

Setting up a Parent Support Group in your school -



A guide for parents or teachers who want to start a group for parents of children with SEN in their school



Why Start a Group?

There are many reasons that you may want to start a Parent Support Group and many things that you can do once you have set it up. Here are some reasons why you may want to set it up

- Parents of children with Special Educational Needs often find it helpful to receive mutual support from others in a similar situation. Being part of a group can enable parents to overcome isolation and gain support
- As a group you can identify what information you need and invite speakers from inside and outside the school to help you access this information
- As a group you can campaign together on issues that you feel strongly about either within or outside of the school

Things to think about at this stage

1. Will your group be specifically for the parents of children with special needs or will it be open to all parents?

2. Who will set up and run the group?

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3. Do you have enough time to set up the group? Can you get other people to help you? You should only undertake to set the group up if you feel you will be able to dedicate time and energy to making it a success.

4. Money - how will you pay for postage and telephone costs that you will need to get the group off the ground. Speak to the school to see if they can help by posting information out with other letters or by letting you use the notice board. Can you ask people to pay a small joining fee?

How we can help

Parent Partnership can help you in the initial stages by supporting you in setting up the group, giving advice, publicising your events in our newsletters, putting you in touch with successful groups in other schools to get ideas. We can also help you to approach the school with your ideas and explore with them the different ways that the group might run. The Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and the SEN Governor might be able to become involved in the group in some way, if this is what you want. Some groups invite the SENCO or the SEN Governor to attend meetings occasionally to share ideas or to pass on information. The school might be able to help with providing a room or sending out information. You will want to talk about ways you can work together to set up the type of group that you want.

So now what...?

Once you have decided that you want to go ahead with setting up your group, you should test your idea out with other parents. You may already know other parents who would be interested in having a group but if not, you can try and make contact with other parents through a wide range of places such as

- Ask the school if you can put a sign on a notice board that is seen by a lot of parents
- Ask the school if they can include an item in a newsletter
- Display signs in local places such as libraries, shops, GP surgeries etc
- Contact Parent Partnership who will pass on information to other parents without breaching confidentiality and can also display information in newsletters

Remember to protect your own identity by only giving first name and telephone/email contact at this stage. Here is an example of a sign you could put up in and around school.

TO ALL PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SEN IN PLEASANTVILLE SCHOOL

We are parents of children in Year 3 with SEN and would like to set up a parent group where we can meet together to gain support and information. If you are interested in joining such a group please contact Marie on 07947853217 or Jackie on 8358 9137 or email parentgroup24@aol.com. We look forward to hearing from you.

You should soon get an idea of whether a Parent Support Group is something that would be welcomed in your school. If the answer is yes, it is time to get started and have your first meeting.

Initial Meetings

When you first meet up you will probably want to spend time getting to know each other. You may want to talk about your children, their experiences in school and your own experiences of the school and outside of school. You should allow yourself this time to get to know each other and find out initial information from each other.

It is worthwhile saying that if anyone prefers not to speak at this stage, they don't have to. For some parents, attending the meeting may be the first time that they are taking steps to acknowledge their child's difficulties. Remember to be friendly and open to new members.

Once you have done this it is a good idea to move on and formalise your group and decide what you want to get out of it. These are some things that you could do in your first or second meeting, depending on how long you want to spend getting to know each other.

Setting **Aims** for your Group

It is a good idea to talk early on about the groups aims and expectations of the group. Some people may have different ideas about what they want the group to be or to accomplish. You could invite a third party to chair the discussion if you felt this would be helpful. **Parent Partnership** workers would be very happy to help you do this.

For example:

Pleasantville School SEN Support Group

AIM - We aim to support and empower parents of children with SEN within our school

HOW WE WILL DO THIS -

We will have monthly meetings and some social events

We will establish a contact list so parents can contact each other between meetings

We will invite speakers from inside and outside of school to talk to us about things we feel are relevant

We will work together to make our views heard on issues that we feel are important for our children

Practical Considerations

The name of your group

You will need to decide on a name for your group. You could just call yourselves 'Pleasantville' parent support group (inserting name of your own school) or you could go for something more creative. This is up to you!

Where will you meet?

You are most likely to meet either in the school or within someone's home. There are advantages and disadvantages to both such as...

School

For: the school is neutral and accessible to all, it will be easy to gain access to information and to invite school staff to attend

Against: some parents may feel inhibited in talking openly if they are worried staff will overhear, may have to book far in advance and work around school activities

Someone's home

For: may be more comfortable and friendly, will be available when you need it

Against: may be hard for some parents to get to, may not be big enough as group grows, may highlight discrepancies in wealth if some parents have large houses and others have small homes. This may make some parents uncomfortable. May seem less independent.

