



PEN's Guide to Starting a Parent Support Group at Your School

If you would like to start a Support Group for Parents of Children with Learning Differences, here is some information that PEN has put together for you. We have found support groups to be incredibly valuable for individual parents--there is nothing like being able to talk and learn with other parents. In addition, a parent group can be an important partner in a school that wishes to enhance learning for all children. Here are some tips gleaned from our experience on what works best to make an effective, harmonious and lasting support group in an independent school.

This is a dynamic process. By that, we mean, Support Groups are as diverse as the people who comprise them; therefore, we are interested in hearing from you about what works, and what doesn't, so we can pass along your sage advice and experience to others. So, please stay in touch with PEN.

Goals and Activities:

1. To provide support and education for parents.

a. Parent Support

- Discussion among those with similar issues
- Feedback on specific anxieties and questions
- Practical advice

b. Parent Education

- Programs at school to promote understanding of learning difficulties (e.g. International Dyslexia Association's (IDA's) Experiential Workshop or Parent Education Network (PEN)'s Teen Panel Presentation videotape)
- Information on conferences and outside resources
- Speaker meetings on topics of interest to the group
- Panel presentation by parents of children with a range of learning difficulties

2. To assist administrator and teachers to provide learning opportunities for all their students.

- Share knowledge of community resources, organizations and websites for parent-teacher education
- Support access to learning tools (e.g. Books on Tape or CD, software contract with Winn or Kurzweil and many others)
- Organize and maintain a school library of resource material

Profile of a Parent Support Group

A key for success is a partnership with administration and faculty. Different models for this partnership seem to work well at different schools. Membership in the group should be open but it is helpful to have leadership that promotes openness, collaboration, and organization.

1 .Partnership Model

A partnership model means collaboration between the parent group and administration. Both come together to share resources, problem-solve and promote efforts toward an optimum learning environment for all students. A partnership approach is recommended as it is not antagonistic or adversarial. It matches well with the work that needs to be accomplished by the group. A champion within the administration, working with the parent group is essential, as is a close working relationship with school's learning specialist.

2. Membership

The Parent group membership is open to all parents but most often includes experienced parents of children with known learning issues, parents of children who are newly diagnosed with learning difficulties, and those with questions about school problems. A parent who acts as a liaison to the Parent Education Network (PEN) promotes access to a wide variety of community resources and information. Membership is often open to the learning specialist, teachers, administrators and other parents, although attendance may depend on the agenda and/or availability.

3. Structure

A Parent Support group functions well when there is a strong, effective steering committee. It is important that the steering committee establish and annually reaffirm ground rules for the group, especially about confidentiality and courtesy during group discussions. The steering committee also leads the effort to maintain effective partnerships with the school administration and learning specialists, especially during times of staff transition. In addition, the committee plans the programs for the year and prepares an agenda for each meeting.

4. Meeting Frequency, Format and Notification

Meetings are usually held once a month and are usually advertised and open to the total parent body. Content can alternate between parent support and parent education. A speaker/discussion format, with a guest speaker addressing identified parent group issues is often most effective. For maximum communication and turnout, notice of meetings should be included in the school calendar. Reminders or articles on meeting topics can be written for the school newsletter or the principal's notes