

How To Start A Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group

The following are suggestions for starting a Grandparents or Other Caregiver Support Group in your area. Dot Thibodeaux, founder of "Second Time Around" and Danna Spayde established this support group in 1993. The following suggestions are a result of Danna and Dot's experiences. We hope this information will be useful to other groups.

1. **One or more dedicated volunteers is essential-more than one is better:** Dedicated volunteers will be needed to help to get resources for the project and organize the support group. An established nonprofit agency would be a good sponsor.

2. **A free meeting facility in a supportive atmosphere is needed:** Various nonprofit agencies provide meeting space at no cost and provide copying, telephone and mailing services. Notices of meeting dates should be sent out monthly and follow-up phone calls to group members should be conducted to remind members of the meeting date.

3. **A meeting room where the doors can be closed to assure privacy during the meeting is crucial. Confidentiality must be maintained.** Very sensitive and personal issues are discussed by group members during meetings. If you take publicity pictures, be sure the persons in the photo agree to having it published. Don't assume that they will. Don't quote group members by name in the media without express consent.

4. **Take advantage of all the free publicity you can get:**

Send public service announcements about your meetings to the newspaper.

Appear on every television and radio show in town.

Place feature stories in every local newspaper, and in locally published magazines.

Speak to senior citizens groups in churches and to civic and service groups.

Conduct workshops at national and regional conferences. Anytime there is an aging related conference, try to get on the agenda by conducting a workshop on starting a support group or discuss grandparents' issues in general.

5. **Make contacts with schools, churches and daycare centers in your area.** Get on the program at PTA and other community meetings. Let local organizations know about your group. Participate in expositions, health fairs, volunteer showcases, etc.

Make up a simple flyer or brochure and distribute it everywhere you can. At every opportunity, distribute your flyer to mental health and counseling agencies; various professionals in private practice (i.e., psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, etc.); doctors' offices, schools, anywhere that grandparents or other caregivers may be taking the children.

6. **Invite professionals counselors, psychologists, social workers, doctors, nurses, judges, attorneys, legislators, etc. to speak at your meeting.** These people need to be aware of your group. They make referrals and spread the word about it. You can also use this opportunity to educate them as they educate you. Most professionals are seeing more and more grandparents raising grandchildren and are glad to know about our group's availability.

7. Register your group with the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Information Center of LA. This is a statewide service and clearinghouse for grandparent who are raising grandchildren. We disseminate useful information to grandparents and keep a registry of support groups. Participants will also be registered with AARP to receive additional information.

8. Vary the activities for your meetings to get and keep the interest of your group. In addition to the types of speakers we have already mentioned, we have also had a notary public talk about the legalities that notaries can handle that will save the expenses of hiring a lawyer; a parish librarian to talk about encouraging children to read; financial planning advisors; legal services agency staff; and vocational education experts. Every meeting doesn't have to be about legal and advocacy issues. We reserve a meeting just for discussion and networking among the group. During holidays, have potluck lunch and relax.

9. Experiment with meeting times, if necessary, until you find what will work for your group. Be flexible in scheduling and arranging programs. Set-up a regular day and time to meet. The Baton Rouge "Second Time Around" group meets at Family Road located at 323 East Airport Drive on the fourth Thursday of each month at 10:00 a.m.

10. Establish a framework for the group which allows some flexibility. Too much change and flexibility can be confusing, since human beings tend to be creatures of habit and we all like order in our lives. You don't want to be rigid and inflexible, however, some things need to remain constant.

11. Celebrate your successes. When things go right, let everyone know about it. Don't be afraid to "toot your own horn." Some kinds of support, suggestion for solving problems. or information provided by a speaker may make a difference in the life of a group member, and no one would ever know it. So always be confident you're are making a difference.

12. Don't give up, and don't be discouraged! Sometimes we have a room full of people, and sometimes we have only one. There are many reasons why attendance may not be what you would like it to be. Keep on plugging away. We get temporarily discouraged, but we don't let this stop us. Don't Give Up!