Leading Foster and Adoptive Parent Support Groups:
A Guide for Social Workers

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Foreword
By Elissa Spelman

In 2001 FosterParentNet published the Foster Parent Support Group Companion Workbook, which provided support group leaders with knowledge and resources for starting and leading foster parent support groups. When the authors initially wrote the book it was intended to meet the needs of any individuals leading such groups. The authors did not fully anticipate the differences between leading a support group as a foster parent and leading a support group as a social worker. As the authors and other professionals conducted trainings using the workbook and began receiving feedback, they realized that there were issues that social workers face when leading support groups that were not adequately addressed by the first edition. It is from such feedback that the idea for this book was conceived.

This year I had the pleasure of creating two different books based on the original Foster Parent Support Group Companion Workbook. The first, designed for parents, is Leading Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups: A Guide for Parents, and the second is this book, Leading Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups: A Guide for Social Workers. Both have been reorganized, include more exercises, and go into more depth on important issues such as conflict management and group dynamics. However, this version also has new sections on leadership and facilitation models, clarifying the social worker's role, important considerations for agency-sponsored groups, additional information on confidentiality, and the effect of power on groups. All of these sections were included to meet the specific needs of social workers starting and leading support groups.

It is our hope that our two improved guides will serve as resources for parents and social workers leading support groups for years to come.
Section 1: Introduction

What is a Support Group?
The Need for Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups
Support Group Benefits
Support Group Drawbacks
Thoughts on Leadership
Why are foster/adoptive parent support groups important?
Introduction
(Section 1)

What is a Support Group?

A support group is by definition a group of individuals who gather voluntarily on a regular basis to meet certain needs that they have in common. Often, these are needs that support group members feel have not been met by professionals (Gottlieb, 1982). Support groups help people cope with stressful life events by sharing experiences and knowledge with others in similar situations. Therefore, professional guidance is not required in order to successfully run a support group. In fact, groups that utilize professionals are sometimes viewed as having abandoned the philosophy of helping people help themselves. In contrast, therapeutic groups are designed to be led by professional therapists who promote growth and change through the use of professional methods (Self-Help Resource Association of BC).

However, this does not mean that professionals cannot be involved in leading support groups. In fact, Remine et al. (1984) have found that many groups want to have professional involvement and that this involvement often strengthens the group by providing organization and long term planning. In order for professionals to aid support groups they must be committed to meeting the needs of support group members and improving their own skills as facilitators. This workbook is designed to help professionals understand their role as support group leaders and to learn and practice the skills needed to be successful.

The number of support, self-help, and mutual aid groups in the United States has grown exponentially over the past few decades (Kurtz, 1997). Before the turn of the millennium, researchers estimated that there would be over 10 million people in the U.S. participating in such groups by the year 2000 (Kurtz, 1997). Additionally, the range of issues addressed by support groups has broadened significantly and includes: alcohol, adoption, disability, divorce, foster care, general parenting, grief, illness, immigrant/refugee, money, psychiatric, sexual orientation, single parenting, violence, weight, women and more (Remine et al., 1984). This growth shows that support groups are meeting a societal need. Therefore, professionals must learn how to work with support groups to maximize their benefits for foster/adoptive parents.
The Need For Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups

"My assumption is that the story of anyone of us is in some measure the story of us all."
--Frederick Buechner

Foster and adoptive parenting presents many complex challenges. Without sufficient support foster/adoptive parents can become overwhelmed and isolated, fail to meet the needs of both their foster/adoptive and birth children, face emotional or psychological problems, and sometimes decide to stop foster parenting.

Foster/adoptive parent support groups are effective because they decrease feelings of isolation, help members feel understood, and provide realistic suggestions to address the challenges that foster/adoptive parents encounter in caring for children. Other forms of support are often not as helpful for foster/adoptive parents. Although social workers provide invaluable advice to foster/adoptive parents, they are not able to offer the sense of belonging and understanding that comes from being with people who share similar daily experiences. General parenting groups, which attempt to bring people together for such goals, often do not meet the specific needs of foster/adoptive parents. Issues such as confidentiality, grief and loss feelings associated with placements, conflicts with the birth family, birth child vs. foster child rivalry, and isolation are not addressed by general parenting groups.

Evidence shows that support groups designed specifically for foster parents enhance their ability to meet the needs of children. Ninety-four percent of surveyed foster parents participating in support groups funded by FosterParentNet said that support groups gave them the encouragement and resources to continue foster parenting.
Support Groups Benefits

Support groups are prevalent because they are helpful to their members. Being with others who have shared similar experiences usually motivates people to address their own problems and those of others in the group. Support group members generally benefit not only from working to solve their own problems, but also from helping others. The “helper therapy” principle explains that helping others makes people feel capable, productive, valued, and also helps them to maintain a sense of perspective and see life beyond their own problems (Zastrow, 1989).

In his book, Self-Help and Support Groups: A Handbook for Practitioners, Kurtz (1997) identifies five common benefits that can result from participation in support groups which are listed below. He also reminds practitioners that such benefits do not result automatically, but must be fostered through effective group facilitation. Kurtz’s tips for enhancing support group benefits are included under each section.

One way to evaluate if your support group is a success is to see if you can find evidence of the benefits described below. After a meeting is over, look through these descriptions and reflect on which of these positive dynamics were occurring. For any benefits that did not exist, review the tip and think of how you will focus more on that aspect of your next meeting.

**Giving Support:** Studies show that support is “a combination of words and silent attention, personal disclosure and empathy” (p.21). Support has also been described to encompass the other four benefits listed below. Group leaders should pay close attention to how members define support because people join support groups primarily for this purpose.

_Tip: In order for members to feel supported, you must create a supportive atmosphere—remember the importance of modeling non-judgmental behavior and setting ground rules in order to create a safe, positive environment._
Offering Information: Information may be in the form of professional advice offered by speakers or informal suggestions shared between group members. Please reference the chart on page _____ that explains the differences between professional and experiential knowledge. When a group of individuals that care about the same topic come together they have collective knowledge that can serve as a resource for the entire group. Research also shows that people who participate in support groups are more likely to seek out additional information when necessary.

Tip: Sharing information is often one of the simplest roles for professional facilitators. However, remember to maintain a balance between professional and experiential knowledge and to never be the only source of information.

A Sense of Belonging: Joining a support group helps participants find people they can relate to and feel accepted by. Feelings of isolation and hopelessness decrease as members realize there are many other people who share similar stories and face similar problems. Often, a support group can be the beginning of a social network that can sustain members over time.

Tip: A sense of belonging will be developed as members begin to learn about each other and notice their similarities. Make sure that the group remains focused on sharing stories and making connections.

Sharing Experiential Knowledge: “The specialized information and perspective that people gain when they live through and resolve a problem differs from both the expertise of professionals and the common knowledge of the lay person” (p.22). This experiential knowledge can be a powerful resource for foster/adoptive parents and is often the element that they cannot find anywhere other than a foster/adoptive parent support group.

Tip: Facilitators need to encourage the sharing of experiential knowledge or group members may believe that professional knowledge is most valued. It can be effective to remind the group that your job is to bring people together to share experiences, not to be the source of information.

Teaching Coping Methods: Members develop coping methods from the professional and experiential knowledge they gain in their support groups. As members try out new ways of handling their problems they will benefit from the group’s guidance and support.

Tip: Make your group a safe place to talk about both challenges and successes—this will encourage people to share and learn different coping strategies.
Professional vs. Experiential Knowledge

Successful foster/adoptive parent support groups offer participants a balance of professional and experiential knowledge. Remember, most foster/adoptive parents join support groups because they are not able to find experiential knowledge through any other means. Therefore, it is essential that while professionals share useful, professional information that they also give sufficient time for group members to share the knowledge they have gained through lived experience. The chart below explains the differences between these two forms of knowledge.

Table 1.1 Professional vs. Experiential Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Knowledge</th>
<th>Experiential Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth acquired through reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others.</td>
<td>Truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information gathered through isolated facts. Data may be grouped together according to an existing paradigm.</td>
<td>Information is gained through personal participation. Knowledge tends to be specific and based on actual experience which is somewhat representative of others facing the same issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical or scientific.</td>
<td>Pragmatic and oriented to the here and now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorized or segmented.</td>
<td>Wholistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results based on accumulation of knowledge within a scientifically accepted framework.</td>
<td>Results based on accumulation of knowledge within an experiential framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access is limited to those who have met requirements of formal education or training.</td>
<td>Access to information gained through personal involvement and sharing experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority is given on the basis that handling the problem requires skills that cannot be performed by others</td>
<td>Authority is given on the basis that those who have experienced an issue and have acquired some expertise and should be respected as role models.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from the Self-Help Resource Association of British Columbia, 2003)
Why I Return: Parents’ Feedback

Over 96% of foster parents in the FosterParentNet study indicated that they would attend their support groups again. As a leader it is important to understand why support group members participate in support groups. Here is some of the feedback from parents:

Support groups are beneficial...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recreationally</th>
<th>57.6%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educationally</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support groups:

- Lessen feelings of isolation
- Provide opportunities to make new friends
- Validate thoughts such as “I know I am not crazy or a bad person because others have the same problems.”
- Enable members to draw wisdom from others who have “been there”
- Provide opportunities to mentor others or receive mentorship
- Become a gathering place for hope and encouragement
- Unite foster parents for a common goal
- Provide respite from life’s daily stresses
- Give a sense of community and group cohesiveness, “We’re all in this together.”
- Provide education, resources, and networking
- Are fun
- Are a safe haven for sharing problems and feelings
Exercise 1

Support Groups Benefits

Objective: Recognize the benefits of support groups

Equipment: Flip chart (or large visible board), markers, and strips of colored paper

Directions: Divide the participants into small groups of four to six people. Ask each group to do the following:

- Talk about any personal experiences, positive or negative, they have had with support groups. (It does not have to be a foster/adoptive parent support group.)

- Share the benefits they have gained as a result of being part of a support group (as a member or leader). Each group should record their responses on colored strips of paper.

Write "Support Group Benefits" on the flip chart. Ask a representative from each group to discuss their responses with the larger group and place their colored sentence strips on the flip chart.

Show participants the list of support group benefits on page ___. You can display it on an overhead transparency or pass it out as a handout. Discuss how the groups' ideas are in line with this list.
Support Group Drawbacks

It is also important to be aware of some of the negative elements that can arise in support groups so that as a leader you can work to prevent or address such dynamics. The following list is adapted from the Self-Help Resource Association of British Columbia (2003).

Discouragement of Outside Support: It is possible that some members of support groups will feel less inclined to seek outside support because of their participation in groups. They may believe that they are receiving all the support they need.

Focus on Blame: In difficult times people often want to find someone to blame. Although this is natural, a support group should not transform into a blame group. Some groups may start blaming professionals for not adequately assisting members or members themselves for not handling problems appropriately. Either way, blame leads to negativity rather than solutions.

Dependency: Individuals may begin to believe that the group is there to “fix” their problems or the group itself may function in such a way that individuals become reliant upon the group for help. Remember, support groups are designed to help people help themselves.

Isolation: If certain members are not welcomed into the group for whatever reason, these people may end up feeling more isolated than they did to begin with. Support groups are not a place for cliques or exclusion. Leaders must ensure that every member understands the group’s goals and ground rules and is fully included.

Poor Skills: If the leader or group members have poor communication, problem-solving, or decision-making skills the group may not be very successful at reaching its goals. Facilitators must work on these skills and model them for the group so that all members can improve in these important areas.
Thoughts on Leadership

The thought of starting or leading a foster/adoptive parent support group may be somewhat intimidating or overwhelming. It is only natural to doubt your abilities as a leader, particularly if you have not had considerable experience starting, organizing, or facilitating groups. You may be worried about meeting the needs of the participants, planning meetings, facilitating through conflict, and retaining members. You may also be concerned that group members may not want the agency or professionals running their support group. Remember, if you care about supporting foster/adoptive parents, listen to their needs, and are dedicated to improving your own leadership skills, you can successfully lead a foster/adoptive parent support group.

Your challenge now is to overcome your inhibitions and turn your vision into a reality. All leaders face this challenge if they want to reach their goals. Don’t compare yourself to other leaders you admire and think that you don’t measure up. Instead, focus on the character traits that you possess that make you an effective leader and bring them into your work. While identifying other leaders’ good qualities, note some flaws they may have. You will find that all leaders have strengths and weaknesses. Leadership can be learned through practice and experience. This workbook is one resource to help you become a more effective leader.

Also keep in mind that you do not have to do this alone. Talk with your colleagues and supervisor about their experiences leading groups and ask for advice when you face challenges. Visit other support groups to observe and learn from other leaders. Finally, it is essential that you recognize your group members’ leadership abilities and empower them to take active roles every step of the way. The first step that successful leaders take is developing a plan of action, which will be discussed at the beginning of Section 2, Creating a Plan.
Qualities of Effective Leaders

- Open to new ideas
- Ability to motivate and inspire others
- Courage to make decisions that aren't always popular
- Dedication to improving their communication skills
- Ability to share the work, power, and glory
- Passionate about what they are doing
- Patient
- Ability to see issues from multiple perspectives
- Accountable and honest
- Ability to identify strengths in others
- Serve as a mentor for others
- Focused on solutions
- Energetic
- Tolerant of imperfections in others
- Confident enough to admit when they have made a mistake or need help
Leadership Styles

Just as people take different approaches to being group members, they also take different approaches to being group leaders. McGregor theorized that there are two main approaches to leadership which are based on two sets of assumptions about people, which he termed Theory X and Theory Y (Zastrow, 1989).

Leaders who ascribe to Theory X believe that group members dislike work and responsibility and are unlikely to make much growth. As such, Theory X leaders are controlling, set goals without member input, punish members for deviating from the rules, and use external rewards to try to control group behaviors.

In contrast, believers of Theory Y think people are capable of growth and work in areas to which they are committed. Theory Y leaders view internal rewards, such as self-respect and improvement, as stronger motivators than external rewards. They also believe that group members have considerable skills and desire responsibility. As such, Theory Y leaders usually share responsibility and help their group members to experience success.

Research shows that people who work with leaders who believe in Theory Y are more creative, productive, motivated, and satisfied with their experiences. Think about times you have worked with Theory X and Theory Y leaders and what the differences were for you. If Theory Y leaders produce such better results, why is it that so many people ascribe to Theory X? Which theory will you ascribe to as a leader?
Section 2: Starting a Support Group

Creating a Plan
Recruiting and Retaining Members
Developing a Purpose Statements
Writing a Social Worker Role Statement
Learning about Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups
Choosing a Group Type
Considerations for Agency-Sponsored Groups
Identifying Accountabilities and Positions
Developing a Budget
What should the group be like?
Starting a Support Group  
(Section 2)  

Creating a Plan

There are many steps you must take as you start your group. In order to proceed through the startup process successfully, it is critical that you have a plan. A plan will provide you with a roadmap of all the things you hope to accomplish and the order in which they should be completed. As the old saying goes "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

As the leader of the group, it is essential to think in terms of "we." Including your members during the planning process is critical to the success of the group. This group is for them—they need to help create it so it meets their needs! While it may be easier to make decisions alone and expect others to go along with the program, acting alone may chase away your members. People want to feel like their opinions matter and that they have some control in the direction of the group. **Don't take this away!** Encourage everyone to participate in the planning. **Consensus! Consensus! Consensus!** is the name of the game when developing a group plan (consensus is discussed on page ____).

