Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health

Child and family partnerships: Group processes

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Facilitating groups

Group facilitation is an important part of your child and family partnership strategy and can help develop and enhance relationships. For groups to be effective, there must be clear purpose and intent which is communicated effectively and with respect.

Groups enable people to travel to a meeting location and undertake large pieces of work. Often, they are a good time to conduct an orientation and provide social opportunities (such as group meals), which help to foster trust and build relationships between staff and participants.

Groups with child and family partners must always have two goals in mind:

1. For partners to gain confidence about the intent and purpose of their input.
2. For the organisation to gain valuable input into how to make their outcomes more effective.

Please note that this process has been developed to use when organising groups for family partners aged 18 years and over. If you wish to organise a group with children, please refer to our resources on child participation. Groups can be time-consuming and costly to organise, so it is important to consider if you have the capacity to run a group well. If after consideration you feel you do not have the capacity to run a group, then you may consider other ways of involving child and family partners, such as one-on-one interviews.

> *"The staff manage to have that insight to care for us, help us be organised, and help decrease our anxiety around travel or partnering and producing resources. I have no idea how they do that but they've done it amazingly, and very sensitively. They're really caring, very supportive. They do clever things like send you information by multiple means. So I'll get a text message or a phone call, I'll get an email with some information, and then I'll get the information printed and posted to me; and then there might even be another copy available when I arrive because I've left it at home. I've felt supported all along the way. They're just genuinely caring, and they really take a lot of pressure off. It's been an amazing relationship."*
>
> **– Child and family partner**

1. Planning considerations

Communication

- Provide participants with contact phone numbers for at least two staff members and relevant helplines. These can be found on the self-care tip sheet which you may adapt for your own use.
- Make sure you have an emergency contact number for each participant before they arrive.
- Discuss and arrange travel plans, accommodation, parking, childcare, taxi vouchers and petrol reimbursements. Make sure participants have this information in writing before they arrive, especially if they are coming from interstate.
- Use clear communication with no jargon. Make sure (from both a written and visual perspective) that documents are easy to read. You may consider using this template to create your own letter to participants.

Venue and transport

- Consider your meeting venue. A comfortable and welcoming space (with windows!) is important.
- Consider how long your group will run for. It can often take longer than expected for members to feel comfortable, supported and able to contribute in a safe and valuable way. However, shorter groups (e.g. 1-2 hours) can still be safe for participants and useful for your organisation if that is what will fit within budgetary constraints.
- Consider any special needs participants may have (e.g. are they unable to use public transport due to physical or mental health issues? Do they need to travel with a support person? Do they need a disabled access hotel room? Do they need an interpreter?).
- Ask about any special requirements (including dietary requirements) ahead of time and make appropriate arrangements.
- If people are travelling from interstate:
    - provide taxi vouchers and a map of the local area, including things such as their accommodation, meeting venue, supermarkets, restaurants and convenience stores
    - do your best to meet them in person on the day or evening before. This helps people to feel welcome and supported and is an opportunity for them to ask any questions they may have.
- Provide food and drinks throughout the day of the group, and a meal allowance for food not provided on an airplane or during meetings.

Other information

- Provide participants with any pre-reading that will make the meeting easier for them. Keep in mind that if a significant amount of reading is required, this time will need to be paid for.
- Prepare an agenda and provide it beforehand. Ensure the agenda is well-balanced – cramming too much information in can mean quantity over quality and leave people exhausted. When touching base with child and family partners before the group, ask if they have any questions or concerns about the agenda.
- Consider giving participants a ‘to share at meeting’ form so they can prepare how they’d like to introduce themselves, or a topic they’d like to discuss, ahead of time.
- If a partner comes from a different cultural background or if English is their second language, take the time to seek advice regarding the individual’s specific needs in relation to culture, communication and understanding. For lived experience advocates, staff will also need to be well-prepared. For more information, refer to our resources on enagaging with First Nations peoples.

> *“It really needs to be quite clear from the beginning what the scope of the organisation is and the purpose of the project or task at hand. It’s important for people to come into this work with an understanding of what it is they are being asked to contribute to.”*
>
> **– Emerging Minds staff member**

2. Inviting people to participate

The invitation process is important. If participants are new to your organisation, they will need some information about the organisation as well as the intent and purpose of the group. Information should be provided both verbally and in writing.

