

## Leading Online Parent Meetings and Groups

Explore this resource to learn ways to lead online parent meetings and groups as an alternative approach to leading groups in-person. It can be an effective way to support and engage families in Head Start and Early Head Start programs when meeting in-person is not possible. Find tips to help plan, facilitate, and evaluate online parent groups.



Parent groups offer parents an opportunity to learn together about parenting and to connect with other parents and family members. Facilitating parent groups online requires planning, preparation, practice, and access to technology.

This resource offers examples to consider before, during, or after leading online parent activities such as:

- ▶ Parenting groups, curricula, or interventions
- ▶ Parent meetings, support groups, and trainings
- ▶ Policy Council meetings
- ▶ Socializations

Research tells us that connections with and between parents are essential for family well-being and child outcomes (Newland, 2015). These connections are especially meaningful during public health emergencies and times of physical distancing.

To learn more about how to lead online parent meetings and groups, explore the following resource topics:

- ▶ Planning: Technology and Design
- ▶ Establishing and Creating a Supportive Group
- ▶ Facilitating Online Sessions: Getting the Most Out of Your Online Platform
- ▶ Reflecting on and Evaluating the Online Parent Group
- ▶ Resources for Supporting Online Parent Groups

### Resource Terms

In this resource, “parent” and “family” refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including biological, adoptive, and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

“Parent groups” may include meetings, support groups, and/or more structured groups with sequenced parenting curricula.

## Planning: Technology and Design

### Designing the Approach

Consider the interests and needs of parents in your program. Review your program goals, community assessment, and family partnership data. Consider how you will ensure ALL parents are included in the decision-making process when choosing the type of parenting group(s) to offer.

Decide what type and how many sessions to offer and what to discuss in each session. Decide the size of your parent group. Will your parent group focus on all parents or groups of parents, such as fathers, young parents, or grandparents? What languages do participants speak? Consider how you will recruit parents for a new group.

If you are using a parenting curriculum, consider whether it is appropriate for online delivery. Find out if there is any guidance available from the developers. In many cases, there are adaptations and suggestions specific to leading the curriculum online.

See Resources for Supporting Online Parent Groups (p.7) and References (p. 8) for more information.

### Choosing a Platform

Consider platforms for web or phone conferencing that are easy to use and access. Look for features to support how you plan to lead your parent group (e.g., webcams, breakout rooms, screen sharing). Become familiar with the platform's functions and features. Practice leading group conversations using the platform. Explore tutorials available online for guidance as you learn how to use the platform most effectively.

### Assessing Technology

Review the technology required to use the online platform. Make sure parents have access to the required technology and internet connections. Some early childhood programs are offering tablets or other computer devices to families to help them stay connected. Plug-in headphones are recommended to make sure audio is high quality.

### Scheduling

Choose meeting times that are convenient for parents in your group. Survey all invited parents to find the best times. In the case of online groups, you may have more scheduling options than with face-to-face groups. On the other hand, there may be barriers to scheduling, such as parents juggling multiple priorities at home. Other barriers common to in-person meetings, such as transportation, may not be relevant for online groups.

### Setting up Online Access

Connecting with parents via computer or tablet is ideal. It may not always be an option. For some families, accessing the online platform by phone may be the best option, especially if it is free. Access to ongoing, stable, and reliable technology (e.g., phones, phone minutes, charging capacity, Wi-Fi) is critical during uncertain times. This access may not be readily available for all families.

### Curriculum Changes During Uncertain Times

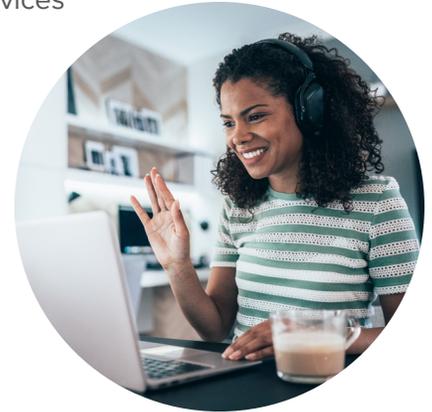
Programs are encouraged to coordinate their virtual adaptations with the parenting curriculum developers. During the public health emergency, the Office of Head Start is easing the requirement to work with developers when making temporary adaptations to a curriculum to be able to use it virtually. Programs that plan to continue offering virtual parenting groups for the long-term are encouraged to reach out to developers to coordinate their virtual adaptations.

## Helping Families Connect Online

Work with families to access discounted, free, or low-cost internet and Wi-Fi services and plans through the Lifeline program and the National Digital Inclusiveness Alliance.

Keep in mind that relying on phones to hold parent groups may mean:

- ▶ Less stable connections than other formats
- ▶ More use of phone plan minutes, leading to unexpected costs for parents
- ▶ Smaller screens
- ▶ Limited access to features of an online platform



## Evaluating the Sessions

Develop a plan to evaluate the parent group. Think about how you will know if your efforts were effective. Consider the following questions.

