



CIRCLEofParents®
Sharing Ideas. Sharing Support.

Parent Handbook

Circle of Parents

Sharing Ideas, Sharing Support

Parents Support Group Handbook

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Section 1: Welcome

So you've come to a parent mutual support group! Only very special parents who really want to change their lives come here. It takes a lot of courage and strength to make that decision, and we're glad you're here.

You'll benefit from the experience and support of parents and other caregivers who have made the commitment to change their way of parenting, and you'll be able to share from your life experience with them as well.

Your parent group is part of a national network that brings self-help mutual support to thousands of people every year. Parent support is not new - it's been around for almost forty years. It is a tried and true way of learning more about how to be the kind of parent you want to be. Groups may have different names in different parts of the country, but some things are always the same. They are free, confidential, anonymous and non-judgmental. No one needs to talk at a group, but everyone needs to listen.

Groups are for anyone in a parenting role; biological parents from all walks of life, grandparents raising their grandchildren, foster and adoptive parents, step-parents and adults who are in the parenting role to their partner's children, parents without custody of their children or who see them only once in a while, and others who see themselves in the role of a parent.

Groups are owned by parents. They are safe places for members to share ideas on parenting, reducing anger, lowering stress, and other things that affect their families.

This handbook was written to tell you more about the **Circle of Parents** program and to answer some questions about mutual support groups. You'll find some tips on disciplining your children and ideas to help you develop personal parenting goals for yourself. To make this handbook your own, we encourage you to fill in the pages at the back of the book with your local phone numbers and contact people.



Why do parents come to a mutual support groups?

Of all the places where we spend our time, we want our home to be peaceful, loving, and safe. As parents, we learn that making that kind of life for our families is often not easy. Parent support groups give us the ideas and strength we need to work toward that kind of life.

We come to group to find others who understand the difficulty of raising children. Some of us are looking for new parenting ideas to try and to share our successes with others. Some of us are worried about the way we are treating our children now. Others of us feel we don't understand today's kids or are afraid we will repeat the same mistakes with our own kids that our parents made with us. Others feel alone and need someone to talk to about their kids.

Whatever your reasons for thinking about joining a parent group, remember that every parent has something to learn from the group, and something to bring to the group. Through this sharing, we all grow.

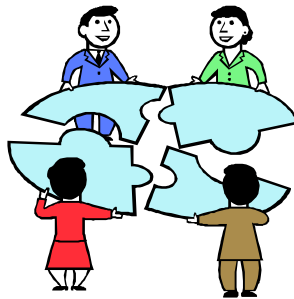


What can a mutual support group do for you?

Group gives us a place to take a break from the hard job of parenting, to feel safe to talk about painful issues, to laugh over our mistakes, and to learn from - and give support to - others. Being part of a group is one way to relieve stress. Group members often share phone numbers so they can reach out to one another during the week.

These are some of the things support groups can do:

- Give encouragement and support,
- Let you talk honestly and openly about what is on your mind,
- Show you new ways to parent and discipline children,
- Provide information for making better decisions, and
- Share information about community resources and how to receive services.



While support groups are an excellent resource for parents, there are some things a support group cannot do. A support group cannot provide therapy. But a support group can serve as a resource for people in therapy.

What are the common elements of mutual support groups for parents?

Groups are free, confidential, anonymous, and non-judgmental and dedicated to positive parenting.

Other things support groups have in common include:

The shared experience:

Group members feel connected with parents who have similar challenges.

Shared Leadership:

Group members have the chance to develop their leadership skills.

Members tell their stories and hear how others cope:

The focus is on daily experiences and how problems can be solved.

Members give and receive help to one another:

The unique experience and skills that every member brings to group makes it possible for everyone to have something to contribute and everyone to have something to learn.

Members create a new sense of what is normal:

People experience a very personal and emotional reaction when they hear that others have the same feelings.

Members create a trusting atmosphere:

Group members set rules to respect confidences so they can discuss situations honestly.

Members can prepare for the future:

Mutual support groups provide an opportunity to listen to members in different stages of their experiences.

Members can go at their own pace:

The mutual support group structure allows members to participate at their own pace—listening at times and sharing at other times.

No fees are charged:

Group meetings are provided without charge. A free children's program is generally available, as well.



Section 2: Parent mutual support groups

This section describes what you can expect from a mutual support group including who attends, how it operates, the confidentiality of information and the role of the participants.

