

Suggestions for Establishing Support Groups or Self-Help Networks

This resource is to assist families and people on the autism spectrum to start up a support group or network. These suggestions are based on the experiences of existing groups. Updated June 2016

Support groups can be an invaluable resource for parents, partners, and people on the autism spectrum. First and foremost, they can provide a friendly space and understanding ear. Support groups can also work on other levels such as helping to create a sense of community and lessen feelings of isolation.

In a practical sense, support groups can provide important information on local services and supports, such as personal experience of local schools, knowledge of local therapists or services. Sometimes support groups can advocate on issues that affect you as a collective.

The name

Keep your name as short as possible. You may like to consider an abbreviation or a catchy acronym.

The purpose

We recommend that you write out two or three brief statements describing your purpose. You can discuss and decide on your purpose as a group in order to ensure that everyone is involved and agrees.

For example: *The group's purpose is to provide mutual support, information and activities to women with autism in Point Cook.*

How will it operate?

It is a good idea to work out some basic guidelines, so that all participants have a clear understanding of who does what and there are no unrealistic expectations or false hopes created.

All new people in contact with the group could receive a copy of the guidelines.

For example:

- List of group/network members and contact details
- Names and roles of key people
- Meetings – where, when, frequency, and format
- Costs – how much per annum, how and when fees are paid, and how is the money used
- Newsletters and notices – when are they issued and how are they circulated?
- Types of activities to be held
- Online presence – some groups have a Facebook page, email newsletter, or website

Key roles

Whilst you may not wish to have the formality of titles, it is important that key roles are defined and the various tasks are shared around.

You may wish to consider having a meeting convener (chairperson), someone with financial oversight (treasurer), and someone who takes minutes of meetings (secretary).

Funding

It may be possible to access some funding for your support group through your local council. The title of the person you need to speak to may change from council to council, but is usually something like "Community Inclusion Development Officer".

What is already out there?

Amaze maintains a list of support groups on our website here: www.amaze.org.au/victorian-support-groups

Have a look at what is already out there and remember, once you have your group set up, we'd love to list it to help you find new members!

And finally...

Remember a support group is really what you make it. Some support groups are very active in setting up social skills groups, guest speakers, whilst other have more modest goals.

Remember that it may take time to build up these sorts of activities and you have to start somewhere!

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