- ▶ How will you evaluate parents' experiences and what they learned? Will it be anonymous, an electronic survey, or through a formal or informal conversation?
- ▶ How will you ask parents to provide feedback about the group sessions? Will you use pre- and post-assessment surveys? Polls? Mid-session check-ins?
- ▶ What methods will you use to ensure confidentiality is maintained?
- ▶ How will you and your program use what is learned for continuous program improvement?

## Establishing and Creating a Supportive Group

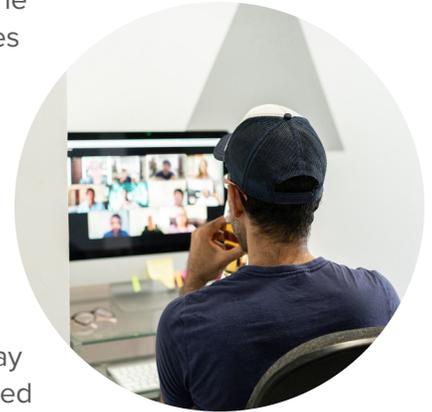
### Choosing an Effective Online Facilitator

Online facilitation requires many of the same skills as facilitation of an in-person group. Having an effective facilitator in place can make the experience seamless and positive for the parents. These skills include:

- ▶ Using your technology to the fullest for group interaction
- ▶ Providing a respectful virtual environment that supports relationship building
- ▶ Developing and maintaining a confidential and safe space, especially when children and other family members may be present unexpectedly
- ▶ Monitoring the participation of all group members
- ▶ Encouraging dialogue
- ▶ Moving the conversation forward
- ▶ Following the stated curriculum (if relevant)

## Co-leading Sessions

Plan to co-lead the session with other staff or parents. One facilitator can lead the discussion. The other facilitator can support parents who have technology issues and monitor the chat. Consider breakout rooms for smaller, more in-depth discussions. Decide who will facilitate breakout rooms before each session. Consider ways to build on the strengths of parents and invite them to lead conversations.



## Creating a Welcoming Environment

Consider how you will create a welcoming and respectful setting. Set the expectation for a warm and productive group experience. Some participants may already know each other. Try to create opportunities for parents to feel connected to the facilitator at the beginning of the group. The way the group starts is important to the success of the group.

Think about how to:

- ▶ Contact each participant before starting the sessions
- ▶ Start and end each session on time
- ▶ Create an opening-and-closing ritual (such as a special greeting, a picture, reading a quote, or moment of silence)
- ▶ Review the purpose and goal for each session at the beginning
- ▶ Explain key takeaway messages and the next steps in the last five minutes of each session

## Providing Technical Assistance

Plan to help parents who are unfamiliar with online technology learn to use the controls. Invite participants to join early or make time during the first few sessions to practice using the functions of the platform. Be patient and have fun. Some participants may need more time than others to become familiar with these tools, especially the mute and camera functions. Check-in with parents about their environment. Ask parents questions such as: Do they have a space with privacy for the session for full participation? If they are on camera, do they want to use a virtual background?

## Building Rapport

Help build connections among the group members. Welcome family members as they join. Ask participants to introduce themselves. Ask the group an ice-breaker question to assist participants in feeling comfortable. Examples of ice breaker questions might be: “What do you already know about the topic?” “What experience do you have that you can use to tailor the sessions to meet group members’ needs and interests?”

## Forming Group Agreements

Form a group agreement (also called norms or ground rules) with participants about how the group will function. Address topics like respect for diverse opinions and confidentiality.

Consider:

- ▶ How will participants let you know when they would like to speak?
- ▶ Will participants be required to have their video cameras on so that they can be seen?

- ▶ Are children and both caregivers invited to participate in all or some sessions?
- ▶ Will sessions be recorded so that parents who miss a session can catch up with the discussion? If recorded, how will confidentiality be maintained?

## Facilitating Online Sessions: Getting the Most Out of Your Online Platform

### Using Online Functions

Use all of the functions of the virtual platform to help create a sense of connection among the group's members. It can be helpful to see all of the participants at once in a gallery view. Use your webcam (video camera). Some platforms allow you to choose a background or mute details in your background for privacy. You can also use other visual tools, such as word clouds or polls, to engage the group. Think about how you want to set up online conversations.



Decide ahead of time:

- ▶ How participants will enter the room (whether you will have a waiting room)
- ▶ Whether participants will be muted when they are not speaking
- ▶ Whether you will enable or disable the chat feature
- ▶ Whether or not a video connection is necessary for full participation
- ▶ Whether participants can join by phone only

### Promoting Consistency and Establishing Community Agreements

Set up the online room consistently to help create a sense of predictability and trust. Think of this step as what you would do to set up the physical space for an in-person parent group. Creating a group agreement may be one way to promote optimal sharing and ensure participants feel safe. On your home screen, you may start with a picture or illustration that you use for each session as part of a group ritual. You might include a particularly relevant quote. To start the next session, you might share what a participant said in the previous meeting as a way to tie the sessions together. Be sure to ask for permission.

### Encouraging Participation

Encourage participants to use chat and other features. Facilitators can use the chat and reaction functions to promote discussion. Of course, if those are used, the facilitator must pay attention and use them in the group process. Show participants how to use these tools early in the process so that it becomes a natural part of the process.