Setting a time

You will need to decide how often you want to meet, at what time of day and how long each meeting will be.

When?

You may decide that the beginning or end of the school day is most convenient because people are already at the school dropping off/picking up their children. If you are a day group, you may agree

to meet in the evening every now and again to include parents who are working during the day, or to give partners a chance to attend too. Parents with children at secondary school sometimes decide to hold all of their meetings in the evening. It's up to the group to decide.

How often?

Some groups meet every week. Others meet together once a month, or every half term.

How long?

Meetings usually last between one and two hours. If you have a speaker, you will want to allow additional time for parents to socialise after the more formal part of the session is over.

Remember, it's entirely up to the members of the group to decide how you want to organise yourselves. All that information can then be written into your publicity so that everyone is clear what the arrangements are.

Publicity

Make sure your publicity is informative and welcoming to new parents. A catchy logo or colourful poster can help with this. Make sure that all essential information is readily available. Think of the five 'Ws'

What? Why? When? Where? Who?

What?	Pleasantville Parent Support Group
Why?	Support and empowerment for parents of children with SEN in our school
When?	2 nd Wednesday of every month
Where?	SEN Support room
Who?	For info contact Marie on 07947853217 or Jackie on 8358 9137 or email parentgroup24@aol.com

How we can help

Parent Partnership can help you to leaflet and can also help you to circulate it.

First Formal Meetings

Once you have decided the aim of your group you will want to get on with meeting these aims!

You will obviously have to decide what you want to get out of these meetings and how you will aim to achieve this.

You may decide that you want the group to be an informal place for parents to meet and chat over coffee, exchanging information and ideas, and an opportunity to share experiences and support each other.

If your aim is to learn more about Special Educational Needs issues, you might want to invite speakers to attend your sessions. [Parent Partnership](#) can help you to contact professionals within the LEA and we can also attend sessions ourselves to speak about the work that we do.

It is a good idea to discuss with the group who you would like to invite and try and gauge interest levels before inviting someone so that you can be sure you will get a good audience and a professional won't come out of their way for no reason.

You may decide to have the best of both worlds: meeting regularly for coffee and organising speakers at regular intervals.

Be prepared to be reactive to what people in the group want.

The structure of the meeting

What will the format of your meetings be like? You may decide that you want to run a 'drop in'. For example: parents know that the drop

in runs from 9 - 11am and can come and go at any time. They may decide to pop by for half an hour or to stay for the whole session.

You might prefer a meeting that starts and finishes at a specific time with people staying for the whole session. Some groups arrange their room so that everyone sits together in a circle at the beginning of the meeting to share news about the week or discuss a particular issue, before breaking off to get coffee and chat together informally.

If you have a visiting speaker, you might decide to arrange things differently.

Setting the Ground Rules

You will want to be clear about who is running the group. A member of staff sometimes starts a group, which is then taken over by the parents. An elected committee of parents runs other groups. Sometimes a couple of parents will start a group with other parents taking on tasks informally. It doesn't matter *how* it works as long as it works for *your* group and every one is clear about who does what.

- Sometimes parents might share personal or emotional issues within a group. It is important that everyone agrees to respect the confidentiality of others so that participants feel that the group is a safe and supportive environment. Child protection issues should be referred on immediately, either to the head of the school, or to the [Parent Partnership](#) worker connected with your group.
- Parents who run a group may need some support themselves, to reflect on how the group is running and its future direction. On occasion, a difficult situation might arise that you feel you would like some help to address.

Parent Partnership is happy to arrange regular contact with group leaders or just to be on the end of a phone if you need us.

Developing your Group

As your group develops and word gets around, more parents will contact you for information, or just turn up to a meeting. As first impressions are so important, it's worth giving some thought to how you respond to a new member. It can be nerve wracking to walk into a new group where you imagine that everyone else already knows each other, so take care to put new members at their ease. Coming to your group may be a parent's first step in acknowledging their child's disability or special needs. They could easily be frightened off, so make sure your group is welcoming and supportive.

What works best depends on the size and formality of your group and what goes on in meetings. Some groups grow and develop organically, according to the number of people attending and what they want out of the group. Parents might be joining and leaving all through the year so the people might change but the group continues to run.

Some groups are 'time limited': The group has served its purpose and will close when those parents leave the school. Eventually, a new set of parents will come along and set up their own group. And you will be left with the happy memories and enduring friendships that developed from your own involvement in the parent support group at your school.

So, now is the time to set up your group and get going.

For further information please contact:
Barnet Parent Partnership 020 8359 7714
parent.partnership@barnet.gov.uk

The Barnet Primary Project are also happy to be involved in supporting your group. Please contact: Barnet Primary Project 020 8359 7977