Who can come to a mutual support group?

Groups are generally open to anyone who is parenting, be they biological parents, grandparents raising their grandchildren, single parents, stepparents, or parents who do not have custody or are in prison. While some parents might have been court-ordered to come to group, it is still a matter of choice as to whether they come or not. No matter how often or how rarely you come to group, you are always welcome, with few exceptions.

Groups are not for people who can't function safely or appropriately in a group for a number of reasons, including substance abuse or alcohol impairment. Groups can be used as an addition to, but not a substitute for mental health services.

How does a mutual support group run?

Every group has a facilitator, who is a trained volunteer or staff person involved with the program sponsoring the group. Depending on the stage of development of your group, it will probably have one or more parent leaders as well.

Groups are ðownedö by parents. While the facilitator is a part of the group, the responsibility for deciding what a group will do is up to the group itself. Parents have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills as parent leaders, if they want. It is one of the responsibilities of the facilitator to help parent leaders strengthen and expand their skills.

Groups usually begin by giving everyone who wants to speak the chance to say who they are (usually first names only) and what's on their mind. Some groups read their group rules. It's the responsibility of the person running the group to make sure everyone's concerns are listened to and still end the group on time!

Can I trust the group ?

Very simply put: **whatever is said in group must stay in group.** Members do not repeat what they've heard to other group members who might not have been at a meeting, or to outsiders, no matter how innocent the information. To break confidentiality is a serious matter. It violates the safety of the group and compromises members' ability to speak freely. If a member is asked a question about an individual in the group, they will respond: "Why don't you ask Alice herself?"

What do I have to do as part of a mutual support group?

First, and maybe the hardest - **Relax!** Every person in the group had a first time there, too! The only expectation of you is that you listen. You don't need to talk. You don't even need to share your name, if you're not comfortable doing so.

If you choose to talk, here are some helpful things to remember:

- Listen a bit first, to get an idea of how the group works.
- Share a story about what happened that day or week.
- Trust the group to understand. Often newcomers feel they say too much or get too personal at their first meeting. It's natural to release pent-up feelings when you are finally with people who understand how you feel. It isn't until you've gone home that feelings of embarrassment, anger, guilt or betrayal may surface and you're ashamed to go back to group again. Don't let your feelings get in the way. You are not the first parent to have come into a group and said or behaved in a way that seems uncomfortable to you.
- Ask questions, rather than make statements, about what you feel or see.
- Direct what you have to say to the person who needs to hear it.
- Tune in to body language. It can speak more clearly than someone's words. If a person is all twisted up like a pretzel but says "everything is just fine!" you can be fairly certain that it's not. The group member with the tap-tap-tapping foot may be releasing tension that might not come in his/her words. Be sensitive to what you see.
- Support other members in achieving their goals.
- Set your own goals with the group's help.
- Ask questions if there is something you don't understand.
- Reach out if someone seems to be struggling.

Together, parents learn from each other about ways to improve their parenting.

Section 3: Parenting

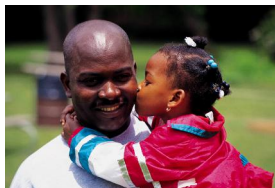
This section presents information on the role of mutual support groups in helping parents and other caretakers to parent their children. Parents tell, in their own words, of the challenges they face and how support groups have helped. The section includes information on child abuse and neglect as well as tips for stress relief and appropriate discipline.

The challenges of parenting?

We often joke that children should come with instruction manuals, but in spite of all the books, TV shows and parenting programs available, there is no substitute for experience. If our experience as a child didn't provide us with the resources to cope with the stress and demands we now find ourselves under, we sometimes slip into bad habits in dealing with our children or struggle to keep from repeating family patterns. Many parents say: "I will not do to my child what was done to me" or "I would never treat my child that way" but need help to find different ways to discipline their children.

While we understand and want to break old patterns of anger, harm and violence, it's not that easy. All these things can lead to frustration and anger: stress, the desire to have our children behave acceptably in the eyes of others, a lack of understanding about child development, and no one to talk to about better ways to handle a problem.

Jobs, moving, and lack of time often separate us from friends, neighbors or family who might have given parenting support in the past. Or we might not want to let others know just how bad things are in our family. Whatever the reason, the support and help available through group can make parenting easier.