Critical areas of planning include:

- Identifying ways to recruit members
- Developing a purpose statement
- Developing a social worker role statement
- Learning about foster/adoptive parent support groups
- Determining what type of group you will be
- Clarifying financial needs and creating a budget

Other possible planning areas:

- Developing a meeting structure
- Assigning group roles or responsibilities
- Establishing goals connected to the group purpose and steps to accomplish these goals
- Listing education/speaker topics of interest
Recruiting and Retaining Group Members

Without members it is impossible to have a group. Therefore, recruitment and retention are essential elements of beginning and maintaining any foster/adoptive parent support group. Recruitment is the process of finding members to participate in a support group and retention is keeping those members. Retention should be measured by visible and consistent participation in group meetings.

In agencies parents are often assigned to support groups or required to complete a minimum number of support group hours per year, in which case this process is simplified. However, if members have not been identified for your group or there is not required participation, you must work even harder to spark and maintain interest in the group.

Suggestions for recruiting new members:

♦ Ask people to become members. One of the most basic things to remember when recruiting potential members is that people will not naturally seek out your group. You need to find them.

♦ Send meeting announcements to foster/adoptive parents.

♦ Use advertising for recruiting participants such as flyers, brochures, and newsletters.

♦ Notify appropriate professionals that work with foster/adoptive parents and ask them to spread the word.

Tips for retaining group members:

♦ Remember that the group is the focus. The support group is not your time to lecture, nor should it be continually dominated by outside speakers. The majority of the time should be for group members to share their experiences and offer support to one another.

♦ Make sure that the group's purpose and ground rules are developed and understood by the entire group. As time goes by, check to make sure that your group follows its purpose statement, goals, and ground rules. People become frustrated when they feel that they are not getting what they were promised.

♦ Keep members involved in all important decision making. This will help members stay invested in the group and ensure that it continues to meet their needs over time.

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Gather feedback from members and use it to improve the group. This can be done by using formal evaluations like the one in Section 4 or through informal means like end of meeting check-ins or quick phone calls to participants.

Be sensitive to issues such as timeliness, organization, childcare, food, and location. All these "little things" make a big difference in whether people will continue coming to your group!

Emphasize attendance without seeming strict. Remind members that the group cannot exist without them and that they all benefit from the group's collective knowledge and experience.

Be aware of the diversity within your group and think about how you and the group can honor your differences. The group should be a safe place where all members feel comfortable with their identities and have their needs met.

It is helpful for all groups to have recruitment and retention plans. They assist your group in maintaining a desired level of membership. On page _____ is an exercise that will help your group develop these plans.
Exercise 2
Developing a Recruitment or Retention Plan

Objective: To brainstorm effective ways of recruiting or retaining support group members. This exercise can be used both for recruitment and retention plans. Alter the directions depending on your focus.

Equipment: Index cards with colored stars, pens or pencils, sentence strips, markers, flip chart (or large visible board), list of recruitment ideas from page ___ written on a piece of flip chart paper

Directions:

→ In order to divide the participants into groups, pass out index cards as they walk in the room. Each card should have a colored star drawn on the corner. If you need 2 groups of 5 people you could mark 5 cards with a blue star and 5 cards with a red star. When it is time to begin the exercise, ask people to gather with the other participants with the same colored star.

→ First, tell each person to independently list as many ways to find/keep members for support groups as possible in 5 minute time period. NOTE: Remind everyone to think of creative ways—not just simple or typical ways.

→ Ask each small group to choose 3-5 of their most promising and creative ideas to share with the entire group. They should write each idea on a sentence strip and then tape them up under the heading “Recruiting Group Members”/“Retaining Group Members” on the flip chart. Each group will select a volunteer to share the sentence strip ideas with the large group.

→ Now share the list of recruitment/retention ideas from page _____. You can check for similarities and differences and discuss all the ideas that have been listed. Remember to congratulate the group on their creativity!
Developing a Purpose Statement

Before moving forward with your group, it is critical to develop a purpose statement with input from all your members. Groups that have no consensus on purpose are setting themselves up for a short and frustrating life or no life at all. Clearly defining and communicating your group’s purpose is a part of giving your group an identity and a reason to exist. Simply because your group may have been started by an agency does not mean that it does not need a purpose statement, or that group members should not participate in creating that statement. However, it is important to consider the agency’s purpose for the group. Make sure the group members are aware of why the agency began the group and that the agency’s purpose matches that of the group members.

To begin developing the group’s purpose statement, try to define the larger goals your group wants to accomplish. Your group has probably been formed to solve a problem or address a common need. It is important to ask yourself, the group, and others, “Why is a group like this needed?” You might find it helpful to research existing foster/adoptive parent support groups. A good place to start is the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA – www.nfpainc.org). They have information on support groups nationwide.

Here are some suggestions for identifying a group’s purpose:

- Discuss the reason the agency started the support group as well as the reasons the members think the support group is necessary.
- Become informed about issues that affect potential members, i.e., “What resources are they missing?” “What challenges do they face daily?”
- Look at purpose statements of support groups and other organizations. This will give you an idea of what different groups see as their purpose.

Once your purpose is clear, write it down. Draft a purpose statement for your group and develop a few key goals. This will serve to guide your group when things get murky. Your purpose statement can also be used in correspondence or as a speaking point to others.

Here are some suggestions for creating a purpose statement:

- Start a committee of others interested in developing a purpose statement.
- Make sure there is agreement among the membership and with the agency on the purpose of the group.
- Surf the Internet to locate online resources that may be helpful.
- Get feedback from foster/adoptive parents and professionals.
- Use the exercises on the upcoming pages!
It is possible for groups to have more than one purpose. Additionally, the purpose may change over time. For instance, a group may originally form for socialization and education but as the group matures it may want to expand to include child advocacy and public policy. Since change is the norm, the mission of the group should be allowed to change when necessary. The important thing to remember is that having a clearly defined purpose for the group increases the likelihood of success.

On the following page are exercises that may be used to determine your group's vision for the future and purpose statement.
Exercise 3

Letter to a Significant Child:
Our Vision for Foster Care/Adoption

Objective: Think about the group’s ideal vision for the future of foster care, adoption, and foster/adoptive parenting. Prepare to write a purpose statement.

Equipment: Paper, pens or pencils, a flip chart (or large visible board), and markers

Directions:

Give each person paper and a writing utensil and read the following prompt:

Imagine that somehow you are able to look into the future and you have just caught a glimpse of the year 2025. A significant child in your life (maybe a birth child, foster child, grandchild, or close family friend) has just become a foster/adoptive parent. Returning to the present, write a letter to this important child in your life describing how you hope the experience of foster/adoptive parenting will be for them in the year 2025.

Once everyone has had sufficient time to write (probably 20 minutes), ask people to share some of their hopes for the future of foster care, adoption, and parenting. You can write these ideas on a large piece of paper entitled “Our Vision for Foster/Adoptive Parenting”. This sheet may be helpful as your group begins to write its purpose statement.
Exercise 4

Developing a Purpose Statement

Objective: Develop a common purpose (or mission) for the group

Equipment: Flip chart (or a large visible board) and markers

Time: Approximately 1 hour

Directions: Ask the group members to imagine they have just awakened from a long night’s sleep and something magical happened while they were asleep. A year has passed and the group is one year old. They are in a meeting discussing the success of the group over the past months.

- Ask members to describe what they see, hear, and feel as the group’s success is being discussed. Encourage them to be specific, to “dream” where they’d like to be.

- Write key words and phrases from each person on the flip chart or board.

- When the process is complete, ask if they can accept the view “one year from now” as the group vision. If there is a strong disagreement to some parts of the vision, identify the common areas and differences.

- Discuss the differences to see if an understanding can be reached. Otherwise, use the common areas as the basis of your purpose statement.

- Ask the group to develop an inspiring sentence that captures the essence of the vision. Keep it short, 12 words or less. This will help everyone remember it. This sentence can serve as the purpose of the group.
Writing a Social Worker Role Statement

As important as it is for the group to understand its purpose, it is just as important that you and the members understand your role in the group. Lack of clarity regarding your role can lead to frustration, competition, resentment, and eventual failure of the group. It is necessary that you talk as a group about your role so that you can shape your role to meet the group's needs. After this conversation it is good to write a brief statement of what your role will be. This document can be returned to in times of confusion and adjusted as necessary.

Two key elements to address in the statement should be your role as a leader of the group and your role as a facilitator of the group. Different leadership models are outlined on pages ____ and different facilitation models are described on _____. Additional elements could include your role in recruitment, arranging speakers, providing resources, communicating with the agency, and coordinating meeting logistics (agenda, food, room, etc.).

Below is a sample social worker role statement:

I, __________________, agree to the following description of my role within the Central Foster Parent Support Group.

I will serve as a co-leader of our group, along with Maria Bennett. The two of us will be jointly responsible for recruiting new parents to the group, determining the topics for our meetings, and planning the agendas. I will be responsible for identifying and scheduling speakers, securing a meeting place, locating any additional resources the group wants, and communicating with the agency when necessary. Maria will be responsible for communicating with the parents when they have any concerns and for arranging childcare and bringing food.

I will serve as a co-facilitator for each session along with an assigned parent. This means that I will not join in the conversation or include my opinion in decisions that are made. I will remain objective and help the group to reach its goals. For 45 minutes during every meeting I will leave the room and the meeting will be solely facilitated by a parent facilitator, allowing the group to speak openly without an agency staff member present.

If the group has concerns about my role they will talk with Maria and as a group we will re-evaluate this agreement and make any necessary changes.

________________________  __________________
Signature                   Date

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Learning about
Foster/Adoptive Parent Support Groups

You have accomplished a major step by finding group members and establishing a purpose. Now it is important that you take the time to learn about support groups, how they work, and your role in leading one. It is important to be knowledgeable about support groups and the different ways that they function. This will help you and the members decide what kind of group you want to be (different group types are discussed in depth throughout the following pages) and help you plan for and lead your group more effectively.

Here are some suggestions for learning about how support groups work:
- Contact the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA)
- Visit existing support groups
- Talk to support group facilitators and members
- Ask support group participants what they like and dislike about their group
- Read books on support groups (see bibliography)
- Visit web sites geared towards foster/adoptive parent issues
- Attend a conference or a workshop on support groups

As a professional it is also important that you focus on learning about your role as a group leader. Working with groups is one element of social work, and one in which some workers will have more experience than others. The Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups developed a set of standards for working with groups that is a helpful starting point for professionals. However, to improve your skills in working with groups you will also need to observe experienced social workers leading groups and have time to practice in the field.

Select Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups
(Association of the Advancement of Social Work with Groups)

Core Knowledge and Values
- Members are capable of change and of helping one another
- Emphasis on member strengths as well as concerns
- Worker’s primary role is helping members help each other
- Members are empowered to feel ownership of the group
- Equal worth of members and worker
- Worker is not all powerful "expert"
- Phases of group development affect group and individuals
- Group type and purpose influences the worker, members, and how the group accomplishes its goals
Group Work Before the Group is Formed

**TASKS:**
- Identify common needs of potential group members
- Recruitment
- Secure organizational support
- Select appropriate group type, structure, and size
- Establish meeting time and place that promote member comfort
- Develop and articulate clear statement of worker role that reflects group purpose

**KNOWLEDGE:**
- Organization's mission and how this influences the nature of group work
- Barriers that may impede group work
- Cultural factors and their influence on group members' lives and abilities to engage in a group and relate to others
- Types of groups and their relationship to members' needs

Group work in the Beginning Phase

**TASKS:**
- Provide clear statement of group purpose, and if necessary of the agency purpose
- Gather member feedback regarding perception of needs, interests, problems
- Encourage members to share concerns and strengths with one another
- Facilitate connections between members and members and worker
- Assist group in creating rules and norms
- Create and maintain an environment of sociocultural safety

**KNOWLEDGE:**
- Group dynamics in the beginning stage of groups
- Causes/manifestations of resistance to change

Group Work for Established Groups

**TASKS:**
- Reinforce connection between individual needs/problems and group goals
- Monitor group norms
- Assess group's progress toward goals
- Clarify and interpret communication patterns between members
- Identify and facilitate member conflict when necessary
- Summarize sessions

**KNOWLEDGE:**
- Group dynamics following the beginning phase
- Role theory
- Communication theory
- Member interactions as manifestations of sociocultural forces of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Purposeful use of verbal and non-verbal activities
Choosing a Group Type

The basic purpose of any foster/adoptive parent support group is to meet the needs of foster/adoptive parents so they can meet the needs of children. Groups are centered on the basic human need and desire to feel connected to a community and also to feel validated and supported by peers. They mainly offer emotional support, training, validation, and fun.

Foster/adoptive parent support groups are started and run both by agencies that provide services to foster families and by independent groups of foster/adoptive parents. The three common types of agency-sponsored groups are: social worker-led, foster/adoptive parent-led, and co-led. Benefits and challenges exist with each model and it is important to choose the group type that will best meet the needs of your group members and agency.

Social Worker-Led Groups

**Benefits**
- Consistent access to professional expertise
- Social worker facilitation can seem more objective and avoid foster/adoptive parent rivalries
- Social workers can access resources for the group
- Social workers have worked with numerous foster/adoptive parents during their careers and can plan activities and share advice based on the breadth of their experience

**Challenges**
- Tendency to emphasize professional knowledge over experiential knowledge
- Social worker facilitation can appear to be social worker control of the group
- Confidentiality and conflict of interest issues may arise if foster/adoptive parents are on the social worker’s case load
- Foster/adoptive parents may feel hesitant to talk about issues related to agency staff or services
### Foster/Adoptive Parent-Led Groups

**Benefits**
- Strong feeling of foster/adoptive parent ownership and control
- Emphasis on parents’ ability to help themselves and each other
- Often an informal structure which may be more comfortable for parents

**Challenges**
- Danger of becoming a gripe group—spending all the time complaining, particularly about the agency
- Competition or conflict about group leadership and facilitation
- Lack of outside resources

### Social Worker and Parent Co-Led Groups

**Benefits**
- Dual emphasis on experiential and professional knowledge
- Consistent agency and member input regarding group development
- Empowering parents to look both to themselves and outside resources for help

**Challenges**
- Maintaining a balanced leadership and avoiding competition or conflict between the leaders
- Addressing the impression that the foster/adoptive parent leader is the “favorite” of the social worker
Considerations for Agency-Sponsored Groups

There are numerous issues to take into consideration when leading an agency-sponsored group. First, it is important to remember that the majority of foster/adoptive parent support groups are started and led by parents, not by agencies (Remine et al., 1984). Such groups are controlled by parents and therefore provide parents with a sense of ownership and empowerment. Agency sponsorship changes many dynamics within support groups, but it is up to the leader to make sure that parents still feel control and empowerment and have their needs met.

