



PENN STATE EXTENSION RELATIVES AS PARENTS PROGRAM

KINSHIP CARE SUPPORT GROUPS

Introduction

This fact sheet highlights some of the benefits of belonging to a kinship care support group and describes the basic steps involved in organizing support groups.

- Many caregivers in support groups express the idea that just knowing there are others in the same situation is very helpful.
- When caregivers' needs are met, they can fully focus on the best interests of the children in their care and create a safer, more stable, and consistent living environment for children.
- Those who are new to this challenging role receive a sense of social validation for their efforts to deal with issues that many of their friends and colleagues do not understand.

Why Might Kinship Care Families in Pennsylvania Go to a Support Group?

The challenges faced by Pennsylvania kinship caregivers can be physically and emotionally overwhelming. Older caregivers are frequently stressed and may experience a sense of isolation as they watch their peers participate in adult activities.

Support groups are ways for kinship care families to assist one another. The groups tend to offer social and emotional support for members by providing advice and understanding. Some support groups also take on a proactive and political component, as they work toward making improvements in local or state policies.

Benefits of Belonging to a Kinship Care Support Group

Support groups can be very beneficial to Pennsylvania families because:

- They have been shown to help reduce caregivers' stress and improve health, resulting in greater physical and emotional stability for caregivers.

Organizing a Support Group

If a kinship care support group does not exist in your area, you can start your own with the following steps:

Gather information about other kinds of support groups; if possible, attend a neighboring group meeting to watch, ask questions, and borrow ideas.

- Determine the best time of day to hold your first meeting; the evening may be better if caregivers are working during the day.
- Find a convenient and safe meeting place for a one- to two-hour meeting, such as a library, community center, faith-based group, hospital, social service agency, YMCA/ YWCA, bank, or fraternal organization.
- Contact school officials and human service professionals working with older adults, families, or children and request that they refer kinship caregivers to you.
- Publicize meetings through posters, flyers, press releases, ads, announcements, or letters to the editor in newspapers, local TV, and radio.



At Your First Meeting

- Keep it simple and start small; two or three people in the beginning afford a good start. Allow one to two hours for the meeting. Let the group decide the time, length, and place of future meetings.
- Introduce yourself and share your story; invite others to share their stories, but do not require anyone to talk before they feel comfortable. All personal information discussed should be kept confidential within the group.
- Collect contact information from all who attend.
- Ask for volunteers to help plan and run future meetings. Assign specific roles such as finding a guest speaker on an area of special interest to the attendees.
- Provide refreshments.

Other Things to Consider

- Choose a name and decide the purpose of your support group. Some group organizers choose to avoid the phrase “support group” in their titles. Instead, they prefer names like “coffee club” or “relatives as parents” to avoid any stigma some associate with being in need of support.
- Try to organize the group so it provides both an informal support (self-help) function as well as a bridge to formal services in the community. Support groups are important for resource sharing.
- Decide what kinds of activities and speakers you would like. Topics could include legal, financial, health, insurance, school, childcare, emotional, substance abuse, stress, and discipline issues for both the children and their adult caregivers.
- Determine who is eligible to attend and whether transportation assistance is needed.
- Plan your meeting schedule—at least monthly is recommended.
- Decide how you will handle any group expenses. How will refreshments be provided? Will dues be necessary?
- Create a plan for childcare or teen activities. Check to see if one of the participating agencies has the expertise and resources to organize activities—perhaps even conduct a support group for children and youth that can take place at the same time your meeting does.
- Plan for a phone network. Exchanging phone numbers or setting up a phone tree for emergencies or for personal support can be very helpful.
- Remember to celebrate the triumphs and the rewards of raising children. People tend to come back when they leave with a smile.

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