Group gives us a place to take a break from the hard job of parenting, to feel safe to talk about painful issues, to laugh over our mistakes, and to learn from - and give support to others. Being part of a group is one way to relieve stress. Group members often share phone numbers so they can reach out to one another during the week.

Parents tell how a mutual support group has helped them:

Sherry is now a parent leader on a national level with Circle of Parents, a network of parent support groups. She writes about when she first came to group.

öThere was so much abuse in my family growing up that I thought the good families on TV got whipped during the commercial breaks. It was just expected, if you were bad you got beat. Being bad was a hard thing to figure out. It usually meant making someone mad.

I wanted it different for my kids, but I never knew it would be this hard. I had to go to therapy because of my depression and after a while my therapist said I should go to parent support group. I was so afraid. I never felt like I fit in anywhere before. They say brave is doing something that is scary, well I guess you'd say going to that group was just about the bravest thing I did.

öI wasn't used to talking about stuff especially myself. I mostly waited for someone to ask me something. But I liked hearing other parents talk about not knowing what to do and getting real mad sometimes. It made me feel like I wasn't the only one. I got some good ideas and tried them at home. My kids say I am a lot nicer when I go to my group.

My goal was to talk and get used to having people listen to me. I even get chances to help out other Moms and Dads with the new things I have learned. I can also tell them how it feels when you are a kid and someone hits you or yells at you. I remember all that real well. My insurance ran out so I can't go see my therapist anymore but my group is still there. They don't quit on you when you get better.ö



Sheryl is a teen parent raising her daughter on her own.

öI would get so angry at Kenseisha because she would throw her food off the edge of her high chair when I was trying to feed her. I thought she was doing it to spite me, and I would slap her. We would both end up in tears. But Monique, in my group, told me that's what babies do when they are learning how to pick up and let go of things. It had nothing to do with me. It was just Kenseisha learning something new. Other parents had ideas to make mealtime easier for us. It really helped me.ö

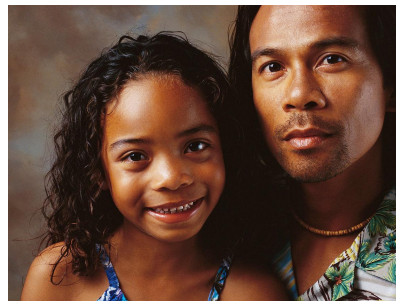
Ralph has three children.

I managed to get through my kids' younger years pretty well, but when Jared turned from a sweet sixth grader into a mouthy, sullen teenager I had no idea how to handle him. I wanted to lock him in the closet 'til he grew up. My wife was no help - she didn't see a problem. By talking about how I felt with the parents in my group I learned why I got so upset and I got some ideas for helping myself calm down. There is always someone from the group to call and talk about things.



What is the role of mutual support groups in keeping children safe from abuse and neglect?

Sometimes parents do lose control and hurt their child, and they need to talk about that in group. If a child continues to be in danger because of a parent's actions or failure to act, the group facilitator, with the group's support, will help that parent take the steps necessary to get help by calling your state child protective service agency. The group will continue to be there for the parent as a support during this tough time. It is then, more than ever, that the parent needs the safety and support that the group can offer.



What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act [CAPTA] as amended, defines four major types of maltreatment: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

Physical abuse is physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child; rather, the injury may have resulted from over discipline or physical punishment.

Child neglect is failure to provide for the child's basic needs. Neglect can be physical, educational, or emotional.

Physical neglect includes refusal of, or delay in, seeking health care; abandonment; expulsion from the home or refusal to allow a runaway to return home; and inadequate supervision.

Educational neglect includes the allowance of chronic truancy, failure to enroll a child of mandatory school age in school, and failure to attend to a special educational need.

Emotional neglect includes such actions as marked inattention to the child's needs for affection; refusal of or failure to provide needed psychological care; spouse abuse in the child's presence; and permission of drug or alcohol use by the child. The assessment of child neglect requires consideration of cultural values and standards of care as well as recognition that the failure to provide the necessities of life may be related to poverty.

Sexual abuse includes fondling a child's genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism and commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials. Many experts believe that sexual abuse is the most under-reported form of child maltreatment because of the secrecy or "conspiracy of silence" that so often characterizes these cases.