- From the start, child and family partners need to be provided with enough context to decide whether they want to participate in the group. This includes the goal of the project, topic, remuneration, travel required, and what specifically is being asked of them. Discussion of the topic is especially important as it clarifies for participants what experience it is that you will be asking them to draw on.
- When deciding if they wish to be involved, participants also need to consider if it is the right thing for them to be doing at this time in their lives. Even very experienced child and family partners need to step back from time to time due to their personal circumstances. Staff should facilitate these conversations with child and family partners.
- When inviting people to participate, let them know that you see them as experts in their experience. You are inviting them to inform you on a topic or project based on their lived experience and wisdom gained from this. You do not expect them to reveal personal information about themselves, although many people choose to share parts of their stories and that is OK, as long as their story is shared in a way that is safe for themselves and other people present.
- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting when inviting people. If the meeting may involve discussing potentially triggering topics, ensure people know about this ahead of time and remind them that their own wellbeing is paramount, and that they have the right to withdraw from certain sections, or the whole meeting, at any time.
- Provide participants with contact details for staff and let them know they can get in touch with any questions or concerns at any time throughout the process.
- It can help people to feel supported and welcome if staff contact them a few days before the group, to check if they are still willing to attend and if they have any questions.
- Provide participants with this self-care tip sheet which you can adapt for your own use.

3. Facilitating the group

Begin the meeting with an Acknowledgment of Country. The following text (which is not region-specific) may be useful:

We recognise the land on which we meet today and pay respect to the Traditional Owners, their ancestors, and elders past, present and emerging from the many Nations across this country.

We acknowledge the importance of connection to Land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community for the wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

If you know who the traditional custodians are of the land on which you're meeting (e.g. the Kaurna People of the Adelaide Plains), you can refer to them directly.

It is also meaningful to do a Lived Experience Recognition, More information on how to do this appropriately so as not to co-opt the Acknowledgement of Country, can be found here.

- Inform the group that your goal is to create a safe, secure, and respectful environment in which people can share their wisdom and experiences. Some key things to mention:
    - Assure participants there will be no judgement from staff or other partners.
    - Remind participants that they should only share what they feel comfortable with.
    - Be clear about confidentiality expectations.

  Setting these group norms is helpful in establishing a safe space and can also be useful for staff and participants to refer back to if needed.
- Groups should be positive and supportive. However, it is important to acknowledge that they can also be emotionally challenging. Plan adequate breaks and talk with participants about the responses they may have. Ensure child and family partners know they can take a break, leave the group and/or seek support from staff at any point.
- Create opportunities to check in with child and family partners.

- While partners are not usually required to actively share their stories in order to contribute, many choose to and there are rich learnings to be found in this. However, aspects of people's stories may be distressing for others to hear. This is a nuanced area that needs to be handled with sensitivity, kindness and respect for all. Some tips for handling such situations include:
    - Pay attention to anyone who may be showing signs of distress and follow up with them privately as soon as you can.
    - Be clear about the purpose of sharing stories. Make sure that child and family partners can see how their sharing contributes to the groups' objectives.
    - Check-in with other participants. Not everyone will show their distress outwardly.
    - Having more than one staff member at meetings is necessary to ensure the goals of the meeting, as well as partner wellbeing are fostered.
- Where possible, use visual aids to help explain and discuss concepts and counteract any verbal information overload.
- Balance different people's points of view. Sometimes a meeting agenda may change if that is the group consensus. However, at times it may be more appropriate to stick to the agenda and organise an additional meeting (via Skype, Zoom, teleconference or similar, if face-to-face is not possible) to allow time for new topics that are raised.
- Be aware and take action if a child and family partner has not had the chance to contribute. This may mean asking them for their opinion during the meeting, or talking with them during a break to encourage them to speak. You may even speak on their behalf, with their permission. Participants who feel less confident may benefit from sitting near a staff member.
- Place a suggestion box on the table for people to provide anonymous comments or feedback.
- Use consent forms for people over 18 and under 18 years of age as appropriate (e.g. if the meeting is being recorded for note taking purposes).
- Have an evaluation form ready for people to provide feedback at the end of the meeting. You can find a template here. Alternatively, you may prefer to seek evaluation feedback verbally.

Including professionals in the group

There are pros and cons to this approach. The topic area, purpose of the group, and the specific partners and professionals attending will all influence the outcome.

- If you decide to run a group with both child and family partners and professionals, make sure there is more than one partner in attendance, and that their views are given the same weight as those of the professionals. Ideally there would be an equal number of professionals and partners present.
- When working with both peer workers and child and family partners in a group context, consider ways of ensuring the knowledge, skills and experience of each group are acknowledged and responded to. For example, this could include structuring distinct group consultations or separate breakout discussion groups within the larger program.

Unique challenges

When organising groups, the following recommendations may help to lessen some of the challenges that can arise:

- Adults are asked not to bring any minors with them. If this is unavoidable, the minor must be accompanied by another person over the age of 18, who will be responsible for them outside of the group while the group is running.
- It is important to be clear from the start what is and isn't possible. Some suggestions are achievable, but others are not due to funding or other constraints.
- If you are a government-funded organisation, you may be unable to carry out formal advocacy work. Be clear about this and try to offer alternative options regarding advocacy.
- Face-to-face meetings take significant time and money to organise, and are therefore limited. In between face-to-face meetings use tools such as Zoom to maintain ongoing partnerships. One-on-one communication via email and phone is also a valuable way of collaborating and continuing two-way discussions and shared learning.
- Face-to-face meetings may sometimes result in strained relationships between participants. This can be intense for those involved, especially if they are away from their homes and usual support mechanisms. It can also make repairing any ruptured relationships more difficult once everyone is back in their hometowns. Ensure staff provide support in the moment as well as after the group around any issues that arise.

