Facilitating Virtual Support Groups

By AdoptUSKids

AdoptUSKids has many resources for parent support group leaders, including this article. This article and other resources on supporting families are available at https://professionals .adoptuskids.org/category/support-families/. For more information about the services available from AdoptUSKids to help states, territories, and tribes enhance the supports available to adoptive, foster, and kinship families, email consultation@adoptuskids.org.

As a support group leader, do you want—or need—to move your in-person meetings online, but aren't sure where to start? Here are some tips and resources to help create a supportive environment in a virtual space.

Choose Your Online Meeting Platform

Try out various platforms ahead of time. There are strengths and limitations to each. See what works best for you and you think will be easiest for your group members to master.

- Zoom
- GoTo Meeting or GoTo Training
- Google Hangouts
- Skype
- Microsoft Teams
- Slack
- Adobe Connect
- Facebook Live, if you have a private Facebook group

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Before your first meeting, try one or two sessions with a co-facilitator or a group member or a friend to work out the kinks. Make sure you know how it will work on a smartphone too.

Expect technical issues and delays. If you have limited bandwidth, it may help to start your meeting at an off-peak time, such as 3:15 instead of 3:00, or during evening or weekend hours.

Write Down Instructions for Yourself and for Participants

Have a cheat sheet for you and your group members to refer to during the meeting. It will make the prospect of an online meeting less scary for those who are less familiar with technology.

You might include:

- Links to any downloads they need to access ahead of time
- Instructions for testing their software, logging on, and using the microphone, chat, and webcam
- How to use a smartphone or call-in option if they don't have a computer
- Basics on how you all plan to participate and what they can expect during the meeting (include screenshots if you are able)

Limit the Group Size and Expect Less Participation

Any online platform takes some getting used to and people may be less comfortable interacting this way in the beginning.

Consider limiting the group size to 20 at first. Just like in-person, too many people in a group setting can make it difficult to facilitate discussion.

Buddy Up with Other Group Leaders or a Co-facilitator and Use Discussion Guides

Having a co-facilitator can be especially helpful if one person is more technologically savvy and could handle more technical questions as the group learns the platform. Consider having one person monitor chat questions and the other facilitate the conversation.

Using discussion guides can help put less pressure on you to facilitate a meaningful conversation and allow you to focus on all the new challenges of facilitating a virtual group.

Establish New Group Agreements During Your First Virtual Meeting

Consider preparing new ground rules and sharing them on your screen at the start of the meeting. This will acclimate group members to the new norms.

Questions to consider for your new group agreements:

- What do we do if a lot of people are having trouble getting on the platform?
- How do we handle phone calls or other things that take us away from the meeting space?
- How can we be sure this is still a private space? With everyone participating from their homes, make sure participants use headphones or can be away from others.

See our publication, *4 Keys to Effective Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*, for more information about group agreements.

Maintain Privacy Settings

Do not post meeting links where people outside of the group could see them, and consider using a platform where the organizer can control who joins the meeting or that requires an access code. Though this may make it harder for your members to access the group, it's worth it to protect their privacy.

Use a Webcam to See Each Other But Also Provide a Call-in Option

Seeing each other's faces helps to bridge the technological gap and remind each other that this is still your normal support group—just in a different format.

But you may have members with limited or no internet access who will need to access your virtual meeting by phone only. If you know that you have

members in this situation, be sure to select a platform that has a call-in option. Stay aware of people on the phone, and be mindful of the fact that they cannot see what's displayed on the screen. Consider including group agreements that specifically address the needs of phone callers.

Check in Frequently and Ask Questions of the Group

It may be more difficult for people to bring up pressing concerns or needs online. It can also be harder for you as the group leader to gauge how members are feeling because you can't read body language or facial cues in the same way that you can in person.

Ask frequent questions of your group, both about how they are handling the digital format and about the content of the conversation:

- "I know doing this meeting virtually is harder than in-person, do you feel like you are missing pieces of the conversation as we talk?"

- "Would it be helpful for more folks to share their webcams so we can see each other's faces?"

- "Are you finding the chat function helpful? If you aren't sure how to unmute yourself, you can participate by chatting."

- "Is this working for our group, or would you like to find another solution?"

Infuse Celebration and Humor into the Groups Wherever You Can

Celebrate the first time you get your webcam to work properly. Take a break from the conversation to laugh at the dog barking in the background or a kid yelling about needing a snack. Humor can break the tension around the stress of this moment and remind group members that this is still the same collection of supportive, helpful people.◈

Join Us for the First-Ever NACAC Virtual Conference!

August 26 — August 29, 2020

We invite adoptive, foster, birth, and kinship parents, child welfare professionals, adoptees, people who were in foster care, and other advocates to join us for the first-ever virtual NACAC conference. From Wednesday, August 26, to Saturday, August 29, NACAC will offer 20 workshops from some top speakers in the field, including:

- Bruce Perry on the impact of trauma
- Michael Sanders on successfully presenting teens to prospective families
- Denise Goodman on recruitment strategies
- Kim Barthel on being a behavioral detective
- JaeRan Kim on transracial parenting
- Sue Badeau on building resilience
- Daren Jones on Trust-Based Relational Intervention®

Other topics include kinship care, grief and loss, building resilience, FASD, trauma-informed parenting, and more. The conference is designed to have sessions for professionals on Wednesday, sessions for both parents and professionals on Thursday and Friday, and sessions for parents on Saturday. Registrants can choose to sign up for all four days or just the days that are the best fit for them.

Participants will be able to attend the sessions live or listen to a recording through September 30. Attendees will be able to earn social work continuing education credits for most of the workshops as long as they attend the live sessions. (We are still working on providing credits for recorded sessions.)

During lunch each day, we'll offer more informal networking sessions on select topics.

Registration will be open soon. Learn more and register at nacac.org/get-training/conference. ◈