

7 Reasons to Join a Parent Support Group

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Recently, a father of a 14-year-old boy called to ask for a family session. He described how he got so fed up with his son's video gaming that he turned the WiFi off in his house. A shouting match ensued and his son got so mad that he jumped out of the ground-level window and disappeared into the night, leaving his parents rattled and worried.

Another mom described in a session the intense daily homework struggles she has with her 9-year-old daughter, adding with some hesitation that she has fantasies of just packing up and leaving.

A father, the main caregiver of two toddlers, described the rage he feels when they just seem to be out of control and his fear that he might hurt them.

These stories are tied together by a common thread: the parents' intense feelings of helplessness, shame or guilt, and their belief that they are the only ones who have these experiences and that there is something wrong with them or their kids.

Parenting has become a hotbed of expectations and one of the most demanding and complex jobs there is. And yet, it has been our experience as mental health professionals and as parents that as children age and their academic and social challenges increase, support for parents diminishes. One of the ways to fill this gap is by joining a local parent group. A group can become a tremendous source of support and clarity for those feeling overwhelmed by the developmental hurdles their children face.

1. Groups help you realize that you're not alone. One of the biggest benefits of a group is realizing that other parents struggle with the same issues. So many parents believe that their problems are specific to them. This creates shame, guilt and resentment. Sometimes just hearing someone else's story takes the pressure off you and your child.

2. Groups let you feel "normal." When you recognize that many other parents struggle with the same challenges you do, it normalizes your own experience. When you realize that other children struggle with the same issues your child does, it normalizes your perspective of your child's experience.

3. Groups let you express your feelings. Sharing your

experience in a safe and supportive environment can be therapeutic and healing. The clinicians who often lead parenting groups are trained to facilitate self-expression and self-discovery in a way that promotes growth and deeper understanding. Listening to others share opens up different perspectives, allowing you to consider new strategies and solutions to your problems.

4. Groups are a chance to gather helpful information. Your fellow parents really are the best resource. When group members share what they've tried and found to be successful (or not), it provides invaluable information about resources and possible strategies. You also might discover that you know more than you thought, which will help build your self-confidence.

5. Groups help you understand that this will pass. Hearing from parents whose kids are older than yours or who went through similar issues can be empowering. It shows in a tangible way that things will change, which brings renewed patience, appreciation for the present and hope for the future.

6. Groups are a chance to share camaraderie and humor. There is much truth to the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Groups can provide a sense of community and belonging. They can also be fun. As you trade "war stories" with fellow parents, you could gain a much-needed sense of relief and camaraderie.

7. Groups might be your most affordable option. Support groups are generally less expensive than individual therapy sessions.

There are two basic kinds of parent support groups. Some are led and organized by licensed mental-health professionals. Members are pre-screened by the therapists and group size is limited. Often these groups have two facilitators, which allows for more and different perspectives. Others, called peer support groups, are facilitated by people who have had similar experiences and want to support others. The leaders might or might not have mental health training and the groups can vary in size.

When considering a group, here are some things to consider:

- You should feel safe sharing there, and confidentiality should be encouraged between members.
- The group should be a good fit for you. Call the organizers beforehand and find out about the group's therapeutic approach and general parenting philosophy.
- There should be no pressure to participate. All group members should be allowed to share when they are ready.
- The group should be differentiated by the ages of the children members are parenting – toddlers, tweens or adolescents. These tend to be more beneficial and cohesive.

When you visit a new group, try to commit to attend a couple of times. The first time can be a bit overwhelming and it might take some time to feel comfortable.

No matter what kind of group you join, the experience of being with other parents, sharing concerns and learning new and positive ways to navigate difficult emotional situations can enhance the resilience and wellbeing of your entire family.

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