Emotional abuse [psychological/verbal abuse/mental injury] includes acts or omissions by the parents or other caretakers that have caused, or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders. In some cases of emotional abuse, the acts of parents or other caretakers alone, without any harm evident in the child's behavior or condition, are sufficient to warrant child protective services (CPS) intervention. For example, the parents/caregivers may use extreme or bizarre forms of punishment, such as confinement of a child in a dark closet. Less severe acts, such as habitual scapegoating, belittling, or rejecting treatment, are often difficult to prove and, therefore, CPS may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm to the child. Although any of the forms of child maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms are identified.

If a parent has abused or neglected a child and is not able to seek help on his or her own, the group facilitator is bound by law to do so. Your group facilitator will support the parent - and the group - through this process and help the group continue to provide ongoing support to the parent, and help the parent to remain comfortable with the group as a continuing source of support.

What is the difference between discipline and punishment?

There are important differences between discipline and punishment. Punishment and discipline are different in what they do and how they are done. Parents have different attitudes about them too, and children feel differently as a result. The chart below talks about the differences and describes the way in which discipline not only corrects the behavior but helps the child develop good behavior in the future, punishment, on the other hand, just stops bad behavior now and doesn't help a child learn how to behave correctly.

Is there a difference between punishment and discipline?

YES !

The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment

	Discipline	Punishment
Purpose	Offers the correct behavior and encourages positive growth	Makes a child òpay forò doing something wrong
Purpose	Developing good behavior for the future	Paying for something in the past
Attitude in which it's done	Love	Anger
How it makes children feel	Secure	Fearful, angry, hostile, guilty

The sections below are drawn from *The Parenting Web* (revised) by Dr. Louise Davis, Extension Child and Family Development Specialist, and edited for this handbook.

What is discipline?

Discipline is guidance. When we guide children toward positive behavior and learning, we are promoting a healthy attitude. Positive guidance encourages a child to think before he acts. Positive guidance promotes self-control. Different styles of discipline produce results that are different. Discipline requires thought, planning, and patience.

The use of discipline is a process of thinking and trying. Remember, effective discipline:

- Is good for both parent and child,
- Teaches a child to take responsibility for his or her behavior, and
- Helps parents maintain a warm relationship with the child.

The goal is to teach the child how to behave, not to make the child suffer.

What is punishment?

Punishment is usually hitting, spanking, or any type of control behavior that is used to stop a child from misbehaving. Punishment does not teach children how to use self-discipline. It only stops the misbehavior for that moment. Punishment may fulfill a short-term goal, but it actually interferes with the accomplishment of your long-term goal of self-control. Punishment may take many forms.

- **Physical** - Slapping, spanking, switching, paddling, using a belt or hair brush, and so on.
- **With words** - Shaming, ridiculing, or using cruel words.
- **With activities** - Locking a child in his or her bedroom, forcing a child to sleep on the floor because he or she wet the bed.

Discipline is used because:

- a. It is positive and reinforcing,
- b. It builds self-esteem, and
- c. It helps children to know what is expected of them.

Punishment is usually used because:

- a. It's quick and easy,
- b. Parents don't know other ways,
- c. It shows adult power, and
- d. It relieves adult frustration.

The lessons children learn from punishment are:

- a. It is right to hit those you are closest to,
- b. It is okay to hit people who are smaller than you are, and
- c. Violence is okay when other things don't work.

Discipline is worth the effort:

When we discipline, we help a child learn to get along with family and friends, teach a child to behave in an agreeable way and help a child learn to control behavior.

Hang in there. Parenting is about setting clear, firm boundaries; providing nurturing and guidance; and creating a safe and dependable set of family rules that expand and change as your children grow. Children can then go about their job of exploring their world in confidence.

When kids see that you are serious about strengthening your parenting skills, they will respond with respect to your parenting methods. Remember that change rarely happens overnight. Your family's patterns of behavior took a long time to develop. It will take a long time to change them.