Below are some of the common problems in agency-sponsored models as well as suggestions for successful leadership of an agency-sponsored group.

Table 2.1 Common Problems in Agency-Sponsored Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Problems</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group purpose is determined by the agency or social worker or group purpose is unclear.</td>
<td>When starting the group, involve members in developing the group’s purpose. Over time, always make sure members understand and agree with the group’s purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker’s role is unclear.</td>
<td>Work as a group to develop a statement describing the social worker’s role in the group (see page ___). Update as necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agency or social worker assumes control of the group, thus disempowering the members (Gottlieb, 1982).</td>
<td>Ensure that foster/adoptive parents have a voice and control in the design and structure of the group. Evaluate to make sure members’ needs are met. Clarify the role of the social worker as facilitator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members feel resentful because participation is required.</td>
<td>If participation requirements are necessary, create an annual hourly requirement so that parents can choose the sessions they attend. Make sure that parents feel the sessions are worthwhile so they want to be there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members compete for the social worker’s attention.</td>
<td>Make the group members the center of attention instead of the social worker. Give members responsibilities, including leadership and facilitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency groups are overly structured and do not allow for relaxation, emotional release, and fun.</td>
<td>Have group members help plan the agendas and choose activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many outside speakers and not enough time to share stories and advice.</td>
<td>The majority of group time should always be dedicated to group sharing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with confidentiality between members and members and leaders.</td>
<td>Create clear guidelines regarding confidentiality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various issues may arise if the social worker has group members on their caseload. For example, a parent may not want to talk openly about their concerns or weaknesses for fear that the social worker will judge them.</td>
<td>Utilize trained foster/adoptive parents, volunteers, or staff who are not directly responsible for supervision of the members as facilitators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers assigned to lead groups have little previous experience and therefore do not have adequate facilitation and conflict management skills.</td>
<td>Provide facilitators with training on how to work with groups (i.e., through FosterParentNet, foster/adoptive parent association workshops, or conferences). Have social workers observe other support group leaders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identifying Accountabilities and Positions

Identifying accountabilities and positions in the planning phase will increase the productivity of the group by sharing responsibility for projects and roles. It is extremely frustrating if group leaders constantly complain at meetings about how tired they are from all their responsibilities, including selecting a meeting location, organizing the agenda, hiring a speaker, and purchasing the snacks.

Responsibility and power should be shared. This happens by electing officials, developing subcommittees for big projects, and recruiting volunteers from the group for miscellaneous tasks.

Elected Officials
Elected officers and clearly defining the roles of the positions is a way to disperse accountability, authority, and boundaries within the group. There are a number of ways that group leaders can assign titles and tasks. Typical titles include:

- President or Chair - This person is responsible for representing the group at community functions, presiding at meetings, serving as the group’s contact person, and generally overseeing the organization.

- Vice President or Vice Chair – This person presides in the absence of the president and may be assigned other duties as needed. For instance, in some organizations this person may schedule the speakers for the parent group meetings or plan the children’s activities each month.

- Secretary – This person is responsible for taking minutes at the meetings, sending notices of upcoming meetings, and handling necessary correspondence.

- Treasurer – This person receives income, disburses checks, handles financial records, and files required financial reports.

In addition to the above positions your group may want to include others depending on the needs of the group. For instance some groups may have a public relations person to handle advertising and recruitment or a fundraiser who focuses on raising money for the group.

Developing Subcommittees
In addition to identifying specific positions and roles, the group should set up a committee structure. The types of committees your group should establish are based on membership preference, as well as the purpose, size, and needs of the group. Typical committees include: Nominations; Membership; Bylaws; Public Education; Recruitment; Advocacy; Child Care, and more.
Recruiting Volunteers

Depending on the group’s size and goals, you may not need to be formal about specific job titles. In fact, some groups find that members prefer to volunteer for a given task rather than take on an ongoing job. Groups may also establish a schedule for routine jobs. For instance, snack duty or childcare for meetings can be rotated by having individuals sign up on a calendar.

Remember when you are able to spread the responsibilities of the group you gain momentum and spark excitement among the members. This is also a means for preventing individual burnout. The suggestions on the following page will help you be successful sharing responsibilities with all group members.
Learn to Let Go: How to Encourage the Sharing of Responsibility in Groups

1. Make sure all members participate in making decisions and leading meetings.

2. Rotate jobs among the membership. Pair people up so that the person who just completed a particular job can teach the new person assigned to that job.

3. Take time to thank, praise, and reward people who take on responsibility. It can be nice to do this individually and with the entire group.

4. Delegate tasks throughout the membership, beginning with smaller tasks so that people don’t feel overwhelmed or taken advantage of.

5. Always remember to include new members. Be friendly and invite them to take on responsibilities so they feel they are part of the group.

6. Whenever you pass tasks on to other people, make sure they understand what needs to be done. This will help them decide if they want to take responsibility for the task and help to ensure they can successfully complete the task.

7. Regularly review the group’s purpose and ground rules to make sure members agree with them. This will enhance commitment to the group and lead people to take on positions of responsibility.

Developing a Budget

A budget is helpful in identifying and planning for recurring operating expenses as well as costs related to special events. It is often beneficial to offset the expenses with revenue (money coming into the group). Remember that budgets provide estimated numbers. However, it is important to try to calculate as close as possible the expenses and revenue your group will create for the year. For instance, if you know that the cost of renting a space for your meetings is $25.00 per month, you should multiply this expense by 12 to calculate an annual estimated cost.

If the group is applying for nonprofit status you will need a budget to complete the IRS forms. You will also need budget information to determine how much you will have to fundraise to accomplish your group's goals. The budget is also a way of attaching spending boundaries to group activities. Below is a sample budget:

FosterParentNet Support Group
Budget for 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>Expense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bake sale</td>
<td>$250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent auction</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FosterParentNet mini grant</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pool party for 10 families</td>
<td></td>
<td>$600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing for 800 newsletters</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postage</td>
<td></td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snacks for meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($25 per meeting x 12 meetings)</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare expense</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($25 per meeting x 12 meetings)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker expense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($100 per meeting x 12 meetings)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource expense</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(books, tapes, computer cds)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>$3,250</td>
<td>$3,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Section 3: Planning a Meeting

The Importance of Planning
Choosing a Time and Location
Making an Agenda
Creating Ground Rules
Choosing Guest Speakers
Evaluating Meetings
Setting Objectives for the First Meeting
More Tips
Planning a Meeting
(Section 3)

The Importance of Planning

In order to run a successful meeting, it is critical that you plan in advance. Many of the things that foster parents say they do not like about support group meetings (look at the list at the end of this section on page ___) can be avoided through proper planning. Steps in planning a successful meeting include:

1. Choosing a time and location
2. Providing childcare
3. Making an agenda
4. Creating ground rules
5. Choosing guest speakers (optional)
6. Evaluating meetings
7. Setting objectives for the first meeting

This section will provide suggestions for all these important areas of planning. The exercise on the following page reinforces the importance of planning.
**Exercise 5**

**Off the Top of Your Head: The Importance of Planning!**

**Objective:** Demonstrate the importance of planning through a fun activity and identify what group leaders will need to plan for in order to run successful support group meetings.

**Equipment:** Large index cards, pencils or pens, flip chart (or large visible board)

**Directions:**

1. Distribute an index card and writing utensil to each person.

2. Tell everyone to place their index cards on top of their heads and draw a detailed picture of a house on it (they can include doors, windows, sidewalk, trees, sun, clouds).

3. Now have everyone take their cards off their heads and look at them. Most people will be looking at very funny looking drawings! Tell the group that this activity is a reminder to never do anything you want to turn out well off the top of your head.

4. Now have the group brainstorm the kinds of things they will need to plan for in order to lead successful foster/adoptive parent support group meetings. List their suggestions on the flip chart and if possible send everyone home with a copy of this list as a reminder.
1. Choosing a Time and Location

Holding your meetings during a weekday evening will probably allow the largest attendance, since many members work in the middle of the day. During your first meeting it is a good idea to ask participants what day and time are best for future meetings. Scheduling can remain a standing agenda item, allowing you to gather feedback from the members on an ongoing basis.

Sometimes the space can make or break a meeting. Below are attributes of a good meeting space identified by Miller (1998), in his book on effective support groups.

- **Privacy.** Every support group needs a certain amount of seclusion.
- **Quietness.** When a group of people is trying to converse on an intimate level, it’s distracting and frustrating to have to compete with surrounding noise.
- **Good friendly lighting.** People need to see one another well. Incandescent lighting is warmer more pleasing to the eye than fluorescent lighting, which tends to cast an unnatural hue and to flicker.
- **Adequate ventilation.** People don’t like to stay long periods in rooms that feel stuffy and stale.
- **Comfortable temperature.** People prefer not to be too warm or too cold. Either extreme can get in the way of group progress.
- **Comfortable seating.** The best kind of seating is light enough to be moved around with ease yet sturdy and functional for people of all shapes and sizes. Seating doesn’t have to be luxurious but those who attend shouldn’t be constantly squirming, trying to find the right position.
- **Adequate size.** People don’t like to feel cramped, especially among people they don’t know well. At the same time, a room that is much too large can feel uncomfortable too, and that may inhibit conversation.
- **Inviting aesthetics.** The overall look and feel of a room is worth taking into account. The meeting room doesn’t have to look like it came from “House Beautiful,” however it will help if it’s attractive, clean, and uncluttered.

The location should be centralized and accessible to everyone. It is important to consider potential members who may live in outlying areas or who may have disabilities. Think carefully about a setting that will encourage participation from a diverse range of families.
2. Providing Childcare

Remember that childcare for members during the meetings is very important. Brainstorming in this area might give you some really creative ideas for managing this issue. Below are some suggestions:

- Recruit volunteers
- Provide support groups and age appropriate activities for children during meetings
- Rotate childcare among group members
- Solicit support from school, social service, or religious organizations
- Ask a business to provide childcare as an in-kind donation
3. Making an Agenda

An agenda is a road map for the group and the facilitator to follow during the course of the meeting. Its purpose is to make the best use of the time that parents have together.

Suggestions for creating an agenda include:

- Make a list of announcements and other things that need to be addressed at the meeting
- Be sure to allow ample time for questions, discussion and formulation of action plans
- Include allotted time and the name of the person responsible for each agenda item
- Make sure the beginning and ending times for each item and the meeting are listed and adhered to
- Include the date, time, and location for the next scheduled meeting if known

Some groups may choose to use an open agenda format where the members identify the agenda items at the beginning of the meeting. No matter how the agenda is created, make sure that group members’ wishes are taken into consideration.

The next three pages include a sample agenda, a worksheet to help create an agenda, and some tips of things to avoid when making an agenda.
Sample Meeting Agenda

Foster Parent Support Group
March 16, 2004

The meeting is scheduled to begin at 6:00 p.m. and end at 8:30 p.m.

I) Socializing 6:00-6:30
II) Share and Support (Millie, facilitator) 6:30-7:15
III) Speaker (Dr Jackson) from Green Clinic
      Topic: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome 7:15-7:45
IV) Event updates (Jerome) 7:45-8:00
V) Action Items 8:00-8:20
V) Feedback and adjourn 8:20-8:30

The next meeting will be held at:
St. John's
2458 Elmwood
Minneapolis, MN 55114

Date: Tuesday, March 30, 2004
Time 6:00 – 8:30
Contact Sheryl Morgan if you need more information
(651) 469-3235

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Meeting Agenda Worksheet

Name of Group: 

Date: ______________ Time: Start ___________ End ___________

Location: 

Pre-Meeting Preparation (Materials to bring, people to call, things to prepare):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Person Responsible</th>
<th>Main Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(What the group should know, discuss or create as a result of this agenda item)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(University of Minnesota, Vol 3, 1999)
Ways to Create a Bad Agenda

Assume that everybody will know what you are trying to accomplish at the meeting. "Therefore I don't have to put the agenda in writing."

Plan to spend the first half of the meeting prioritizing what to do in the second half of the meeting.

If you have an agenda of difficult items, improve efficiency by skipping breaks to allow for more discussion time.

When the most important discussion is likely to be emotionally charged, save it for last. "Hey, the group will be able to deal with it then."

Since everyone wants to leave on time, assume that no one will raise a topic that's not on the agenda.

Knowing that the agenda is too packed, assume that the meeting will run overtime. However, don't share this with the members.

Expect that every meeting will follow the timeline right down to the minute and start and end exactly on time.

Decide that planning an agenda is a waste of time. "Hey, things never go the way I want them to."
4. Creating Ground Rules

Ground rules are standards for behavior that govern how people interact within a group. They can be developed to ensure agreement about issues like respectful interactions, the use of time, turn taking, decision-making, and ways of managing conflict. They are important because they create guidelines to help all members feel safe. Most people have had negative group experiences in the past and in order to make your support group a positive experience ground rules must be set from the beginning.

The ground rules should be kept to a minimum, be written down, and most importantly, be agreed upon by the entire group. This means that once a list of ground rules has been created by the group, the facilitator should ask each person to show some sign of agreement with the rules or voice their disagreements.

Flexibility is also important so that changes can be made as the group grows. Whenever new people join the group the ground rules should be reviewed so that everyone understands the norms for behavior. The addition of new members also provides the opportunity to re-evaluate the ground rules. This allows the new members to share any concerns or suggestions and existing members to express any changes they feel should occur. This will help make new group members feel welcome and included and make sure that the ground rules continue to meet the needs of the entire group.

On the next pages are some standard ground rules, information about confidentiality, and exercises to help your group develop ground rules.
Standard Ground Rules

Z Speak for yourself
   Use “I” statements—“I feel frustrated” rather than “You always…”

Z Share air time
   No one person should dominate the discussion
   Everyone also has the right to listen instead of talking

Z Listen to understand
   Listen to what others say fully
   Don’t interrupt or immediately think of your response

Z Be respectful
   Of others’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences
   Debate, don’t attack or criticize

Z Confidentiality
   Confidentiality is complex and important. Please read page __.

Z Give support, not advice
   Only give advice when it is asked for

Z Agree to disagree
   Sometimes people are not going to come to the same conclusions
   in which case they can agree to disagree rather than arguing

Z There are no wrong or right answers
   Be open to learning from others’ views

Z Be on time for meetings and participate fully
More about Confidentiality

Establishing confidentiality is always an important step to make groups feel safe. Confidentiality is not intended to prevent people from talking openly or sharing their experiences and feelings. It is designed to make sure that what is shared remains within the group and that individuals' identities are protected. It is advisable to mention confidentiality at the beginning of each meeting to inform new members and remind returning members of the group's expectation. Some groups ask each participant to sign a clause agreeing to confidentiality before their meetings begin. This shows the group that it is something to be taken seriously.

Generally, confidentiality means that group participants agree that after meetings are over they can tell other people what they have said or the ideas that were discussed, but they will not talk about what other people said or did. Therefore, it is aimed at protecting the identity of the people in the group.

In the case of foster parent support groups, it is also necessary to protect the identity of the foster children and their biological families. Therefore, in your group it will be important to add that confidentiality means not using names or other information that can make it possible to identify the children or families being discussed.

