



MONTHLY PARENTING JOURNAL

# SUPPORT GROUP 101



FELLOWSHIP 01



*Love to Nurture is a relationship-driven, grace-based, trauma-wise style of parenting that holds sacred the dignity of every child, the uniqueness of every child, the emotional safety of every child, and the developmental stage of every child.*





# SUPPORT GROUP 101

## 8 GUIDELINES TO PARTICIPATING IN A SUCCESSFUL SUPPORT GROUP

*By Hope & Home Staff*

Whether you've been attending a Hope & Home Support Group for five months or five years, we want you to walk away from group feeling educated, supported, and encouraged. Over Hope & Home's 20 year history, we have developed a few "rules" that help groups stay on track. As we start 2020, keep these guidelines in mind for a successful Support Group year.

### 1. SUPPORT GROUP IS CONFIDENTIAL

What is said in Support Group should stay in Support Group. Sharing can be painful, emotional, vulnerable, and sensitive. Often, it can take quite a bit of courage to share with a group. No matter how tempting, don't find yourself gossiping about what you've heard. A successful group honors this rule consistently. At the same time, realize that nothing said in Support Group is a secret. If you reveal something important in the group, members of the group may find it necessary to involve others. The obvious examples are suicidal or dangerous comments, unsafe behaviors, illegal activities, issues involving mandatory reporting, or violations of Volume 7.

### 2. FOCUS ON GIVING SUPPORT INSTEAD OF ADVICE

While individuals are sharing, it may be tempting to jump in and fire off a good word of advice, give out the names of experts, relate tried and true remedies and the like, but be careful when doing so. Support Group is not designed to be a search engine for suggestions; it's first and foremost about support. And when it comes to feeling supported, listening and empathizing with others is more productive than giving suggestions. Individuals should feel like they can give voice to what they are feeling about a particular issue during Support Group. If they ask for advice, group members may share what has been productive in the past, but advice-giving should not be the focus of the group. If it becomes apparent that advice is needed in a particular situation, suggest to other members that they schedule a meeting with a Hope & Home supervisor or set up a meeting with Jacque Thurman or Ross Wright.

### HOPE & HOME SUPPORT GROUPS

Hope & Home Support Groups are designed to give foster families a place to engage in community, receive training, and share support with each other.

Generally, Support Groups run as follows:

5:30pm-6:00pm—Meal and Fellowship

6:00pm-7:00pm—Training Hour

7:00pm-8:00pm—Support Hour

8:00pm-8:15pm—Wrap-Up

### YOUR RSVP IS IMPORTANT!

There is a lot of planning that goes into each Support Group. Your group leader is preparing to lead and knowing who will be there is helpful in this preparation!

It is especially important that your childcare RSVP is made promptly. Each Support Group requires staff and volunteers to be scheduled, activities to be prepared, and food to be ordered. We want to make sure that *everyone* has a great Support Group experience!

### 3. TIME IS IMPORTANT

The hardest part about Support Group is keeping it on schedule. Group needs to start and end on time in order to respect people's schedules and commitments. Everyone should commit, together, to making sure group stays on time. When it is time to share, each individual needs to be given time to speak. This might mean looking around the room and dividing the hour by the number of individuals and saying that time allotment out loud. Setting up this expectation at the start is helpful because when someone's time is up, it is clear that it was an expected time allotment and not a personal decision to cut someone off. People tend to fall into patterns and if this time expectation is not set up at the start, month after month those who share last may leave disappointed and discouraged if they sit through an entire group and never get a chance to share their feelings.

### 4. SCOPE OF SUPPORT

Support Group does not take the place of a doctor's appointment, a therapy session, a church service, a political rally, or a friend hangout. Remember that you are receiving ongoing training credits during Support Group, so we want group to be a productive place for everyone. If you feel like you need to see a therapist, chat with a friend, or reach out for help on a specific issue, feel free to communicate that during group, but remember to fulfill those needs outside of Support Group.

### 5. BE CONSTRUCTIVE

Most Support Groups are built around hard issues—trauma, reunification, exhaustion, and grief. Group members need to be able to openly share their feelings while being mindful of the pain of others that might be present in the room. Be kind to each other and build each other up. Don't side talk or whisper while others are sharing. Pray for each other. Find a way to light the single candle in the darkness.

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WHAT YOU'RE SAYING UNTIL  
THEY FEEL LIKE YOU KNOW  
HOW THEY'RE FEELING**

### 6. VALIDATE FEELINGS

Most people can't hear what you are saying until they feel like you know how they are feeling. As a group, listen for "feeling" words and respond in kind. Validate feelings, not facts. For example, when someone says that caseworkers are all idiots and "the system" doesn't care, move beyond the facts and hear their feelings. Focusing on correcting the facts leaves the person with a sense that you don't get how they are feeling. Validate how it feels to that person.

### 7. FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

It's easy to play the blame game but focusing on blaming others during Support Group is not productive for the group. In the world of foster care, there is so much that cannot be controlled by foster parents. We can't control the judge, caseworker, or birth parents, but we can focus on how we respond to each circumstance. For example, if someone complains that they get really upset and anxious when their caseworker doesn't return their calls, focus on the first half of the sentence, not the second. Focus on what it is like to feel upset or anxious. Keep yourself from diving into a group rant on how caseworkers never return calls. Concentrate on how we handle the tough stuff, not the circumstances that cause it.

### 8. MANNERS MATTER

If your Support Group is meeting at a local church, or even if your group is meeting at Hope & Home, remember that we are all in this together. Be good representatives of Hope & Home. Always make sure to thank the people who are watching your child, leading the group or setting up and cleaning up the room. We should follow the Boy Scout Rule and always offer to leave the space as we found it (or even better than we found it!). Welcome new members and make an effort to get to know them—treat others as you'd like to be treated!





## BONUS! TRY TO AVOID THESE SUPPORT PITFALLS

1. Minimizing—Belittling someone else's challenges or replying with, "Well at least it's not as bad as..." only makes the person sharing feel worse. What seems like a little problem to you might be a big problem to them. Focus on empathizing with that person.
2. Catastrophizing—It can be easy to see everything as a disaster. Try to keep things in perspective. This is a delicate balance, trying not to catastrophize things while also not minimizing them.
3. "Piling On"—Part of Support Group is finding commonality in others and seeing that you are not alone in your situation, but it is important to allow others space to share as well. Be careful to not "pile on" in a conversation and call out "me too" in a way that takes the focus away from the person sharing. Don't hog the ball and take up more time with your own story.
4. Externalizing—Support Group is, in large part, about figuring out how we can grow as individuals and interact better with our own lives. Try not to focus on external issues that are usually outside of our control.

### A TECHNOLOGY PITFALL

Make sure that you are able to be fully engaged during each group and not distracted by your phone. We all struggle with this! Technology has invaded our lives in a big way. Please leave your phone in your pocket or bag during group. If you're expecting an important call or text, extend an extra level of courtesy to the group and let them know ahead of time that you're expecting a call and may need to step out quickly.



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