Tips for Effective Discipline

- **When you discipline, explain why.**
- **Set clear and safe limits.** Be sure children know these limits. Be consistent.
- **Keep discipline positive.** Tell children what they can do instead of what not to do.
- **Teach by example.** If you hit children for hitting others, they won't understand why they can't hit.
- **Guide through consequences.** If a child leaves his or her toys outside after being asked to bring them inside and the toys are stolen or damaged - then the child has no toys.
- **Build self-esteem and respect with words and actions.** Avoid words that reduce self-esteem.
- **Plan ahead.** Prevent misbehavior by eliminating situations that spell trouble. For example, make sure children have been fed and rested before going to the grocery store.
- **Address the situation; do not judge the child.** This is important because diminished self-esteem leads to insecurity, even hostility.
- **Be consistent so the child knows what is expected of her or him.**
- **Be firm.** Clearly and firmly state that the child does what needs to be done. Speak in a tone that lets your child know you mean what you say and you expect the child to do it. It doesn't mean yelling or threatening.
- **Keep your cool.** Listen calmly to your child's explanation of the problem; talk about ways to deal with it. Come to a solution that's agreeable to you and the child - this helps the child learn to be responsible for his or her behavior.

One group member's experience with discipline

Many people feel guilty about the way they have been parenting. Brenda, a divorced mother, who balances a full-time job, two pre-teens and a four year old talks about discipline and life with her family.

“When I felt guilty about my parenting, I would try to make up for it by giving in to my kids' demands. I was trying to make up for my mistakes.

My children caught on to this game and would say things to make me feel guilty on purpose: "You are so mean." "My Daddy lets me do that." "Everybody else's parents say it's okay."

My group told me how I was letting guilt ruin my present, past and future. A parent told me that parenting with guilt is like driving down a busy street just looking in the rearview mirror. You get to see the results of your mistakes but you can't prevent them. WOW!

I knew that was happening in our family. My group helped me set some reasonable goals to take small steps to change my behavior. Now I feel more like a sensible driver with my eyes on my destination."

Tips for handling stressful situations

One of the ways that parents discipline children is by using "time out." Sometimes, parents need a "time out" as well. When you are feeling stressed and need to cool down, find ways to:

- **Distract yourself,**
- **Calm yourself,**
- **Let off some steam,**
- **Take time away from the stressful situation, and**
- **Make yourself laugh.**

See if any of these ideas seem right for you:

Work off your frustration:

- Run up and down stairs, or do jumping jacks.
- Shoot hoops or pound a punching bag.
- Make some comfort food like macaroni and cheese.
- Rain or shine, bundle up the kids and go for a walk. Fresh air can work miracles.
- Wash your hair.
- Slow down - take a deep breath and think about how far you've come.
- Think though why things make you angry or upset.
- Ask yourself how important this is to do or to change.
- Count to 100.
- Get positive results from negative energy - scrub the kitchen floor.
- Write down your nasty feelings.
- If you can leave your child somewhere safe, give yourself a time out.
- Put a funny video on and let yourself laugh.
- Put your hands in your pocket to remind yourself not to hit.
- Put on some music and dance, or sing, or exercise.
- Call a friend or another parent in your group.

Your support group facilitator knows where to get help in your community for a lot of different needs: parenting workshops and programs, emergency food or housing, after school programs, recreational facilities, job placement services, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and child care. Your cooperative extension program has lots of good information on home management, raising children, multi-generational families and how to budget your money.

Perhaps your best resources are the parents in your group for support and help identifying other community resources. Most groups members exchange phone numbers as soon as they feel comfortable doing so.



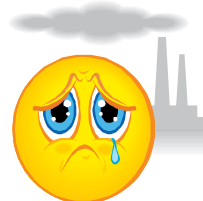
Section 4: Your personal journal






The section below provides an opportunity for you to evaluate your situation, with a focus on family and parenting, and to see where you would like to make some changes. It provides tools for self-assessment and for recording your goals and your achievements.

Take an honest look at where you are






If you don't know where you are, how can you see how far you've come?

Put an X in the column that best describes where you are on the following scale:



		 Great	 Pretty Good	 OK	 Needs work	 Help!
When I think about						
Myself as a person	I feel					
Myself as a friend or partner	I feel					
My family	I feel					
My parenting	I feel					

Ask yourself these questions again after six months. Have your answers changed? Do you see a direction you want to grow?

		 Great	 Pretty Good	 OK	 Needs work	 Help!
When I think about						
Myself as a person	I feel					
Myself as a friend or partner	I feel					
My family	I feel					
My parenting	I feel					

Make a plan to grow

Take a moment to think about areas where you'd like yourself and family to grow. Are there ways you'd like to develop? Problems you'd like to overcome? Talk to your family about your goals. Ask yourself how you can use the support of the group to achieve in these areas.

Then ask yourself these questions:

What are my strengths?