Another element that complicates the matter of confidentiality in foster/adoptive parent support groups is mandated reporting. All foster/adoptive parents and social workers are mandated reporters of child abuse or neglect. That means that anyone present at a support group meeting is mandated to report anything they hear that makes them concerned for the safety of a foster or birth child. In such an instance, breaking confidentiality would be allowed, and in fact, required by law. If you are unsure of the mandated reporting process in your state, ask your supervisor, check with the department of human services, or contact the police.

Important Considerations for Social Workers Leading Groups:

When social workers lead foster/adoptive parent support groups additional issues surrounding confidentiality can arise. It is often hard for a social worker to hear a group member talk about something difficult and not want to fix it. You may be inclined to go back to that member's worker to discuss your worries about that person and how to provide better treatment. First, remember that support groups are often used for venting, which often can result in a focus on the negatives. Second, confidentiality is not just for the group members, it is also for the group leader. This means that unless you have received permission or it is a case of
mandated reporting, you cannot talk to anyone about what the group members have shared.

Agency-sponsored groups can fail because of this one issue. Participants join support groups so they can share their experiences openly with people like themselves. They are not looking to be fixed. They certainly aren't looking to have someone go behind their back and talk about them to their social worker. This will obviously be even more complex if you have any of the group members on your caseload. To address these complicated situations, one clear solution is to provide the group with time during which you are not in the room. Time alone should decrease any moral dilemmas you would otherwise feel and allow the group to talk openly about things such as their weaknesses and their concerns with the agency and workers.

On the next page is a summarized list of guidelines for confidentiality.
Guidelines for Confidentiality

☒ Confidentiality is a necessary step to make groups feel safe

☒ Confidentiality means that what is shared stays with the group and everyone's identities are protected

☒ After the meeting you can talk about what you said or the ideas that were shared, but not about what other people said or did

☒ Also, make sure that you do not give information that will enable people to identify the foster children or families being discussed

☒ Make sure everyone understands and agrees to the group definition of confidentiality—it is good to do this at the beginning of each meeting

☒ MANDATED REPORTING: Anyone present at a support group meeting is mandated to report anything they hear that makes them concerned for the safety of a foster or birth child

☒ Confidentiality is for group leaders too—social workers leading groups must get permission from members before talking to anyone about what they have said

☒ Groups should have time to talk without the social worker being in the room
Exercise 6

Group Commandments: Our Philosophies about Ground Rules

Objective: To think about one's beliefs about proper group behavior and work toward creating ground rules for the group.

Equipment: paper, pens or pencils

Directions:

◊ Say to the group: "You should not kill" is a commandment for human beings. There are also "shoulds" and "should nots" for members of groups like ours. Take 5 minutes to write five commandments that you think a member of any group should follow.

◊ Ask everyone to read their list aloud. Tell the group that they should not respond at this point, but simply listen. Once they are done, tell each member to re-read his or her own list silently.

◊ Now open up a discussion, using questions such as:
  - How closely do you follow your own commandments?
  - Which commandments seemed idealistic? Why?
  - Which commandments seemed realistic? Why?
  - Which commandments would you be willing to follow or not?
  - If you were to re-write your list now, how would you change it?

◊ You can now have the group try to generate one list of group commandments as ground rules. Or, you can stop the exercise at this point and use a different exercise (like the one on the next page) later to actually create ground rules.

(Exercise adapted from Pfeiffer's 1989 Encyclopedia of Group Activities, pp.119-120)
Exercise 7

Developing Ground Rules

Objective: Generate a list of ground rules for our group

Equipment: Post-it notes, pens or pencils, flip chart (or large visible board), and markers

Directions:

1. Ask the group to think of ground rules for the group that will help them to feel safe and supported, achieve their goals, and enjoy their time together. Tell the group to write each one of their ideas on a post-it.

2. Now go around and have the participants share their ideas and attach their post-its to the wall.

3. Once all the post-its are on the wall, ask the group to work together to categorize them.

4. After all the post-its have been placed in a category, tell the group to think of a summary description to place above each category (i.e. if there are cards that say "Don’t talk too much," "Everyone deserves a chance to speak," and "All people participate," the description above that category could read "Share air time").

5. Ask the group to discuss whether they are comfortable using the summary descriptions above the categories as their ground rules. Leave time for discussion as there may be some disagreement at this point.

6. Once there is consensus on the ground rules have the group decide how they will monitor and reinforce them.

(Exercise adapted from Facilitation Resources Volume 4: Managing Group Interaction, p. 4.16 by the University of Minnesota, 1999)
5. Choosing Guest Speakers

When choosing a guest speaker, consider an agency or community representative with expertise in a topic of interest to the group. However, remember to make sure that you always leave enough time for parents to talk and share their own experiences. The primary purpose of your group is support and parents generally do not want to be lectured to or have the sessions be too structured. One of the most powerful aspects of parent support groups is sharing stories.

When you do choose to include outside educators or speakers, always ask your group what they are interested in. Also refer to this list of popular topics generated by foster parents participating in FosterParentNet funded support groups.

- Adolescents
- Adoption
- Allegations
- Biological Children
- Child Development
- Children with Special Needs
- Dealing with Dishonesty from Foster Children
- Discipline
- Foster Parent Recruitment
- Grief & Loss
- Helping Foster Children Fit In
- Laws & Regulations
- Medicaid
- Medication
- Multiple Placements
- Nurturing Cultural Identity
- Reactive Attachment Disorder
- Resources & Training
- Reunification
- School
- Sexual Abuse
- Specialized Training (self mutilization, anorexia, etc.)
- Substance Use & Abuse
- Transracial Foster Parenting and Adoption
- Working with Biological Families
- Working with Social Workers
6. Evaluating Meetings

Why is evaluation important?
Evaluation helps identify areas of meetings that are working, those that need improvement, and areas that should be discontinued. Evaluation is also a way to see if meetings are addressing the intended goals of the group. For instance, if one of the goals of the group is to provide education for the membership and they indicate frequently on the evaluation that they aren’t learning anything in the meetings, the facilitator should try to improve the education component of meetings.

How can I evaluate meetings?
The best way to evaluate your meetings is to get the participants’ perspectives. Handing out a quick survey for participants to complete BEFORE leaving can be an effective way to evaluate your meeting. Below are some questions you may want to include on a meeting survey. You also may want to keep track of a few things on your own, such as how many new and old members attend your meetings or the number of people who arrive late.

Possible Survey Questions
- **End Result:** How well did we achieve what we needed to?
- **Use of Time:** How well did we use our time?
- **Participation:** How well did we do at involving everyone equally?
- **Decision Making:** How well did we make decisions? (Consider both the process used and the end result)
- **Next Steps:** How clear and doable are any next steps we set for our group?
- **Organization:** How well organized was the meeting?
- **Facilitation:** How well run was the meeting?
- **Interest:** How well did the meeting keep your interest?
- **Usefulness:** How useful was the meeting for you? (For instance, did it help educate you or provide you with support or encouragement?)

What do I do after I evaluate?
It is not enough simply to ask people what they think of the support group meetings. You must look at their responses and try to find patterns that suggest how to make the meetings better. Did a lot of people say the meeting was interesting but unorganized? Maybe you can improve or stick to your agendas. Or did many members say you reached your goals but participation was weak? In that case, try to find different activities or facilitation methods that will include more members as you accomplish your goals. Always listen to the participants’ opinions—evaluation is your opportunity to learn and improve as a facilitator!

On the next page is a sample meeting evaluation used by the Hennepin County FosterParentNet support group.
This form is to be completed by all foster parent participants of the Hennepin County Foster Care Association Support Groups and other FosterParentNet grant related activities.

Date of session or event _______________________ Topic ________________________________

1. This session has been of value to me in the following ways:
   Please circle all that apply
   
   Recreationally  Emotionaly  Educationally  Of No Value

2. Do you plan to attend another support group meeting?
   
   Yes or No
   Why?

3. What did you enjoy most about this session or event?

4. What did you like least about this session or event?

5. What are issues or topics that you would like to see addressed in future sessions?

6. How would you rate this session?
   
   4=excellent  3=good  2=fair  1=poor
7. Setting Objectives for the First Meeting

Starting off well is important. That is why we commonly hear the phrases “make a good first impression” and “get off on the right foot.” For a social worker leading an agency-sponsored parent support group, this advice is especially relevant. Parents will most likely come to the first meeting with a number of worries. These worries may stem from preconceived notions about the social worker, the agency, and the group, as well as from past group experiences. Part of your job as the group leader is to calm these anxieties, answer questions, and make sure everyone is beginning on the same page. In his book, The Skills of Helping Individuals and Groups, Shulman (1979, pp.139-140) offers the following list of objectives for social workers to accomplish during their first group meeting (which has been adapted slightly):

☑ To introduce group members to each other.

☑ To make a brief, simple opening statement which tries to clarify the agency’s or institution’s stake in providing the group service as well as the potential issues and concerns that group members feel urgent about.

☑ To obtain feedback from the group members on their sense of fit between their ideas of their needs and the agency’s view of the services.

☑ To clarify the role of the social worker in the group

☑ To deal directly with any obstacles that may affect the group’s ability to function effectively, such as stereotypes group members may have of support groups or feelings of anger if the group is involuntary.

☑ To begin to encourage intermember interaction and sharing of experiential knowledge rather than discussion between the members and the leader.

☑ To begin to develop a supportive culture in the group in which members can feel safe.

☑ To help group members develop a tentative plan for future work.

☑ To clarify expectations. What does each person expect of the other members, of the social worker, of the agency? What expectations do the social worker and agency have of the members and of each other?

☑ To gain some consensus on issues to be addressed as a group and next steps to take.

☑ To start to encourage honest feedback and evaluation of the effectiveness of the group.
Tips for a Smooth Meeting

Z Welcome guests – Greet and welcome people as they arrive. Make sure everyone feels welcome to refreshments and knows where the bathroom is located.

Z Sign-in – A sign-in sheet can be passed around to serve as a record of attendance at the meeting.

Z Check-in and introduction of new members – During the check-in, members might be asked to say their names for the benefit of new members and answer an icebreaker question. For instance, each member might be asked to describe an interaction with a member of their family that caused them to smile this week.

Z Breaks and Food – When planning your meetings don’t forget the importance of providing well-spaced breaks and food. Breaks let people stretch their legs, use the restroom, make necessary phone calls, and return to the group more focused. Food is an excellent icebreaker and it has a way of establishing a friendly and warm atmosphere. Your group can decide how casual or elaborate the food should be.

Z Closing discussion – Provides a brief opportunity for participants to share their feelings or concerns in relation to the meeting. This might also be the question and answer session after a speaker has presented.

Z Setting the date of the next meeting – Before the meeting ends be sure to discuss the date, time, and location of the next meeting.
Pearls of Wisdom from the Tennessee Valley Foster Parent Association

- Stay up to date on new policies and procedures affecting foster care issues.
- Don't become just a fundraising group or coffee club.
- Don't let your group become a gripe forum. Encourage the group to offer support and share suggestions.
- Cooperate with public and private agencies, but don't sacrifice your goals for the sake of cooperation. Encourage partnership.
- Remember the purpose for your group.
- Share the glory. Involve all of the members, not just a few.
- Communicate with your members on a regular basis. Keep them informed through monthly newsletters and reports.
- Keep your meetings as informal as possible. Speakers are good, but not if they lecture. It works best if they talk, share, and answer questions.
- Reserve time during your meetings for your members to share their problems and joys.

A Note: Groups are Not For Everyone

Regardless of how warm and friendly your group may be, remember support groups are not for everyone. Some people are not at a place in their lives where they are ready to meet with a group around personal issues. They may not feel comfortable with the support group idea and never will be. Support groups can always be suggested and offered but they are not prescribed across the board. "What works for one will not work for another." (Miller, 1998)
Support Group Members’ Views on Meetings

Data was collected on what FosterParentNet support group members liked and did not like about their group meetings. Hopefully these lists can help you and your group develop interesting and successful meetings. You will notice that the dislikes are often small issues that can easily be fixed through proper planning.

Likes

- Education
- Emotional support
- Feeling validated
- Food
- Fun
- Information on starting support groups
- Information on foster parenting
- Opportunity to share thoughts and feelings
- Opportunity to exchange ideas
- Realizing we are important

Dislikes

- Boring
- Driving in bad weather
- Finding childcare
- Hard to hear
- No food or breaks
- One person talking a lot
- Schedule
- Speaker unskilled
- Temperature
- Topic irrelevant
- Unorganized

Barriers to Support Group Participation

- Foster/adoptive parent suspicion of outsiders and strong value of self-reliance
- Inconvenient meeting locations
- Weather conditions which make travel difficult
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of child care
- Inconvenient time
- Unskilled facilitator
- Unclear group purpose
- Irrelevant topic
Facilitation (Section 4)
Pages 74 thru 100

The Facilitator's Role
Different Models of Facilitation
Basic Facilitation Skills
Encouraging Participation
Dealing with Conflict
Facilitation Tips
Facilitator Evaluation
Facilitation Exercises
Effective facilitating!
Facilitation  
(Section 4)

The Facilitator’s Role

The support group facilitator’s greatest challenge is to foster a sense of mutual aid so that the member thinks it is the group that is important and not the leader (Kurtz, 1997, p.93).

The role of the facilitator is to be neutral and guide the group toward meeting their goals without taking power away from the group. The facilitator is not the same as the group leader. A facilitator guides the group by managing the process but leaving the content to the participants. When a social worker facilitates a support group it is different than when a foster/adoptive parent plays the same role. Social workers have power over foster/adoptive parents because they are professionals and because they make decisions that affect the foster/adoptive parents. Therefore, social workers must work even harder to clearly define their roles as facilitators and to make sure that group members are empowered and have their needs met.

As groups begin, many social workers tend to either become overinvolved and controlling or to withdraw and become too passive to effectively facilitate (Brandler & Roman, 1999). Both dynamics lead to problems. Kurtz (1997) explains that when social workers assume control of the group from the beginning they generally remain in control for the life of the group and fail to distribute power to the group members. To avoid becoming overly controlling, social workers should consider sharing leadership with foster/adoptive parents. This can be done by having a co-leader or by involving different foster/adoptive parents in leadership roles for different tasks.

It is also common for social workers to not be completely comfortable in a position of authority and want to create an egalitarian group. However, if social workers give up their leadership role, necessary tasks such as creating ground rules and determining the group’s purpose may never occur. Remember that being assertive and demonstrating leadership creates a safe place for the group (Brandler & Roman, 1999). As long as you focus on process and leave the content to the members, you can empower your group while maintaining your position as facilitator.

It is clear that in order to be an effective facilitator, one must understand the difference between process and content as well as the difference between leaders and facilitators. Those concepts are explained on the next page.
Process vs. Content

The simple way of understanding the difference between process and content is that process is "how" and content is "what."

The process includes the ground rules and climate that are established, the procedures used throughout the discussion, and the group dynamics and style of interaction among the members. Often the process is harder to identify than the content. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the functioning of the group.

The content is what is recorded on the agenda and said during the meeting. Content includes topics of conversation, problems solved, decisions made, and the goals set and accomplished. The agenda serves as a content road map. Remember, the group is responsible for the content area.

