

The Role of Families on Groups



Where do I start?

Parents who have served in roles on decision-making groups share that when they started out it was helpful to learned about the group; its history, its style of leadership, its priorities and goals, its structure, and its decision-making process.

Review the group's mission statement, purpose and history.

This will help you see if the group is working on issues that are important to you. Find out the reason the group was created in the first place.

Find out the group's expectations and a description of member roles.

Are there attendance requirements? Do you have the time and necessary commitment level? Are you required to serve on additional committees?

Ask for meeting notes from the past few meetings.

This will help you understand what the group has been doing most recently. These notes are also called 'minutes' because they record what the group talked about and any decisions that were made.

Visit one of the group's meetings.

This will help you see the group dynamics before you officially commit to joining.

Who leads the group?

Is the group formal or informal? Is there a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer? If there is no designated group leader, find out who organizes the meetings.

Families Ask Questions

I am confused by all the jargon used at meetings. Where can I find out the meaning of all these terms?

"The terminologies and short-cuts that professionals use are confusing. For lay people like me, who are not often exposed to these terms and initials, whose lives are busy just getting through the day, understanding what some words mean takes time. I wish when initials or unfamiliar terms are used by groups, they would take a minute to explain what it stands for so we don't have to grope for the meaning of the words. It is especially difficult since English is my second language."

-Marla, parent

What else do I need to know?

"I have learned about the different personalities that often fill a room and how to engage each type in order to

- 1) *allow every voice to be heard and*
- 2) *find a way where everyone feels they have ownership in the final decision."*

-Cheri, parent

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What do I need to know *about my role?*

The energy you will spend learning new skills, preparing for and attending meetings will be worth it, especially when you begin to see the results of your efforts.



Connect with the parent who served before you.

This will help you get an honest picture of your role. If the group does not provide a mentor, ask for one! If there has not been a parent previously find a mentor in the group who can serve as your guide as you begin.

Always come to the meeting prepared.

If the group will be reviewing a draft document at the meeting, it may be helpful to you to read a copy ahead of time. You can ask to receive the information by mail or by email a few days earlier. Chances are everyone in the group would like to have things ahead of time.

Find out if the group has documents that guide the way they operate.

If so, ask for a copy of the most recent version and review them. List the document names here:

Ask if reimbursement or a stipend is offered for family members, and if so, what the process is to request this.

Especially if you need childcare to participate, you have out-of-pocket expenses or must travel.

More Words of Wisdom

"Plan your initial introduction carefully so that it gets important points across in the time the agenda has provided. In 5 minutes, you may only have time to share your name, a little about you and your family, and what brings you to the group."

-Cheri, parent

"When I introduce myself to a new group, I have found that story telling is extremely powerful. Whether I am telling the story of my son's experiences, or the experiences of other children and families, story telling can be very effective in communicating information. I have seen family stories about their experiences influence policy at both the local school level and at a district-wide level."

-Barbara, parent

Remember...

**You are there to represent
the voices of many families,
not just your own.**

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What information do I need to know about the group?

My Reason for Joining the Group

Keeping in mind the issues I care about: _____

My personal goal for making a difference: _____

Type of Group

Name of group _____ Contact person(s) _____

Phone/email _____ Web-
site _____

Leadership (names/contact info): _____

Group's Purpose _____

Group's Vision _____

Group's Mission _____

Activities of the Group

Group's Function: governing advisory leadership planning evaluation practice group

Group's Authority: budgets services programs personnel policy advisory
 public awareness training and education legislation performance review _____ other

How often does the group meet? _____ Time? _____

Membership and Roles

How are members selected? Volunteer Appointed Elected Mandated

Is there an application or nomination process? Contact _____

Length of service? _____ Are additional committees required? _____

My role description and responsibilities: _____

Is there an orientation for new members? Is there on-going training?

Is travel required? Is mileage reimbursed? Is a stipend provided?

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What ways might I represent the perspective of other families?

It is your role to seek out and support the involvement of families who are interested in and potentially affected by the group's decisions. Provide your contact information on a postcard and welcome ongoing input from families.



Role of the Parent Representative

You will be required to bring the family perspective to the decision-making process. Family input is an important source of information that will influence the decisions of the entire group. When the families can't physically be at the meeting, they rely on parent representatives to bring their interests and concerns to the discussion.

Parent representatives on groups serve as liaisons to families by providing them with information they need to know. This information will help families participate and contribute in meaningful ways. Parent representatives also help bring ideas and questions from families to the people who need this information.

Provide Feedback

Write *summary reports* and post them in places like libraries, community centers, grocery stores, county and state agency websites and newsletters so families can see the impact they made.

Be Accessible

Attend parent group meetings and school staff meetings to reach more people.

Families Ask Questions

I am a parent representative to a group. What are ways that I can collect input from other families so that I can better represent their interests?

Tip: Create a brief survey with your team. Several language versions may be needed to reach all ethnic groups and neighborhoods. Work with your group to be mindful of confidentiality, so families feel comfortable answering questions.

Tip: Plan a focus group meeting for anyone interested in the topic. Provide information in advance so participants can prepare their thoughts. Consider onsite child-care.

Tip: Offer to visit with families in their home if they can not come to the focus group or complete a survey.

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Sharing Your Family Story

"Never underestimate the power of your story. A well-told story has the potential to touch hearts and change minds. While impersonally delivered facts can easily be forgotten or dismissed, a story lingers and mingles with the other stories that shape our shared human experience."

This template will help you record and organize important points about your own family story. Start by jotting down experiences you have had. Put them in order and write a brief story. You may wish to use this template below to help organize your thoughts. Putting your thoughts down on paper now will help you prepare for opportunities to share your story in the future.

The whole story...

(You may wish to continue on additional sheets of paper.)

Consider your audience

Now connect your experience to an issue...These points should consider the listener's common experiences, concerns, goals, and position on an issue.

Point 1: _____

Point 2: _____

Point 3: _____

Excerpt from: 'From Experience to Influence: The Power of a Parent's Story', ACTION Sheet: PHP-c121, PACER Center, 2006.
<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c121.pdf>