What are some strengths my family and friends have that can help me achieve my goals?

Are there people I can call on to help me make a plan for my goals?

Are there community resources - churches, neighbors, social services agencies, schools - that can help me? Ask your group for ideas.

Count on the group to help you as you change and grow. Growth is never easy and sometimes the group may take you to task. There are no fast answers, but sharing your feelings and talking in a group goes a long way.



Parents talk about their goals

Kevin, a single parent, says:

õI was having a lot of problems in my family with the kids mouthing off at me, and then me getting angry at them and mouthing off back. I got some ideas from the group, then sat down and asked the kids to help our family solve this problem. They liked the idea of me asking them to help with a problem.

Billy suggested we charge a fine for mouthing off. They thought I should pay the most, because I was the oldest (ha-ha.) Then Michelle, then Billy and finally even Karen, my six year old, could pay a little something too. We made a plan to take the money at the end of each month and donate it to our town's food pantry. That way, none of us would make a profit off of doing something wrong.õ

õThe kids called each other on mouthing off, and of course they called me on it- big time. The first month we donated over \$40! Now, eight months later, we hardly have anything to give away at all. We had a goal of reducing mouthing off, we helped each other and, I should say, the kids helped me. My group also gave me lots of high signs for sticking to our plan.õ

Shanique, who has three kids between the ages of 9 and 13, says:

õWhen I got home from work I just wanted some peace and quiet, but that's when the kids were all over me. I knew I should listen to their every little problem, but I would snap and snarl at them while I tried to make dinner, and then later on at night feel guilty about how I treated them. My goal was to be a better parent when I got home and not to feel so guilty.õ

õMy group helped me look at the situation. I would rush straight home from work and get in, hungry and tired, with a meal to cook and the house a mess. The kids would be hungry, too, and stand around me, waiting for me to make dinner. I felt like I was being nibbled to death by a duck. I was mad.õ

õThe group gave me ways to reduce the tension. I remembered how nice it was when my grandmother would sit with me and just listen and laugh at my stories. It made me feel like I was important, and I wanted my kids to feel that way too. I learned that the schedule did not always have to be so rigid.õ

öOne big way I changed was giving me just a little time to unwind after work. Instead of driving home on the freeway, I now take a back road. It takes me fifteen minutes longer, but I look at the view instead of all the road-crazies.ö

öInstead of feeling I need to make dinner the second I walk in, the kids and I sit down together for fifteen minutes and snack on cut-up vegetables, or some cheese, or apples, and everybody gets to talk about their day. Then, when I get up, everybody is more peaceful. Sure dinner is sometimes late and that makes their bedtime later, too, but so what?ö

öIt took me three months to change my behavior, but I now feel like I am not as nasty to the kids. Oh sure, I still get impatient and annoyed with them, but I have learned that I could make a plan to change my life and see real results.ö

Brian is a single parent of an adopted child with special needs. He now works with children's groups and is a highly-respected leader. He writes:

öI started coming to group because I wasn't happy with the way I was parenting. I yelled at my special needs son all the time and was always exhausted. Nothing I tried with my son ever seemed to come out right. I had tried everything, and didn't know what to do. I didn't like my life.

öAt first I didn't think I had much in common with the other group members and didn't see much point in coming. But after hearing them talk about their issues and seeing how much everybody cared about each other, I started feeling some hope. These people were talking about real issues, and being honest about how they felt. I began talking a little bit about how things were in my family. No one looked down on me or anyone else, not like my experiences in the past with social workers and psychologists where I always felt like I was a problem they had to fix.

öAfter I got into it, I realized that I never had set any goals or done much to correct my parenting problems because they seemed too big and too painful to face alone. The group helped me realize that my expectations for my son were too high. It dawned on me that I wasn't alone any more, and I listened to the group when they told me I needed to take better care of myself. They worked with me to set realistic goals. I started to go to bed earlier and to eat more regularly. Things seemed easier to deal with when I wasn't exhausted and irritable.

“I began to learn more about my son’s disabilities and normal child development. My son eased up on his resentment when he saw how hard I was trying. But it wasn’t all easy. When I didn’t stick to the plan, the yelling would return. But my group cared about me and my family and would support me when I slipped and help me get back on the right track. I soon found myself following through on my goal because I didn’t want to disappoint my group.

“Now I follow through for myself. The encouragement I got from my group helped me through my struggles with frustration and shame and reminded me that perfection is not the goal.”