The process goals for support group facilitation on page _____ should help you better understand how to effectively maintain a focus on process.

Leaders vs. Facilitators

Two important roles for any successful group are leader and facilitator. It is impossible for someone to be the leader and facilitator at the same time. Leaders organize the group or take responsibility for the life of the group. They are also actively involved in the group's decision-making process. Facilitators, on the other hand, do not participate in decision making, but remain neutral and help the group reach its goals. Therefore, in order for leaders to facilitate, they must temporarily refrain from sharing their views and affecting group decisions. Remaining neutral as a facilitator can be even more challenging for social workers, who have to make sure their position of power does not impact group decisions.

Groups can be facilitated by the social worker, a parent, or by the social worker and a parent together. Ideally, the social worker will not be the solely responsible for facilitation. Instead, facilitation can be rotated throughout the group membership, possibly in collaboration with the social worker. Providing parents with the opportunity to facilitate enables them to experience the benefits and challenges of being a support group facilitator and ensures that power is shared with group members. When group members facilitate a group it is important that they emphasize their position of neutrality to the group.

On the following page are some specifics to help you understand the role of the facilitator. The text in italics are examples of things facilitators might say included in the book The Art of Facilitation (Hunter, Bailey, & Taylor, 1995).
Facilitators should be able to:

Plan for meetings (including making an agenda), but always stay flexible
- It's time to get started. We will finish at 7:30.
- Everyone seems to want more time for this item, so we will continue the conversation.

Welcome all participants to meetings and create a positive, trusting environment
- Let's discuss the ground rules and see if anyone has some they would like to add.
- What are your hopes and fears regarding this group?

Clarify the purpose of the meeting and group
- Where do you hope to be in three years?
- What are the steps that will lead us toward this goal?

Listen and watch carefully in order to understand all participants' ideas and needs
- Is anything going on for you Corey? You have become very quiet.

Keep discussions on track and end meetings with clear next steps
- Let's put this new issue on the agenda for later.
- What steps can be taken to move in the right direction?

Ensure all viewpoints are heard and foster cooperation among members
- James, you've had time to state your view. Let's hear from someone else.
- How do these issues fit together?

Manage conflict
- Please don't interrupt when Keisha is speaking.
- This sounds very emotional. What do people think about it?

Use consensus to help the group make decisions that include all opinions
- We don't have an agreement. I'll write down the different perspectives on the board.
- Please say "yes" if you agree, "no" if you don't.

Be impartial and treat all participants equally
- Let's go around and give everyone a turn to speak.
Qualities of Effective Facilitators

- **Optimism** - Effective facilitators do not allow diverse reactions from the group to throw them off. Instead they focus on what can be achieved and draw the best from participants.

- **Openness** – It is critical that facilitators are open to all participants' experiences, ideas, and feelings.

- **Honesty and Trust** – The facilitator should model these traits for the group. If a facilitator doesn’t have the answer to a question it is best to say so and ask for suggestions from the group. The facilitator needs to be honest and trust that the group has the skills to solve problems.

- **Knowledge** – Facilitators should listen carefully and get to know the participants so that they can understand their needs. Facilitators also should gather information about topics that are important to the group and continue learning about the skills of facilitation.

- **Flexibility** - Successful facilitators have an agenda for all meetings but are also willing to deviate from that agenda if it is clear that the group needs to do so.

- **Understanding** – Facilitators understand that all group members experience pressures in other parts of their lives that may affect their ability to be present and positive during support group time. Facilitators also understand how to make the support group a safe place and help members get centered for meetings.

- **Alertness** – Great facilitators pay attention to group dynamics and notice what is going on at all times. Facilitators must also be aware of their own feelings and biases and make sure that they do not affect the group.

- **Firmness** – The role of the facilitator is an active and not a passive role. It takes a great deal of assertiveness to keep people on track and manage conflict.
Unobtrusiveness – The facilitator does as little talking as possible. Generally they say only enough to give instructions, stop arguments, keep things on track, and summarize the meeting.

Energy – A centered facilitator brings his or her own energy to the group experience. Support group members who participated in a focus group with Scheunemann (2001) said that tired facilitators were barriers to support group participation. They indicated that a tired facilitator meant a boring and frustrating meeting.

(Some of the above characteristics were taken from Bens’ *Facilitating with Ease*, 2000, p.31)

Don’t get discouraged if you don’t possess all of the facilitation skills listed. As with leadership skills, these skills can be learned.
Process Goals for Support Group Facilitation

Facilitators are responsible for the process of their groups as opposed to the content. Group members will determine content goals, such as what they want to talk about, what resources they need, and what speakers they would like to hear. The facilitator should set goals for process and work to make sure they are achieved. Kurtz (1999, pp.100-102) offers the following process goals to keep in mind while facilitating a support group:

- **Information Exchange**: Ensure all members are given the information they need, from both professional and experiential sources.

- **Mutual Support**: Model and teach active listening and empathic responses so that all members feel supported by the group.

- **Group Cohesion**: Help the group to recognize their similarities, develop relationships, and work together.

- **Increased Coping Skills**: Encourage sharing stories and strategies.

- **Diminished Isolation**: Foster relationships and emphasize the importance of being non-judgmental. Meeting and being accepted by people with similar life experiences decreases feelings of isolation.

- **Stress Reduction**: Provide a relaxing environment, free from blame and guilt, and that encourages fun activities.

- **Safety**: Establish ground rules in order to develop a safe environment. It is also important to respect differences, not push for self-disclosure, and to set limits on inappropriate behavior.

- **Focus on Success**: Reinforce positive and productive conversations and strategies rather than those focused on complaining or finding fault.
Diagram 4.1 illustrates how groups are able to access many more ideas when provided with skilled facilitation than when provided with poor facilitation.
Different Models of Facilitation

There are three different models of facilitation for agency-sponsored support groups: social worker facilitated, foster/adoptive parent facilitated, and co-facilitated. Although the person who leads the group often facilitates the group, this is not the only option. A social worker-led group could be facilitated by a parent, by the social worker and a parent, or by a different person each session. Similarly, a parent-led group could be facilitated by the social worker, by the two in cooperation, or by different people based on rotating assignments. There are strengths and weaknesses to every facilitation model and the group should decide which one is best by taking into consideration who leads the group and the group's needs and dynamics.

Social Worker Facilitated: When facilitation is conducted by the social worker it allows all the parents to participate fully and feel that there is an objective person managing the group process. If social workers have experience working with groups, the group may benefit because they will have learned and practiced different facilitation skills. Additionally, the agency may be more inclined to pay for a social worker to receive professional facilitation training than a foster/adoptive parent. Although facilitation is not the same as leadership, there is the danger that the social worker will assume too much control of the group or the participants will feel that the social worker is in charge and become disempowered.

Foster/Adoptive Parent Facilitated: When foster/adoptive parents facilitate it is clear that the group process is not in the hands of a social worker. This may help the members feel more empowered and confident that their needs will be met. On the other hand, because facilitators should not be involved in the content, a parent facilitator will not have the opportunity to share their thoughts. Therefore, parent facilitation should be shared among the parents so that one person does not lose the opportunity to talk and receive support.

Co-Facilitated: Co-facilitation is a challenging process, but one that can have many benefits. In order for two people to facilitate together successfully they must have time to plan, to get to know one another, and most importantly to learn about each other's facilitation styles. Otherwise the danger exists that the two facilitators may not be able to share the role, agree on their methods, and help the group achieve its goals. When co-facilitation works it provides support for the facilitators, particularly with challenging group dynamics. It also models for the group the way in which social workers and foster/adoptive parents can work together, share power, and learn from one another. If different parents take turns facilitating with the social worker they may want to work together for two sessions in a row so that they can get used to each other's styles.
Basic Facilitation Skills

There are many skills that make someone an effective facilitator. They all can be learned and will improve with practice. Facilitation skills help group members feel like what they are contributing to the group is important and understood. Attending, paraphrasing, questioning, and summarizing are common tools used in facilitating support groups (Kaner et al., 1996, Bens, 2000). They are used to ensure clarity in communication within the group and to make the group process as successful as possible. They also can be used to encourage participation or deal with conflict, however specific skills will also be presented for those situations.

**Attending:** In order to meet needs of the individuals and the group, the facilitator pays careful attention to group members' body language, behaviors, and words. The facilitator also gives verbal cues to the audience that they are listening and focused on the group through eye contact, body language, and body positioning. Attending helps all participants feel included and like their needs are being met.

**Paraphrasing:** The facilitator repeats back what they heard to be the main idea of what a group member said and asks for clarification ("I heard you say..., is that right?"). This tool helps group members feel heard and understood, gives them the opportunity to clarify what they meant if they were misunderstood, and can help the conversation keep moving.

**Clarifying/Questioning:** When further information is needed from a speaker in the group, the facilitator may question the individual for clarification and to gain insights on feelings. This technique helps maintain clarity for the facilitator as well as the group members.

**Summarizing:** This tool can be thought of as paraphrasing numerous thoughts of an individual or a group. Summarizing allows the facilitator to highlight important aspects of a discussion in order to make a decision or come to a conclusion. It can also be used to identify tasks and action steps for the next meeting or review previous meetings. Finally, summarizing can make connections between different people's ideas or help provide focus when someone speaks for a long time.

**Tip:** Continual paraphrasing, questioning, and summarizing during an open discussion can become tiresome and frustrating for the group. It slows down the pace and can eliminate spontaneity. These tools are usually used to help speakers who are having difficulty expressing themselves. (Kaner et al., 1996, p.60)

**Tip:** Be yourself with your gestures and tone of voice; don't be wooden or phony. Remember a key purpose of building open communication is trust.
Encouraging Participation

Some people are careful thinkers and prefer to process things internally before sharing new ideas or opinions with the group. Some of these are the same folks who, on the way home from the meeting, think to themselves “I wish I would have said what I am thinking right now during the meeting.” They may need a little more time to think or encouragement to share their thoughts than others. Below are some facilitation tools that Kaner et al. (1996, p.64) suggest using with less talkative members. On the next page are activities that may be helpful for increasing participation.

Encouraging: Asking “Who else wants to say something?” or “Can we hear from someone who hasn’t spoken?” can provide enough encouragement to bring new voices into the conversation. It can also serve as a reminder to more talkative members that they can also take a turn listening.

Balancing/Calling for Responses: This technique is similar to encouraging, but is aimed at making sure all viewpoints are expressed. The facilitator might say “Does everyone see it that way or are there other opinions in the group?” or “Does anyone have a reaction to what Erin just said?”

Drawing-out: The facilitator asks the speaker to say more. The purpose of this tool is to invite the speaker to continue talking and verbally develop a line of thought.

Rewarding: The facilitator uses verbal and nonverbal positive reinforcement to encourage quiet members when they speak. This can also be used to signal to the group when they are sticking to the agenda or meeting their goals.

Tip: The facilitator should be careful not to always draw-out, focus on, and reward the people with the most promising ideas. Group members may begin to feel underappreciated or suspect that the facilitator has a hidden agenda.

Tip: If you and your group can tolerate silence between responses, there is a greater chance that more introverted, shy people will join the conversation. Try to remind the group to slow things down a little and give everyone a chance to join the discussion.

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High Participation Exercises

In addition to facilitation skills that encourage participation, there are many activities that are designed to ensure the participation of all group members. Most people will enjoy these activities because they add variety to meetings, give them a chance to share their ideas, and help them get to know other group members.

Exercise 8
*Discussion Dyads/Triads:* Pose a question to the entire group and ask everyone to find a partner or two with whom they can discuss the topic for a few minutes. The small groups can report back to the whole at the end.

Exercise 9
*Tossed Salad:* Place a bowl (or other container) in the middle of the room. Give each person a slip of paper to write down one good idea they have. When everyone is done writing, place the slips in the bowl and “toss the salad.” Then each person removes one slip of paper from the bowl and reads it aloud to the group. Now discuss the most promising ideas as a group.

Exercise 10
*Issues and Answers:* This activity is great if the group has a number of issues to discuss or problems to solve (that would take a long time to get through all together). Follow these steps:

1) Write each issue or problem on the top of a piece of chart paper and hang them around the room.
2) Have the participants each choose one sheet to begin with and discuss that issue with whoever else is there. Give them five minutes to talk and then make sure they summarize their thoughts on the top half of the paper.
3) Now have everyone switch groups and continue switching until they have discussed each issue.
4) Then have everyone return to the issue they began with and come up with a number of solutions to write on the bottom half of the sheet.
5) Again, people circulate to all the groups, this time adding their solution ideas to each sheet.
6) Now, everyone walks past each sheet and checks off the solution they think is best.
7) Finally, the small groups that began at each sheet are responsible for creating action plans to address the issue on that sheet (using the most popular solutions).

(These activities were adapted from *Facilitating with Ease* by Ingrid Bens, 2000, pp.76-77)
Dealing with Conflict

Conflict naturally occurs in all groups. However, many people are uncomfortable with conflict and it has the potential to ruin a group if the facilitator is unable to manage it. Therefore, it is critical that facilitators understand and can help a group move through conflict.

Identifying the Conflict
Sometimes, as the facilitator, it is hard to determine the source of a conflict. The following tool (created by Brandler & Roman, 1999) will help you identify issues below the surface that may be causing conflict, thus enabling you to facilitate more successfully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker’s Feelings</th>
<th>Members’ Feelings</th>
<th>Population Dynamics</th>
<th>Group Stage Issues</th>
<th>Problems on the Surface</th>
<th>Problems Below the Surface</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

To Use this Tool:

1. After a session is complete, fill in the first five columns.

**Worker’s Feelings:** What were you honestly feeling during the session? Think specifically about when you were aware there was a problem or conflict. Were you uncomfortable? Afraid of failure or rejection? Angry? Be honest.

**Members’ Feelings:** Write down both emotions that members stated they were feeling as well as any that you observed. You can add quotes or examples to help you remember the feelings during the session. Make a note next to feelings that are based on your speculation—you may be wrong and it is important to be able to look back and re-analyze later.

**Population Dynamics:** When considering population dynamics it is important to think about what dynamics exist because of the members’ common experiences and identities as foster/adoptive parents (i.e. feelings of being overwhelmed, isolated, not meeting the needs of biological children, conflicts with social
You also should think about the differences in the group and what dynamics are associated with the various identities present (i.e. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, rural/urban, age, etc.).

Group Stage Issues: How long your group has been working together can have a significant impact on all group dynamics, particularly conflict. Make sure you take the time to learn about the different group stages (refer to the Group Stages descriptions on page ______) and always remember to think about their impact.

Problems on the Surface: You have decided to complete this chart because you have some idea that there is a problem or conflict in your group. Think about what alerted you to the fact that there is a problem. Write down the interactions and behaviors that you have observed that signal that there is a problem or conflict. For instance, some members may have started challenging your ability to lead the group. This may be a legitimate issue, but it may also be a sign of other problems that have not yet come to the surface. It is possible that group members are reacting to feeling disempowered by trying to make you feel disempowered.

