

Maintaining Smooth Group Dynamics

Group dynamics can be a wonderful and yet unpredictable thing. Some “Rollercoaster” Parenting Discussion groups will “gel” and become very close, and others may fall short of that. To establish a positive group experience, each group member must take responsibility for what happens. Talking about expectations and goals from the beginning is important. And remember, some of this is a natural, or “organic” process. Even if you don’t become close friends you have much to learn from one another. In fact, you can’t force or predict whether long lasting friendships will result, so consider that if you meet for 8 meetings and get through the entire curriculum your group has been successful.

Creating a successful experience in your group will depend on several things:

- set and discuss expectations and goals
- the way individuals relate and respond to one another will build or diminish group trust and openness
- over time each group will establish some “norms” for behavior – so be intentional about making those norms positive and supportive

Here are some ways you can develop a positive and supportive group atmosphere:

Listen: Listening sounds easy and yet to really do it “right” requires your focus and concentration. It’s important to

- a. listen without simultaneously preparing your response
- b. listen with your heart as well as your head
- c. listen with the intention of understanding the speaker from his/her point of view.
- d. Resist the urge to solve other participants’ problems. Only offer suggestions if they are requested.

Plan to learn from others: Come to the meetings with the intention to learn from other people’s experiences and viewpoints. You may “learn” that you don’t agree with them, or you may develop a new outlook and understanding. If you end up only being more firm in your position, make sure you know the “why” behind your viewpoint.

Respect all opinions: All participants and their opinions must be treated with respect so that each participant has the opportunity to express himself openly.

Do not judge others: Group participants can gain the support of peers and colleagues simply by being listened to and respected – there is no place for judging as that will negatively impact the process for everyone. Know that “bragging” about your, or your teenager’s, successes may feel like a judgment to others who may be having trouble. Judgments can be subtle and even unintended – but either way they are subversive to the group’s success. Everyone in the group must be considered as equal.



Give all participants an equal opportunity to speak: “Equal opportunity” is the operative concept here, as not everyone will want as much “floor time” as others. Understand that different people have different styles. (You may want to do the exercises in Chapter 5 and identify the introverts and the extroverts in the group.) Don’t force people to speak, but make sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute and be heard. It may be helpful to use an old American Indian tradition of a “talking stick,” which is a device that clearly identifies who has the floor.

Don’t allow one person to dominate the discussion: One person may speak up more than others, but unless it is out of hand, just try and relax. Understand that a different behavioral style may be behind the behavior. Changing the group discussion leader each session should create opportunities to vary the pattern, and you can vary the discussion format. You may want to suggest a rule such as “wait until everyone has spoken before speaking again.” If one person is creating an uncomfortable environment, try reviewing group expectations and discussing the desired norms. It is important not to talk behind people’s backs but to keep the group energy positive while working toward a dynamic that supports everyone’s needs.

Be reasonably flexible: This is not meant to be a therapy group, yet there may be a time when a group member needs to process an issue and wants to do so with the group. You may need to review the confidentiality agreement so that all is safe. Even though discussions may get you off schedule, remember, the person having the issue next time could be you – so try and give the speaker some room. Perhaps you’ll want to build time into the schedule for group members to bring up issues for discussion.

Revisit your goals: Have occasional discussions about how the group is doing; discuss the group dynamics. Making this a safe topic gives members an easy way to express the desire for changes.

Take some things slow: Don’t dive right in to the more personal topics. The order of the chapters in the book has been thoughtfully designed. For example, note that you don’t address risky behavior until your fourth meeting. Discussing risky behavior can go right to the core of parents’ fears, and this can affect their behavior. Group members should be aware of topics that are sensitive and, particularly in these discussions, they should be extra careful about being respectful of others’ opinions.

Find the humor and have fun! Help one another by finding the humor. Sharing laughter will not only lighten your load, but it will make the group function at a higher level.