Dawn, a mother of three pre-schoolers and another on the way, remembers:

“When my group asked me to set some goals for myself, I almost laughed. I was living day to day, sometimes minute by minute with three kids to take care of. How could I make goals when it was all I could do to handle the emergencies in my life? I never had enough time for me. I could not even go to the bathroom by myself. I felt like a robot mommy. I didn’t have much to work with.

“But I thought that one goal could be getting to group! I always feel so much better after I’ve been. The people in the group seemed really interested and caring about me. Part of it is having the kids in the children’s program then, but part of it is knowing I’m not alone, and other people have survived parenthood, too. So I made a goal of doing one nice thing for myself each week for eight weeks. On the weeks I couldn’t make group, and I knew there would be some, I put aside those two hours to do something special, just for me. One time I sat in the bathtub and read a magazine. One time I asked my neighbor to watch the kids and I went for a walk all by myself- no strollers, no toddlers. One time after the kids went to bed I just sat outside on the porch and watched the stars and didn’t care that the dishes were dirty or the wash didn’t get done.

“I learned to think of simple things like making a cup of tea as taking care of myself. I use my favorite cup, sit in my favorite chair and think about each sip I take as one made for a queen. It doesn’t sound like much, but it is my time, and I’m worth it.”

Develop your personal goals

Think of three changes you'd like to see. Make them be your goals. Spell them out so you'll know when you've succeeded. Look at the examples below for some ideas.

[Sample]

My Goal	To make mealtime more pleasant
What's working well already	We eat together at the table as a family.
What needs to change	Kids need to stop fighting. I need to stop nagging.
Sources of support or resources	Advice from my group. Parenting books.
How will I make this happen	Make sure everyone knows the rules. Set an example of how to behave. Reward kids' good behavior.
How long will it take	Three months.
How will I know I've succeeded	When we can eat supper together and for three nights in a row there will be no fighting or nagging.

Goals aren't set - or accomplished - in a day. Give a lot of thought to what you can realistically hope to do. By setting goals too broad, you are setting yourself up for failure. Break goals down into smaller steps that you **CAN** do, rather than trying to accomplish everything at once.

Don't expect change to happen easily, or overnight - some days it might feel like you are going backwards, not forwards! Your group will help you and support you as you work toward your goal. They will understand that there will be setbacks along the way and they will help you through the hard parts. They will also be there to cheer you on when you've made progress, and celebrate with you when you have accomplished your goal.

[Sample]

My Goal	To better control my anger
What's working well already	I see my anger coming and know I could get out of control.
What needs to change	I have to identify what gets me mad, learn to look at things differently, and find ways to let off steam.
Sources of support or resources	My group. Take a class in anger management. Sign up for swing dancing.
How will I make this happen	Keep a daily journal to look for patterns. Track my progress in staying cool. Give myself rewards for handling tough situations well.
How long will it take	Six months.
How will I know I've succeeded	I will not yell at the kids or hit them out of frustration for a week.

My Goal	
What's working well already	
What needs to change	
Sources of support or resources	
How will I make this happen	
How long will it take	
How will I know I've succeeded	

My Goal	
What's working well already	
What needs to change	
Sources of support or resources	
How will I make this happen	
How long will it take	
How will I know I've succeeded	

My Goal	
What's working well already	
What needs to change	
Sources of support or resources	
How will I make this happen	
How long will it take	
How will I know I've succeeded	

Down the road, when you've accomplished your goals, your group can help you set new ones. Use the chart below to keep track of your progress so you can see how much you've accomplished.

Goal	Date begun	Date accomplished

Above all, give yourself permission to be human. Don't expect that your goals will just fall into place. Expect that you'll have a harder time with some goals than with others, and that it might take you longer to reach them. Celebrate your small successes. You deserve it!



Appendix: Important Contacts

Use the spaces below to record important telephone numbers. Include members of your support group, resources you have identified within your community and family and friends you can call on.

Support group phone numbers:

Community resources:

Friends and family resources

[illegible]

This handbook was originally written for the **Circle of Parents** program by parent members of the National Family Support Roundtable and the staff of Prevent Child Abuse America.

For more information about parent support groups in your area call:
Dora 773-257-0111 Ext. 146 or visit www.circleofparents.org.

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2100 S Marshall Blvd. Unit 305, Chicago, IL 60623