2. Make some educated guesses to fill in the sixth column. You have gathered a lot of data that can help you analyze the group dynamics and hypothesize about different problems that may exist below the surface. One way to gather additional data is to use this tool for a number of sessions and then reflect on patterns you see over time.

3. Make changes to address the problems you believe exist below the surface. The majority of the time this will necessitate talking to the group about the problems you think exist and working together to solve them.
Facilitating the Conflict

Once you have recognized that a conflict exists, and hopefully have determined its cause using the tool on the last page, your job is to facilitate the conflict. Bens (2000) explains that there are two steps in facilitating conflict: venting and resolving. Venting provides everyone with the opportunity to express their emotions and feel heard. Until this step is taken, usually people are not prepared to resolve the issue. Resolving involves choosing and implementing an approach that will lead to a solution.

Venting

During venting you want to allow people to express their thoughts and feelings, but not at the expense of others. Many negative dynamics can occur while people are venting their emotions during a conflict, including: not listening to others' perspectives, sarcasm, disrespect, shutting down, finger pointing, and criticism. In order to avoid and work through these dynamics, Bens suggests the following techniques:

- Slow things down
- Stay neutral and calm, but assertive
- Revisit the group's ground rules
- Emphasize listening and paraphrasing
- Do not allow for disrespect or fighting
- Call time out if the group needs to cool down or re-focus
- Record ideas to keep track of the group's progress
- Help the group transition to resolving the problem

On page ___ is a model that can be helpful for facilitators and participants to work through the venting stage successfully. If necessary, you can pass this model out and ask participants to follow the steps carefully.
Resolving
Once people have shared their thoughts and feelings concerning the conflict it is time to work toward a resolution. Bens offers three resolution approaches that may be helpful in facilitating:

Accommodate: Ask people to try to be more tolerant of each other’s views and to get along. Sometimes this involves one person giving in to another person.

Compromise: Look for the middle ground between differing views. Each person gives up less important things to reach a more important goal.

Collaborate: Examine the conflict and work together to find solutions acceptable to all.
A Method for Talking Through Conflict Respectfully

Step 1—Listen: Listen fully and carefully as the other person speaks. Really try to understand his or her perspective rather than arguing as soon as you hear something you disagree with. Show the person you are listening actively by making eye contact and encouraging him or her to continue.

"Uh-huh, keep going."
"I'm not sure I understand. Could you repeat that last part please?"

Step 2—Empathize: Accept the views of the other person even if you don’t agree with them. Try to understand the other person’s feelings and express this understanding.

"I see what you mean. I understand how that would make you feel angry."
"I bet I’d feel the same way if..."

Step 3—Clarify: Make sure you understand what the other person really means. Paraphrase what you think the person is saying and ask for clarification.

"Let me see if I understand...are you saying...?"
"Are you proposing...?"

Step 4—Seek Permission: Ask the other person if she or he feels understood and is ready to hear your perspective.

"Now that you’ve shared your views, can I explain mine?"
"Could I now bring up some points you haven’t mentioned?"

Step 5—Resolve the Issue: You are ready to resolve the issue once both people feel heard and understood. Choose a resolution method from below that will be best in this situation. Remember to continue using the L-E-C-S (Listen-Empathize-Clarify-Seek Permission) skills you practiced above as you come to a resolution.

Accommodate: Ask people to try to be more tolerant of each other’s views and to get along. Sometimes this involves one person giving in to another person.

Compromise: Look for the middle ground between differing views. Each person gives up less important things to reach a more important goal.

Collaborate: Examine the conflict and work together to find solutions acceptable to all.
Exercise 11

Be Each Other:
Understanding Different Perspectives

Objective: To help two participants who are having a hard time communicating, understanding each other, and seeing each other's point of view.

Equipment: None

Directions: Ask the two people who are having difficulty to move their chairs into the middle of the circle facing each other. Tell them to continue their original conversation, but this time to be each other. They should respond in the conversation as if they are the other person. Tell the participants in the outer circle to say “stop” any time they feel the people are not staying in their roles. Let the conversation continue until the two people have come to agreement or have talked for about 10 minutes.

Now ask the following questions and allow for discussion:

Questions for the pair
Can you now see the other person's point of view? Why?
Did you have trouble being the other person? Why?
Did you feel the other person did a good job being you? Why or why not?

Questions for the outer circle
Did the pair do an accurate job of playing each other? How did they not?
What feedback can you offer to the pair?
Improving Group Communication

- When someone is being repetitive, a facilitator can use paraphrasing to help them summarize their thinking.

- Facilitators can help speakers who are difficult to understand by slowing them down and drawing them out.

- Facilitators can validate an important point of an exaggeration without debating its accuracy.

- A facilitator can treat interruptions firmly and respectfully by assuring the speaker that when the current discussion ends the group will come back to their point.

- When a group member expresses intense feelings, the facilitator can acknowledge the emotion and make sure the speaker’s point does not get lost.

These points emphasize how important it is for a facilitator to listen skillfully and respectfully to everyone.
Facilitator Evaluation

It is important to evaluate your job as a facilitator so that you can make any necessary changes to meet your group’s needs. This evaluation can be completed by asking group members or an outside observer to answer the questions or by answering the questions yourself after reflecting on the session.

1. Was the goal clear?

2. Was the group kept on task working toward the goal?

3. Was communication open and honest?

4. Did the facilitator listen actively and paraphrase when needed?

5. Did everyone participate and have a voice in decision making?

6. Were there verbal or nonverbal distractions?

7. Was time managed successfully?

8. Did the group have enough information to make good decisions?

9. Was the facilitator objective and focused on the process?

10. Were any conflicts that arose handled effectively?

11. Was there an end of meeting summary that accurately described what occurred?

12. Was the session worthwhile?

(Adapted from Facilitating with Ease by Ingrid Bens, 2000 and the University of Minnesota Vol. 1: Understanding Facilitation, 1999).
Icebreakers

Exercise 12
Birth Order Fun: Have the group divide up by birth order: oldest, youngest, middle, or only. Members should find a partner who shares the same family position and share common experiences, characteristics, etc.

Exercise 13
Name Tag Mixer: As each person comes into the room give them someone else's name tag. Tell them to circulate around the room introducing themselves to people and trying to find the person whose name tag they have. When they find this person, tell them to find out three things about them so that they can introduce them to the entire group.

Exercise 14
Childhood Experiences: Tell participants to get in small groups (3-4 people) and have each person share a childhood experience that had a positive or negative impact on them. If there is time, they should talk about how these early experiences affect their approaches as foster/adoptive parents.

Exercise 15
Ball Toss Activity: Have 6-10 balls or objects to toss. Tell the members to stand in a circle and explain that they will throw the balls in a pattern so that each person receives a ball only once (“I will throw to Jeff, who will throw to Marcia, …until it comes back to me”). Practice the pattern a few times. You can tell the group that the ball is a message and it is important to send messages clearly so that they can be received. Now start the ball again and this time add in more balls as you go. Stop the game in the middle to talk about how the process is going and whether messages are being received.

Exercise 16
Distraction banishment: As participants enter the room, ask them to write down at least three things that are on their mind from their home, personal, or work life that may distract them during the meeting. Make sure they realize this list should not include stresses related to foster/adoptive parenting—after all, that’s what you’re here to talk about! Then ask them to place this list in an envelope, seal it, write their name on it, and place it in a box outside the room (to be picked up at the end of the meeting). Remind them that you want this time to be useful for everyone and outside distractions will take away from their participation and enjoyment.

(The exercises above were adapted from Facilitation Resources Volume 4: Managing Group Interaction by the University of Minnesota, 1999)

Daily Inspirations for Foster & Adoptive Parents: This book by Susan Stone is an excellent resource for a facilitator to use as an opening or discussion starter for a support group meeting.
Exercise 17

Identifying the Group’s Needs

Objective: To find out what the participants need from your foster parent support group by learning about their experiences, hopes, and fears.

Equipment: Basket, bucket, post-it notes, and pens or pencils

Directions:

1. Put a basket and a bucket out with post-its. Have each participant write down a fear and put it in the bucket. Then have them write down a wish and put it in the basket. They can be fears or wishes pertaining to their child/ren, birth families, or foster parenting.

2. First take the fears out of the bucket and hang them up. Lead a discussion about these fears and how the support group may be able to help with these concerns.

3. Then remove the wishes from the basket, post them, and lead a similar discussion.

Facilitator’s Tip: You may want to keep the lists of fears and wishes to revisit over time to see how well the group is helping your participants address their fears and realize their wishes. This shows the group that you remember their needs and want to make sure the group is helping them meet those needs.
Exercise 18

The Capacity of Our Group

Objective: Demonstrate the wealth of experience and knowledge within the group.

Equipment: Flip chart, pens, colored strips of paper, and tape

Directions:

1. Draw a line down the center of the flip chart sheet. Label the left column “The Best Part of Being a Foster Parent” and the right side “The Worst Part of Being a Foster Parent.”

2. Ask the members of the group to write down their ideas about the best and worst parts of being a foster parent on the colored strips of paper and tape them under the appropriate heading.

3. Then make a scale on one piece of the flip chart paper as follows:

| 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 |

4. Ask all the parents to write down or say aloud how many years they have been foster parents, how many kids they have cared for, and how old they are. Tally these numbers up and share with the group how many years the group has fostered children, how many children they’ve cared for, and how many years of lived experience they share as a group.

5. Conclude by saying “given the wealth of knowledge and experience within the group, we will be able to share many great ideas and strategies for addressing the difficult parts of fostering—and that is what our group is for!”
Exercise 19

Problem Solving Challenging Behaviors

Objective: Demonstrate a framework for problem solving and generate suggestions for addressing challenging behaviors.

Equipment: Index cards, chart paper, and markers

Directions: Give each participant an index card and ask them to write down a challenging behavior they have encountered with a foster/birth/adopted youth within the last month. Let the participants know that cards may be read aloud and that they should not use real names. After 5-10 minutes collect all the cards and choose one at random. Read the problem described aloud and then guide the group through the following problem solving process:

1. Define the problem
2. Describe the adult's thoughts and feelings about the situation
3. Are others helping to solve the problem? If so, how?
4. Brainstorm solutions. List as many solutions as possible, without judging or discussing
5. Explore the pros and cons of each possible solution
6. The person who owns the problem selects one solution
7. Give each participant the opportunity to share one new idea or strategy learned during the exercise
Exercise 20

The Effect of Foster Care on the Family

Objective: Discuss the impact foster care can have on the entire family and brainstorm ways of supporting the foster parents and their biological children throughout the process.

Equipment: Flip chart (or large visible board) and markers

Directions: Read the following case study and lead the group through a discussion using the discussion questions below.

Case Study
Janie came into care at the age of 5 due to allegations of sexual abuse and deprivation. She had been neglected, deprived, and singled out as the bad child in the family. She had two younger half sisters.

She wouldn’t give any eye contact and repeatedly stated that she was ugly. She also told her foster parents’ biological daughters that they were ugly and sometimes tried to bite them.

She was labeled ADHD, exhibited low social skills, and had a very difficult time at school. Janie’s teacher called almost every other day to report on her bad behavior and ask the foster parents to do something.

Janie was very angry and would masturbate openly while in the presence of family members and company. She demanded attention from the foster mother but would not interact with the foster dad.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the behaviors that she exhibits? Which ones would be difficult and exhausting for a foster family to handle?
2. What are strategies to deal with these behaviors?
3. How could you go about getting help for Janie in these areas?
4. How can the foster parents find support for them and their other children?
Group Dynamics (Section 5)

Pages 100 thru

What is a Group?
Group Stages
Group Roles
The Effect of Power on Groups
Group Decision Making
Culture and Group Dynamics
Facilitator Responses for Difficult Dynamics
Getting along and getting support...
Group Dynamics
(Section 5)

What is a Group?

According to Bens (2000, p.51), a group is “a collection of people who come together to communicate, tackle a problem or coordinate an event.” Members of groups often have varying jobs and lives outside of the group and only come together for the purpose of the group. In your support group there are probably many differences between the members of your group, but they all come together to support one another and share their experiences as foster/adoptive parents. It is also important to remember that although members of a group come together for some common reasons, each person still has his or her own ideas and goals. Therefore people may focus mainly on what they want to get out of the group as individuals, which can sometimes lead to conflict.

Who will be in the group?

It is a given that members should have a similar purpose for being in the group and have some personal characteristics in common. This provides a foundation for communication and helps members identify with each others’ concerns and problems. Having things in common helps members build relationships. For instance, in a foster/adoptive parent group all of the participants have some common issues centered on the care of children.

However, it is also true that every group is naturally diverse and that it is important to create an atmosphere that respects and encourages diversity. Diverse groups that learn how to work together are more productive than groups lacking in diversity (Shaw, 1983). This diversity will come in the form of members’ coping skills, length of involvement in the foster care/adoption system, levels of expertise, and life experiences. Group diversity will also appear in terms of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, relationship status, economic status, and varying abilities. Finally, parents will have experiences caring for a range of children of different ages and backgrounds possessing varied strengths and challenges. The individual uniqueness that each person brings to the group makes it possible for members to learn from one another and share their strengths.

One of the most challenging aspects of support groups is addressing the similarities and differences represented by the members. A key guideline is to always listen to and validate each person’s experience. As the facilitator, encourage people to learn from each other’s experiences without questioning...
them. Also remember the importance of cooperation. Members must be committed to working with one another or a group cannot function. You can set the tone of your group by including respect for other's experiences and working cooperatively in your ground rules.
Group Stages

Groups move through various stages as they work together. Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing are the stages commonly identified (Hunter, Bailey & Taylor, 1995, Bens, 2000, University of Minnesota, Vol 4, 1999). The ultimate goals is to reach the performing stage, however, many groups get stuck on their way. Hopefully, the startup, planning, facilitation, and group dynamics skills in this workbook will help you guide your group to the performing stage. It is also helpful to know that groups can return to earlier stages, go through stages multiple times, and show behaviors from more than one stage at a given time. Despite these variations, it is good for group leaders and facilitators to understand the basic stages through which most groups progress.

Stage 1: Forming
In this first stage the group is being formed, ground rules are set, group members are getting to know one another, and expectations are high. During this stage members tend to be polite, not share their feelings, and not engage in conflict. Basic information is shared but few group tasks are accomplished. The group is often very dependent on the facilitator.

Stage 2: Storming
At this point members begin to see differences between their original expectations for the group and how it has formed. They may have trouble getting along with other members, realize the goals are too difficult to accomplish, or the facilitator may be taking too little or too much control. Conflict, competition, and frustration are common as people negotiate for power and control concerning these issues.

Stage 3: Norming
The norming stage is necessary in order to move eventually to performing. While norming, group members address the conflicts that have surfaced and find ways to resolve them. Through this resolution process the group is able to create new norms for the team and focus again on the similarities between individuals. During stage 3 people listen more actively, include more members, and can stay focused on the task at hand.

Stage 4: Performing
Having completed the norming stage, groups have addressed their conflicts and now can work more cooperatively and productively. Typical behaviors include respectful interactions, openness to new ideas, successful decision making, creative conflict resolution, and power sharing. Groups in the performing stage generally feel committed to the group and experience increased morale.
Group Roles

Groups develop norms for behavior that govern and guide how people interact within the group. As groups are forming, people pay attention to how others react to their behaviors. Group approval or disapproval then helps create the norms and roles that will exist within the group. Within the first 3 to 4 hours that groups are together roles begin to emerge.

