



Support Groups Can Become Social Groups, Too

Being able to connect is a vital part of any human relationship and is something people do on a daily basis in order to live in harmony with others. Humans are social creatures, and they derive great joy and benefits from interaction with others. Thus, the idea of families getting together with other families appears to be simple and far from novel at first glance, but for families who have found themselves operating outside of traditional parenting and social circles, the opportunity to get together with other families may be a significant source of support, enrichment, and enjoyment. Despite the sometimes monumental barriers to the formation and maintenance of such groups, they may become a needed lifeline to folks who often feel as though they are drowning. Such is the nature of affinity groups. They share a common experience, perspective, and focus.

Family-run support groups that welcome people who are raising children and youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties can provide a haven for family members who want to relax and spend a little time in the company of like-minded people. Although a support group meeting may not sound at all like a source of relaxation or a haven from stress, closer inspection reveals several socializing and affirming influences at work.

Being in the company of other people who face similar parenting challenges brings a degree of relaxation in and of itself. Families are heartened by the realization that here, at last, are other people who have a shared understanding of the kind of meltdowns and explosive episodes taking place in their home. Here are others who have experienced similar frustrations, tensions, exasperation, and desperation. Here are others who can recognize and savor the impact of a tiny turnaround in their children or a step in the right direction in family life.

One reason people like affinity groups is because they find support, acceptance, and understanding for themselves when they spend time in the company of others who share a common experience. People who like to fish enjoy swapping stories with others who like to fish. Photographers enjoy discussing F-stops and shutter

speeds with other photographers. It stands to reason that people who are raising challenging children enjoy sharing experiences and perspectives with others who understand what that means on a daily basis and in the contexts of their lives. The line between club and affinity group loses much of its distinction when compared against the benefits of being in a club. At a basic level, the joys and benefits are much the same in both. Viewed from this “normalizing” perspective, family-run support groups take on importance as places for enjoyment and socialization as well as places to gather information and get therapeutic support. They become almost like a club.

As support groups network with other groups and family members travel to trainings and conferences together, informal conversation in the car or around the dinner table naturally touch on family interests and values. Family members get a chance to spend some needed time away from the problems at home. What they learn at conferences will remind them that they are not alone. Simply having a meal in a restaurant without having to worry about other peoples’ behavior is a treat for some parents!

The family-run support group may be one of the few quasi-social organizations left open to many families. Families with emotionally-troubled children often have been marginalized by society. For example, many of our families have been asked not to bring their problematic children to Sunday school any more. Most of our kids are not at the top of other kids’ birthday party lists. Some of our kids have even been kicked out of therapy groups. As parents, we are well aware of the many ways and forms of exclusion our children suffer. They are excluded from field trips, school clubs, and special events at school. We, family members, have been excluded ourselves because our children’s behavior does not conform to society’s norm.

The result of this exclusion is that we begin to withdraw from optional social situations because the risk of rejection outweighs the potential benefits of socializing. It is easier to stay home with our children in a structured and controlled environment where no one is

stigmatized or exposed to the additional hurts inherent in being shunned or being excluded.

In order for family support groups to provide enrichment, the groups must be genuinely parent-run and parent-driven. Despite their academic credentials, unless they are family members, professionals lack the background and expertise to both know and help. Indeed, their very presence at such a group may inhibit the free exchange of conversation and social support. People may not feel free to express themselves honestly because they may perceive that the professional is assessing and meeting them, not as fellow humans, but as patients or subjects. Unfortunately, these feelings are based on nasty realities. Every family that reaches the point of accessing professional help for a child with emotional and behavior difficulties has been scrutinized and dictated to by professionals. Unfortunately, despite all we have learned about the biological basis of emotional disturbances, there is still a tendency among some professionals to blame families or give up on the client when professional expertise doesn't render a lasting solution to the problems. Families' experience with those professionals, as well as with court and school officials, has made them wary of being themselves in front of people who might judge them or further add to their already heavy burdens.

Although in most instances professionals should exclude themselves from the actual support group meetings, they can do several things to facilitate the meetings. Professionals are the ones who have best access to the families who might enjoy the benefits of being in the support group. Despite the constraints of confidentiality, professionals can partner with existing support group members to put a family member in direct contact with a prospective group member. They can circulate flyers and brochures among their clients and colleagues. Professionals can help a group secure funding to access a place to meet and to pay for childcare providers. Professionals have access to networking information that is not readily available to family members, so they are more likely to know about organizations like the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, local advocacy groups, attorneys who can help with applications to gain not-for-profit status or articles of incorporation, and businesses that specialize in communications for such organizations.

The ability to meet and have childcare provided is another important element of these support groups. Although this discussion of family support group meetings has been geared toward enrichment and relaxation for the adult family members, their children also benefit from programming that is concurrent with the adult meeting. Thoughtfully structured childcare provides safety and interesting activities. Thus, everyone has something to look forward to on meeting nights.

Support groups can learn from each other on structuring the process and content of the adult experience, as well as the children's experience. They can assist each other in the process of "normalization" as inclusion rather than exclusion. Families Reaching for Rainbows, an Indianapolis-based chapter of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, rents an indoor municipal swimming pool for its December meeting. Members, caregivers, and related professionals are invited to bring their families for pizza and an energetic evening of swimming and water slides during a time of year that is characterized by social get-togethers. Last year, one of the pool employees commented that it was one of the best-behaved groups of children they had ever hosted!

Though research may still be developing on the socialization and enrichment aspects of family support groups, there is much anecdotal evidence to underscore their value. Time and again, parents have said, "This group has helped me more than anything," or "I don't know how I would have made it through this without support from all of you." Families who feel like that are then ready to turn around and invest themselves in advocacy and support for other families. They are energized by the empowering effects of feeling included, of being accepted, and of being understood. These effects provide what is necessary for them to go beyond their own situations and advocate for others.

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