- If people are travelling to your meeting and staying in accommodation, it is helpful if they can arrive the day before and leave the day after the meeting. This allows time for them to get orientated and not feel rushed, therefore supporting their wellbeing. It also allows staff more time to develop relationships and provide any necessary support, or for participants to provide peer support to each other.

Including professionals in the group

There are pros and cons to this approach. The topic area, purpose of the group, and the specific CaFPs and professionals attending will all influence the outcome.

- If you decide to run a group with both child and family partners and professionals, make sure there is more than one CaFP in attendance, and that their views are given the same weight as those of the professionals. Ideally there would be an equal number of professionals and CaFPs present.
- Make sure that the professionals and group facilitators don't revert to using jargon or discussing theories that CaFPs may not be familiar with. This is easy to do and can create a strong power imbalance and other unintended consequences.
- Avoid making generalisations about groups of people without evidence.
- In the group norms, ask that everyone come to the group with a curious and collaborative mindset.
- It may also be appropriate to have separate groups for child and family partners and those who are also peer workers. Both groups bring vital knowledge, skills and experience; however, there can be a perceived and unintentional power imbalance between the groups.

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- It is important to be clear from the start what is and isn't possible. Some novel suggestions are achievable, but others are not due to funding or other constraints.
- As a government-funded project, we are unable to undertake formal advocacy. You may need to be clear about this and try to offer alternative options regarding advocacy.
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What to do in a group?!

While you need to be prepared and have a purpose for your groups, you don't want your structure or questioning to be too restricted. It is important that, within the boundaries of the project or task, child and family partners feel empowered and positioned as experts to inform the group about what works and what doesn't.

Consider a variety of ways to engage with partners, including group discussions and activities that require some movement around the room. You might also consider preparing a case study for participants to respond to.

Dedicate some time working with your project team so that you are well-prepared for your group.

4. Child and family partner wellbeing

Discussions concerning wellbeing need to occur at every stage of the process and include:

- acknowledgment of our child and family partners' generosity and the gift of their experiences and wisdom as given to others
- partners' informal and formal supports, and what they would do if they felt triggered or in need of support when working with your organisation
- details of at least two staff members they should call if they need support
- information on self-care. Provide child and family partners with a copy of this self-care tip sheet which you can adapt for your own use
- strategies for reflection for child and family partners, and reflection and quality improvement for staff. This will vary but includes things such as individual and group conversations about each stage of the collaboration process; written evaluation forms; suggestion box; and email, phone and face-to-face discussions. It is also important for staff to make time to have ongoing discussions with their team (both the team working on the project, but also the broader team) about how to incorporate the reflections received
- consideration of your organisation's responsibility to do no harm, while respecting and supporting child and family partners' right to make decisions about what is best for them and their family.

"It does create a lot of difficult emotions, whether it's sadness, regret, guilt, shame sometimes... it brings all those up. And I found that staff were able to help me to process those emotions and be kind about those emotions. There was a lot of kindness, but the other thing that was encouraged was self-care. In all of the documentation, all of the communication, it's, 'Please make sure you take care of yourself.' And in the lead up to coming over, 'Take care of yourself', and afterwards, 'Take care of yourself.' And even while we were making the resources and doing the various activities, self-care was kind of built in."

"But what I found really good was the fact that someone would give you a call afterwards. To have someone ring and just say, 'How are you doing today? Was it a big day? How did you pull up?' was really, really good. And it's an opportunity to debrief, but it's also a prompt to say, well, how are you going? Because sometimes you go back home, and you get back into the thick of life, or work, and you don't really process what you've just done."

– Child and family partner

5. Following up after the group

It is important to touch base with child and family partners a few days after a group. This call offers partners an opportunity to reflect, and gives you a chance to respond to their experience of the process. Let them know that you will be doing this, as some people may prefer an email or a text.

Do:

- **Thank** them for their valued contribution.
- **Find out** how it went from their perspective.
- **Listen to**
  - any reflections they have had since
  - any feedback about how the process went well or could be improved
  - how their involvement was useful/not useful for them and their family

  If their experience was negative, what would have helped to improve this for them?
- **Let them know** the next steps for the project and discuss any future involvement they may have in this project or others.

Also:

- **Ensure payment** for their time and expenses has been organised.
- **Ensure** they know they can contact you to discuss any of the above in the future.
- **Confirm how and when** you will be in touch about the outcome of their work (e.g. informing them when a resource is launched, or when a new project is being devised based on their previous work).

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