### Offer Time for Breaks

Some people find looking at a screen for a long time exhausting. Consider how to break up sessions with short videos or even physical breaks for stretching or movement. Online participation may require more breaks than an in-person group. Set clear start and end times for breaks.

## Reflecting on and Evaluating the Online Parent Group

### Reflect on the Session(s)

Reflection is essential to the facilitation of any parent group. Consider questions like these:

- ▶ How did individuals participate in the group?
- ▶ Was participation equitable? Was there a balance among the speakers? Did anyone appear to retreat from the conversation?
- ▶ Were ALL eligible families invited to participate?
- ▶ What concerns were shared, and how can they be addressed in future sessions?
- ▶ Did the content of the conversation meet the interests and needs of participants? Did participants feel included?
- ▶ Would it help to have a co-facilitator to discuss certain topics, such as how men and women may parent differently?
- ▶ Did you, as the facilitator, manage the group process effectively? What worked well? What can be improved? Any lessons learned to enhance participation for the future?
- ▶ What did you learn about recruitment efforts? What worked well? What can be improved? What lessons did you learn for the future?

### Reflect on Technology Considerations

Reflect on the role of technology in the parenting sessions. Consider questions such as:

- ▶ Was the use of technology helpful or challenging for the group? Were there any significant technology issues that kept families from participating?
- ▶ Did participants have clear and steady Wi-Fi connections?
- ▶ Did technology affect how individual parents participated? You may need to follow-up with individual participants to address these issues between sessions.
- ▶ Did any participants seem to have difficulty using the mute or chat functions or other features?
- ▶ Were the visuals engaging? For example, were the images clear, easy to read, and understand?

### Request Participant Feedback

You can work with your program to carry out your plan to evaluate the parent group. Consider whether evaluations will be in writing, an electronic survey, formal or informal conversations (see above). Use participants' feedback to enhance the parent group.

Consider:

- ▶ How did the sessions go?
- ▶ What worked well? What were the challenges?
- ▶ What did the participants find valuable?
- ▶ What would they like to continue with or stop doing?

As with all discussion groups, creating a safe, respectful environment is essential for positive outcomes. Facilitators work to ensure both the individual and the group experience are welcoming and affirming.

Parent groups are a powerful and effective way for parents to connect with other parents, develop or enhance parenting skills, and support parent-child relationships. Making a shift from in-person to online parent groups involves intentional planning and consideration. Facilitated online parent groups promote effective learning experiences for both the participant and facilitator (Nunn, 2020).

As you lead parent groups online, we encourage you to share your tips and ideas with us.

## Resources for Supporting Online Parent Groups

Explore the following resources available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

### Parenting Curricula Review Databases

Programs looking for a parenting curriculum for group-based or one-on-one home-based delivery can review these databases:

- ▶ **Parenting Curricula for Group-Based Delivery**  
Explore these curricula to find a curriculum that can be delivered in a group setting.
- ▶ **Parenting Curricula for Home-Based Delivery**  
Review these curricula to find a program that can be delivered to parents one-on-one in their home environment.

Programs looking for parenting curricula that target specific parent groups or that can be fully integrated into a Head Start or Early Head Start program can explore these new databases:

- ▶ **Parenting Curricula for Specific Groups of Parents**  
Find research-based curricula developed for groups of parents, including mothers, fathers, and young parents.
- ▶ **Embedded Parenting Curricula for Group-Based Delivery**  
Learn more about parenting curricula that are part of a broader, program-wide approach. These approaches may include classroom curricula, family engagement activities, professional development for educators, and administrative support.

### Resources for Implementing a Parenting Curriculum

- ▶ **Choosing a Parenting Curriculum for Your Program**  
Explore the decision-making checklist to find out what to look for when choosing your program's parenting curricula.
- ▶ **Implementing a Parenting Curriculum Webinar Series**  
Watch these four webinars to learn how to select and implement a parenting curriculum in your program using implementation science.
- ▶ **Implementing a Parenting Curriculum Using Implementation Science**  
Review the steps and exemplary practices for selecting and implementing a parenting intervention with this easy-to-use tool for programs, states, and child care network leaders.

## Working Remotely with Families

- ▶ **Tips for Family Services Staff Working Remotely with Families**

Find tips for family services staff and other direct service professionals who are teleworking with Head Start and Early Head Start families.

## Resources to Help Families Access Internet and Wi-Fi Services

Explore these resources to help families access discounted, free, or low-cost internet and Wi-Fi services and plans.

- ▶ **Lifeline Program**

Learn about this federal benefit that lowers the monthly cost of phone or internet service for families. <https://nationalverifier.servicenowservices.com/lifeline?cid=fd585d5730f813ab478b1153034908e1>

- ▶ **National Digital Inclusiveness Alliance**

Explore a detailed list of current offers from internet service providers that will help low-income households to acquire service at low or no cost.

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/free-low-cost-internet-plans/>

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For more information about this resource, please contact us:  
[PFCE@ecetta.info](mailto:PFCE@ecetta.info) | 1-866-763-6481