Explaining different roles to the group can raise awareness and assist the group in recognizing patterns of behavior and habits of interaction, which members could otherwise adopt unknowingly. Group members can then be more purposeful in the formation of their own group roles and dynamics. Below is a list of some of the roles that are commonly present in groups (Brown & Wiedemeier, 1995):

- **Task Roles** – Roles related to task completion:
  - Initiator
  - Opinion giver
  - Elaborator
  - Clarifier
  - Information provider

- **Group-oriented roles** – Roles related to group cohesion, morale, and unity:
  - Tension reliever
  - Compromiser
  - Harmonizer
  - Encourager
  - Communicator
  - Active listener

- **Self-oriented roles** – Roles focused on the individual:
  - Aggressor
  - Obstructer
  - Recognition seeker
  - Negator
  - Topic jumper
  - Devil’s advocate

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The Effect of Power on Groups

Power always has an impact on group dynamics. Power can be defined as “the capacity of an individual to motivate others to carry out certain actions or to behave in a particular way” (Zastrow, 1989, p.70). Support groups led by social workers will most likely be more strongly impacted by the effect of power than groups led by foster/adoptive parents. It is very important for social workers to understand the different ways in which they have power over the group and how this may affect group dynamics. Zastrow (1989) uses French and Raven’s model to describe the effects of five types of power. They are described below in the context of a social worker-led foster/adoptive parent support group.

**Reward Power:** Reward power exists when one person believes that another person has the power to offer them rewards or eliminate punishments. In such circumstances the first person is more inclined to work for or obey the second person. Social workers’ positions allow them to influence many interactions between parents and the agency, creating a strong base of reward power. If parents think that a social worker is going to help them they may feel positively toward the worker despite the power differential.

**Coercive Power:** Coercive power is when one person believes another person has the power to punish them or remove rewards. This type of power usually results in the first person obeying the second, but often accompanied by negative feelings, such as resentment. Once again, social workers do have the authority within agencies to punish parents in various ways, including not placing children in their homes. Parents may follow the social worker’s expectations because they feel like they do not have a choice, but develop negative feelings toward the worker and the group.

**Legitimate Power:** Legitimate power exists when one person believes the other person has a legitimate right to dictate how he or she should behave. Many parents may believe that a social worker, because of his or her position of authority, has some legitimate power. However, if the social worker appears to be assuming power the parents do not feel is warranted by the position, they may become angry or resentful.

**Referent Power:** Referent power exists when one person is influenced by another person because she or he identifies with that person. The first person believes she or he should be like the other person because of some similarity between them. Referent power will have an impact for some parents with some social workers. Identification could occur for many reasons, including gender, race, life history, personal interests, personality or other factors.

**Expert Power:** Expert power exists when one person believes that he or she should accept the other person’s advice or direction as an expert. This type of
power will almost definitely exist in support groups, when parents view the social worker as leading the group and having expert knowledge to impart. However, this can be complicated by the fact that parents may feel they are the true experts on foster care/adoption based upon their lived experiences while the social worker feels he or she is also an expert. Conflict or resentment could arise. Additionally, if the social worker attempts to assert power outside their realm of expertise, the parents may lose confidence in the social worker.

Social workers should complete the exercise on the following page before beginning work with a support group. It will help identify the types of power the social worker and the parents have and the potential effects of this power on the group.
Exercise 21

The Effect of Power on Groups

Objective: To identify the types of power the social worker and foster/adoptive parents have and the potential impact of this power on group dynamics.

Materials: Descriptions of different types of power (found on pages _______), flip chart (or large visible board), markers

Directions:

1. Expose social workers to the different types of power (described on pages _____). This can be done by lecture, reading, role plays, or other creative methods.

2. Divide the participants into groups of four to six people and ask them to discuss the following questions:

   What types of power do social workers leading support groups have?
   What types of power do foster/adoptive parents in support groups have?
   What is the primary type of power social workers have?
   What is the primary type of power foster/adoptive parents have?

3. Ask all the groups to return and write their answers on the flip chart and then talk about any differences in their answers.

4. Once the participants have finished their discussion, they probably will have agreed that social workers have much more power in support groups than foster/adoptive parents do. Tell them it is now time to think about what effect these different forms of power will have on the group as well as what they should do to diminish negative effects of social workers' power. Ask them to do this by completing a chart like the one below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Power</th>
<th>Effect of Power</th>
<th>Things to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>Make parents afraid to talk honestly</td>
<td>Remind parents that you are there to facilitate, not to judge or assess. Provide the group with time to talk without you in the room. However, do remind parents that you are all mandated reporters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Foster resentment because parents feel they are the true experts based on their life experiences</td>
<td>Avoid giving answers when questions are raised. Instead direct the question back out at the group and have them use their collective experiential knowledge to find appropriate answers. Only use guest speakers when the group requests them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Etc.

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Group Decision Making

Helping groups make decisions is one of the most important jobs of the facilitator. Groups often are unsure of how to make decisions, get overwhelmed by conflict, or end up making poor decisions. Facilitators should help identify decision making methods that will be helpful in a given situation and guide the group through the process. Five effective methods identified by Bens (2000) are described below.

It is also important to note that during the process of making a decision a group can progress through the four group stages described earlier in this section. In other words, in order to make a decision a group often will form, storm, norm, and then perform.

Decision Making Methods

One person decides: Although most groups think that decisions need to be made by the entire group, having one person make a decision can be much simpler. Making sure that everyone has the chance to share their ideas with the decision maker can help people feel included and can result in a higher quality decision.

Compromise: When group members have strongly opposed positions, compromise can be helpful. Each side is asked to give up some of what they wanted in order to find a solution in the middle. It can be challenging to find a solution that does not require one member to give up too much. When compromise works a decision is reached and both sides end up feeling that they both won and lost.

Multi-voting: This method works best when there are a number of options to choose between. Each person is given a certain number of points or stickers that they can assign to the options for which they want to vote. One common guideline is that you cannot give more than half your points to any one item. Once everyone disperses their points, all the points are added up in order to identify the most popular options. One drawback to this approach is that there is often not much discussion of the options.

Example: A foster/adoptive parent support group is trying to choose 3 out of 10 activities to include in a foster family celebration. Each person is given 10 points to disperse as they wish (not giving more than 5 to any one activity). One member really wants to have a barbeque and is also somewhat interested in both a soccer game and a fishing trip. She might put 5 points on the barbeque, 3 on the soccer game, and 2 on the fishing trip. Finally, everyone's points are added up for each of the 10 activities and the 3 most popular activities are chosen.
Majority Voting: This is the traditional method of voting where the majority wins. People can either raise their hands or write down their answers depending on if you want the group to know everyone’s opinions. This is a fast method and can be a good method if enough discussion happens before voting. Otherwise people may make decisions without having enough information. Another drawback is that it creates winners and losers.

Consensus: Consensus requires that everyone learn about the situation or problem, listen carefully to others, and work to find a solution that everyone can “live with.” The steps are as follows:

- Present the problem
- Brainstorm all possible solutions
- Discard solutions that people refuse to consider
- Discuss pros and cons of remaining solutions
- Modify solutions if better ideas arise
- Select the best, most workable solution/s

It is best to use consensus for important decisions because it takes everyone’s views into account and therefore often means that people will stand behind and work for the decision that is made in the end. You may not want to use consensus for more minor decisions because it can be a lengthy process.

Four Tips for Reaching Consensus

1) Avoid arguing for your view. Explain your opinion clearly and then listen to other ideas.
2) Don’t give up and make a win/lose decision. Really try to make a decision acceptable to all involved.
3) Don’t change your mind just to avoid conflict. Change your mind if someone convinces you that they have a better idea.
4) Don’t avoid conflict by voting or making deals. Consensus is not the same as compromise.

(University of Minnesota Vol 5, 1999)

On the following page you will find a chart summarizing the decision making methods described above.
### Decision Making Options Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>One Person</strong></td>
<td>- can be fast</td>
<td>- lack of input</td>
<td>- when one person is an expert</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- clear accountability</td>
<td>- low buy-in</td>
<td>- individual willing to take responsibility</td>
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<td><strong>Compromise</strong></td>
<td>- discussion</td>
<td>- adversarial</td>
<td>- when positions are opposite or</td>
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<td>- creates a solution</td>
<td>- win/lose</td>
<td>consensus is unlikely</td>
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<td><strong>Multi-Voting</strong></td>
<td>- systematic</td>
<td>- limits dialogue</td>
<td>- to sort or prioritize</td>
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<td>- objective</td>
<td>- may not end with</td>
<td>a long list of options</td>
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<td>- everyone participates</td>
<td>choosing real priorities</td>
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<td>- feels like a win</td>
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<td><strong>Majority</strong></td>
<td>- fast</td>
<td>- may be too fast</td>
<td>- less important</td>
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<td><strong>Voting</strong></td>
<td>- high quality with dialogue</td>
<td>- winners and losers</td>
<td>decisions</td>
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<td>- clear outcome</td>
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<td>dialogue or sufficient information</td>
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<td>group is okay</td>
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<td><strong>Consensus</strong></td>
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<td>- takes time</td>
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<td>- systematic</td>
<td>- requires that people share information and have good communication skills</td>
<td>- when total buy-in matters</td>
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<td>- everyone participates</td>
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<td>- encourages commitment</td>
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<td>- discussion oriented</td>
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(Chart taken from *Facilitating with Ease* by Ingrid Bens, 2000, p.117)
Factors that Affect Decision Making

The Self-Help Resource Association of British Columbia (#3) identifies the following five factors as having an impact on the decision making process. It may be helpful to think about how these elements may affect your group before you make any decisions together and also to review them when your group is having a difficult time making a decision.

**Individual Skills:** As this workbook makes clear, there are many communication, conflict management, and decision making skills that people can learn. The process of making a decision will be affected by how skilled the individuals in your group are in these different areas. Groups that have many inexperienced, unskilled members may have a harder time making decisions.

**Power Imbalance:** When power is relatively equally distributed throughout a group more members tend to participate in decision making processes. If there is a significant power imbalance, decisions may be made by those in power without taking into account the views of those with less power.

**Group Size:** The larger a group gets, the more likely it is that sub-groups will be formed. The existence of sub-groups can result in greater opposition within the group or control by one more powerful sub-group.

**Stage of Development:** Groups in the forming stage do not have experience making decisions together. The members are learning how they work together, establishing roles within the group, and usually trying to make good first impressions. This may result in quicker, less careful and honest decision making. Storming group members may be so attached to their own views and immersed in conflict that they have difficulty making any quality decisions. Norming groups will probably not have much experience with successful decision making, but they will have the ability to work at the task thoughtfully. Finally, because of their experience as a group, performing groups will probably make the best decisions. They can recall different strategies they have used in the past and are aware of challenges and pitfalls that may arise.

**Past History:** Any problems from the past, such as difficulties making decisions or unresolved conflicts between members, can inhibit the group’s ability to make a good decision.
Diagram 5.2 (Kaner, et al., 1996) illustrates the process that groups go through in making decisions. Facilitators should educate their groups about this process and in particular, the existence of the conflict stage. It is important for people to understand that the best decisions usually come after a period of conflict. It is the job of the facilitator to help groups negotiate through conflict and reach a decision by using their conflict management skills and providing groups with decision making processes appropriate for the situation.
Exercise 22
What’s the Best/Worst that Could Happen?

Objective: If the group is having trouble making a decision, it is sometimes because of people’s fears regarding that decision. This activity gives people the opportunity to think about the best and worst things that could happen so that the group can move on and make a decision.

Equipment: Flip chart (or large visible board) and markers

Directions:

★ Write each option the group is considering at the top of a piece of flip chart paper (note: make sure you do not have more than three options—it becomes overwhelming).

★ Begin with the first option and ask the group, “What is the worst thing that could happen if we chose this option?” Record their responses.

★ Then ask them, “What is the best thing that could happen?” and write their comments.

★ Now ask, “What’s most likely to happen?” and record their thoughts.

★ Go through the last three steps for each option. Give enough time that people are able to share their fears and also have a discussion about what realistically will happen.

★ Now return to the decision making process and see if the group is ready to choose an option.
Culture and Group Dynamics

Facilitators will find themselves working with group members who differ in the areas of race, sex, culture, ethnicity, culture, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, and social class. In foster/adoptive parent support groups, diversity is also represented by the children in care. Effective facilitators are able to work effectively with diverse group members because they have engaged in a process of self-exploration. They are aware of their own cultural limitations and biases and work to make sure they do not impede the group process. On page ___ is an activity that will help you reflect on values and biases.

Just as diversity exists at the individual level, issues of diversity also are important to consider at the group level. Facilitators need to be aware of how members from different backgrounds experience and participate in the group process. It is important to understand that members bring their own behaviors, values, and language to the group, all of which affect group dynamics. Patterns of behavior, values, and language often exist within cultures, however, it is critical to remember that not all people from any one culture will share any trait. There are always individual differences. What is most important is that you remember the types of differences that affect groups and work to make your group as inclusive of these differences as possible.

Here are some differences, often related to culture, that affect group dynamics (Cox, 1993, Haslett & Ruebush, 1999):

**Space Orientation**
Different cultures and people have different ideas about what is a normal amount of space between people when they are interacting in public places. If people with different norms about space are interacting there can be misunderstandings. For instance, if someone backs away from a person who is used to standing close together while talking, the second person may perceive the behavior as rude. Give group members the time to talk about space and create group norms.

**Time Orientation**
Cross-cultural research has identified three common time orientations: linear-separable, circular, and procedural. Linear-separable orientation sees time as divided into the past, present, and future, with the most focus on the future. It is also separated into units (months, days, minutes), allowing for clear beginnings and endings of events. Circular orientation views time as repeated cycles and focuses on the past and present rather than the future. Procedural time orientation, in contrast, treats time as irrelevant. Individuals and cultures holding this orientation take as much time as is necessary to complete whatever task or activity is at hand. A group consisting of people with different time orientations will need to negotiate about things such as punctuality, use of time, planning for the future, and deadlines.
Leadership Styles

Task-oriented leaders focus mainly on completing required work, while relationship-oriented leaders believe that relationships are necessary in order to accomplish work, and therefore put energy into building relationships. It is easy to imagine that a relationship oriented leader could be insulted by a task oriented leader who does not seem to care about relationships. In contrast, the task oriented leader could view the relationship oriented leader as wasting time talking to people instead of "getting work done." In reality, a group with both kinds of leaders will probably be most effective, so talking about what people’s goals are and how they try to accomplish them can help create understanding.

It is also important to note that individuals from dominant groups (men, European-Americans, people from the upper-middle class) tend to assume leadership positions more often than people from non-dominant groups and end up having more influence on group outcomes. This does not mean that they are better leaders or have more to contribute to the group. Facilitators should work to ensure a balance of power and ideas.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualists place more emphasis on individuals’ needs and goals, competition, and personal rewards. Collectivists focus more on the group needs and goals, cooperation, and group rewards. Group dynamics, including setting goals and the ability to work as a group, will certainly be affected by the number of collectivist and individualist members in the group.

Competitive vs. Cooperative Behavior

Individuals and cultures value competition and cooperation differently, both in personal interactions and performing tasks. Cooperative individuals are more inclined to help others in their group than competitive individuals. Cooperation often leads to the entire group reaching its goals while competition generally results in only some group members accomplishing their goals. For your support group cooperation is essential, however you should find a way to emphasize cooperation without excluding more competitive group members.

Locus of Control

People with an external locus of control tend to believe that things outside themselves (often things outside of their control) cause events to happen in their lives. In contrast, people with an internal locus of control tend to believe that they cause the events that occur in their lives. These differences may exist in individuals or cultures because of things such as belief in God or fate, or experiences with discrimination. Differences in locus of control may affect how group members understand difficulties, approach challenges, and think about power.
Communication Styles
There are a tremendous number of variations in communication that appear across and within cultures. Here are some of the ways in which communication styles differ:

- listening before talking vs. “thinking aloud”
- forthrightness vs. reservation of thoughts/feelings
- communication for connection and collaboration vs. competition
- expression vs. containment of emotion
- responsive vs. reserved listening
- clear advice for solving problems vs. discussion of issues and feelings
- tendency to express agreement vs. disagreement
- direct eye contact as a sign of respect vs. disrespect
- quick vs. slow pace of conversation

These differences can quickly lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, hurt feelings, anger, and ineffective group processes if they are not discussed and addressed. Do not assume that everyone is communicating in the same way or that you will be able to quickly understand other methods of communicating. The two exercises on the following pages are designed to help participants become more aware of the differences in nonverbal communication and behavior.

Conflict Management Styles
There are five commonly identified conflict management styles. They differ in terms of how much assertiveness (concern for self) and cooperativeness (concern for others) are present in each style. Different cultures and people may tend to use a particular style, however, they may use alternate styles depending on the situation.

Avoiding (low on assertiveness and cooperation)
Competing (assertive but not cooperative)
Accommodating (unassertive but cooperative)
Collaborating (assertive and cooperative)
Compromising (moderate assertiveness and cooperativeness)

As the facilitator it is your job to help the group find ways to handle conflict. Within your group there are probably multiple conflict management styles and you need to pay attention to these differences and help everyone in your group work through conflicts. It can be helpful to talk about conflict management styles so that group members begin to understand their own behavior, others’ behaviors, and how to solve conflicts together.
Exercise 23

Spaceship to Futura

Objective: To help group leaders reflect on their values and biases toward different individuals and groups

Materials: Copies of the list of 13 people (page ____), writing utensils, flip chart (or large visible board), markers

Directions:

1. Break the group up into subgroups of 4-6 people. Tell them that this exercise will help them clarify their values regarding the continuation of the human race following a nuclear war. Read them the vignette on the next page and give each group the list of the thirteen people.

2. Give the subgroups fifteen minutes to make their decisions. Offer time checks when there are ten, five, three, and one minute remaining.

3. Ask each subgroup to write their list on the flip chart and share their rationale.

4. Lead a discussion using the following questions:

   What values underlie the different selections?
   Why were certain individuals chosen/rejected?
   How did you feel during the process and when you heard the other groups’ lists?
   How does this exercise relate to the experience of leading a support group?
   How can you stay aware of your prejudices and biases and be a good leader?
   What have you learned from this activity?
The Situation:

The United States has discovered a planet, Futura, in another galaxy whose environment is very similar to the earth's. There is every indication that the planet will be able to support human life, although no human life has been detected on Futura. The United States has just completed a spaceship that will be able to travel to Futura. It will only hold a total of seven people. Your subgroup has been appointed by the government to select the first seven people to go to Futura. The spaceship is remarkable in that it has a new computer system that has already been programmed to automatically guide the spaceship to Futura without requiring a pilot.

Suddenly a nuclear war breaks out among the world's powers and it looks like the nuclear destruction may eliminate human civilization on this planet. The chief scientist frantically calls. The spaceship must take off in fifteen minutes or it will be destroyed. The seven people that launch for Futura may be the only people left to start the human race again. There are thirteen people at the spaceship. Your subgroup must decide who will go to Futura on the ship (if the thirteen people themselves decide, they are likely to become irrational and begin fighting). All you know about the thirteen people is what is listed below.

The People:

1. Chief scientist, female, forty-seven years old.
2. A Latino peasant, female, four months pregnant.
3. A black male, third-year medical student.
4. A white female, prostitute, twenty-seven years old, a Communist.
5. A white male, gay, Olympic athlete, twenty-four years old.
6. A white biology professor, sixty-seven years old.
7. A rabbi, twenty-seven years old.
8. A white female, twenty-eight years old, has been arrested for several felonies, has never been employed.
9. A white female, twenty-four years old, has cerebral palsy.
10. A Korean child, male, eight years old.
11. A white male, moderately retarded due to lack of oxygen at birth, thirty-three years old.
12. A white female elementary school teacher, twenty-seven years old, has genital herpes.
13. A twenty-eight year old white farmer, has had a vasectomy.

(Exercise adapted from Social Work with Groups by Charles Zastrow, 1989, pp.118-120)
Exercise 24

Range of Cultural Values

Objective: To gain a better understanding of the different values in our group

Materials: Copies of the range of cultural values three page handout for each participant, writing utensils, markers, ten pieces of paper numbered 1-10, tape

Directions:

1. Hang the ten numbered pieces of paper across one wall of the room so that they create a continuum line.

2. Give each person a copy of the three page handout, The Range of Cultural Values, and a writing utensil. Ask them to take some time to think about their attitude toward the different items and mark where on the continuum they fall.

3. Now read the first item and ask people to walk to where they feel they belong on the continuum. After everyone has stopped ask the group to look around and notice the different values the group shares. Ask for a couple volunteers who to talk from where they are standing. They might talk about where they learned this value (from which part of their culture—we all have numerous cultures that shape us), why it is important to them, the experience of having a different cultural value than other people, or anything else that is meaningful to them about the value.

4. Now read the next item and follow the process outlined on #3. Continue with all the values on the sheet.

5. After the group is seated again, open the discussion using the following questions:

   What was it like to participate in this activity?
   What surprised you about the responses—your own or others?
   What did you learn?
   How will you use what you learned to help our group?
### The Range of Cultural Values

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<td>Meeting individual needs is important</td>
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<td>Group needs are more important than individual needs</td>
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<td><strong>Attitude toward small groups or family</strong></td>
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<td>Family is a person's loyalty</td>
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<td>Relationships outside the family are as important or more important</td>
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<td>Rational and logical</td>
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<td>Instinctive and impulsive</td>
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<td><strong>Attitude toward status, rank, and education</strong></td>
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<td>Based on heredity and seniority</td>
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<td>Earned by ability and hard work</td>
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Attitude toward control of one's environment

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<td>Personal or internal decision</td>
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Attitude toward authority

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<td>No respect or equal status</td>
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Attitude toward commitments and appointments

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Attitude toward strangers

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<td>Complete distrust</td>
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Decisions about the environment are seen as outside of one's control, or external.

Authority is valued and shown respect.

Precise.

Great hospitality.
### Attitude toward mistakes

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<td>Learn by mistakes</td>
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<td>Mistakes should be avoided at all costs</td>
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<td>Self-directed, takes initiative</td>
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<td>Directed by others, waits for orders</td>
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(The value descriptions were taken from the Self-Help Resource Association of British Columbia’s *Self-Help Facilitator Training Manual*, 1998)
Exercise 25

Eavesdropping:
Observing Nonverbal Behaviors

Objective: To develop participants' awareness and understanding of nonverbal behaviors.

Equipment: Paper and pens or pencils

Directions:

- Ask two volunteers to go across the room from the rest of the group and have a conversation for 3-5 minutes. Tell them to talk about something that is meaningful to them, but to make sure the group will not be able to hear them. If anyone can hear them, instruct them to clap so the pair can lower their voices.
- Explain to the rest of the group that they will be "eavesdropping" on their conversation without being able to hear them. Therefore, they will be observing their nonverbal behaviors and body language in order to try to guess what the pair is talking about.
- After the 3-5 minutes are complete, ask the large group to write down what they think the conversation was about.
- When they are done ask each person to read their description aloud.
- Then have the two participants in the conversation explain what they discussed.
- Now lead a discussion using the following questions:
  
  What nonverbal behaviors and body language did the observers notice and use to help them guess the topic of conversation?
  
  What helped some people to guess correctly?
  
  Why did other people guess incorrectly?
  
  How did the participants choose the topic of conversation?
  
  How did it feel to be eavesdropped on?
  
  What did everyone learn about nonverbal behavior, body language, and communication?
Facilitator Responses for Difficult Dynamics

What is a response I can use for a group member that is extremely dominating and wants to "out-talk" everyone?

When a person is over-participating, everyone else is under-participating. The facilitator should focus their efforts on the passive majority. Encourage them to participate more. Trying to change the dominant person only gives them more attention.

"Could someone who hasn't spoken take a turn?"
"What do you all think of Susan's idea?"

How do I handle two group members who are in a heated argument?

Don't waste time trying to resolve a conflict between two people who have no intention of reaching a consensus. Reach out to others in the group and ask their opinion.

"What are some other ways of seeing this?"
"Who would like to share their opinion of this topic?"

What do I do about group members who sit in the corner and whisper and tell jokes while the meeting is convening?

Don't ignore this behavior; it probably will not go away. First you can try standing close to these group members while you continue facilitating. If the problem persists assume there is a reason. For instance, has the topic become stale? Do people need a break? Would participants like to move into a small group discussion? If you cannot quickly solve the problem by adjusting some aspect of the meeting, do not hesitate to address the disruptive members and remind them of the ground rules. Respect is a key part of a successful support group.

What do I do when some members don't appear invested in the topic?

A typical mistake would be to ignore them and be happy they aren't making trouble. However, a better response would be to look for an opportunity to have a discussion on "What's important to me about this topic?". Have people break into small groups to have this discussion. This gives everyone in the group a chance to explore their own stake in the outcome.
How do I deal with a group member who is driving everyone crazy because he says the same thing over and over and over again?

Sometimes people repeat themselves because they feel like they aren’t being heard. Summarize the person’s point of view until they feel understood. Give others an opportunity to respond.

"I hear you saying __________. Am I right?"
"Can someone assist me in responding to this point?"

How do I change a group norm of always starting and ending meetings late?

Don’t wait for everyone to show up and then go overtime without asking. Waiting encourages lateness. Instead, start when you say you are going to start and ask for the group’s permission if you need to go overtime. If you find yourself always going over you may need to improve your agenda planning. You might also try offering “on time” drawings. Those who are on time have the opportunity to enter the drawing for a small gift.

What happens when I am confronted with a situation that I am unfamiliar with and it is not covered in this or any other resource?

Facilitation is an improvisary art. It is like jazz rather than classical music. Don’t get stuck doing things a certain way. Remember, there is no one way or technique. Be flexible, ask the group for suggestions, and stay positive. A good response could be, “I don’t know the answer to that, however, I will do a little research and report back next meeting.”

On the next page is an exercise that will let facilitators brainstorm different strategies to use in challenging situations like the ones described above.
Exercise 26

**Handling Common Problems**

In the chart below are many common problems that occur in groups. As the facilitator you will need to come up with some strategies to address these problems. In small groups talk about what you might do in these situations and write down the best ideas your group comes up with so you can refer to them later.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Group Problem</th>
<th>What Can I Do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group is losing interest, attention, or energy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group keeps getting off the agenda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only some members are participating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group is unresponsive to an activity/topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some members are getting highly emotional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(This exercise was adapted from *Facilitation Resources Volume 6: Dealing with Conflict*, p.6.24 by the University of Minnesota, 1999)
Conclusion

This book offers many of the necessary resources to begin and lead a foster/adoptive parent support group. However, no one book will provide the answers to all the questions that may arise while leading a support group. As a social worker, you have probably learned the importance of being creative, combining ideas from different sources, and learning from experience. These skills will help you to be a successful foster/adoptive parent support group leader.

Assisting foster/adoptive parents in creating support groups is a very important challenge. Ultimately your efforts are making it possible for more children in the child welfare system to have access to emotionally strong and resilient foster/adoptive parents. If you need further assistance with starting or facilitating a support group contact the National Foster Parent Association (800) 557-5238.
Review
Material Review

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1) Research shows that parents in support groups think that professionals________
   a) Have no place in support groups
   b) Can take the focus away from helping people help themselves
   c) Are necessary for the successful running of a group
   d) Can help groups become more organized
   e) B and D

2) Support groups help foster/adoptive parents________
   a) Cope with stressful life events
   b) Feel less isolated
   c) Share experiential knowledge
   d) A and B
   e) A, B and C

3) Experiential knowledge is________
   a) Knowledge that can only be shared through experiential exercises
   b) Information gained through personal experience
   c) Information learned in formal educational settings
   d) Theoretical and scientific
   e) All of the above

4) What are two drawbacks of support groups?
   a) Discouragement of outside support and discouragement of inside support
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   b) Experience leading groups
   c) Passion, commitment, and a dedication to improving their skills
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   b) Focused on solutions
   c) Accountable and honest
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   a) People cannot make decisions alone
   b) Consensus is the only good decision making method
   c) Members will feel that their opinions matter
   d) All of the above
   e) None of the above

8) What are 3 critical ingredients for a foster/adoptive parent support group plan?
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   b) Recruitment, number of members, and purpose
   c) Recruitment, purpose, and group type
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b) Facilitation and meeting logistics
c) Recruitment and arranging speakers
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c) Disempowering group members through agency/social worker control
d) Difficulty identifying a leader
e) A, B, and C
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17) What are some of the items included in a business plan?

a) Bank account and incorporation
b) Budget and location
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a) Creating By-laws
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b) Local businesses
c) Social workers
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20) When planning for a meeting a leader should________

a) Make notes so s/he can lecture to the group
b) Be responsible for every task
c) Choose a convenient time and location and make an agenda
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21) A good meeting place should__________
   a) Ensure privacy
   b) Be accessible
   c) Have friendly lighting
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22) Which of the following is an excellent icebreaker and creates a friendly warm environment?
   a) Food
   b) A sunny day
   c) A large membership
   d) A lot of interesting case studies
   e) Statistical information

23) Appropriate ground rules include__________
   a) Dress code
   b) Use "I" statements
   c) Confidentiality
   d) Everyone talks 3 times a meeting
   e) B and C
   f) B and D

24) Which are important guidelines for confidentiality?
   a) Confidentiality means not discussing private matters
   b) Confidentiality should only have to be explained once
   c) Everyone should agree to the group's definition of confidentiality
   d) Group leaders should ask permission before sharing what members have said with other staff
   e) A and B
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   a) Have each member set a goal that will be assessed after a month
   b) Develop a supportive and safe group culture
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©2003 by FosterParentNet. A collaboration of the Professional Association of Treatment Homes, Inc. and the National Foster Parent Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
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a) Individual skills and individual age  
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