

Skills for Serving on Groups



What skills will help me *prepare for a meeting*?

This final section offers practical tips and strategies for putting your skills into practice. You will learn most skills “on the job.” Many skills can also be used in other areas of your life.

The following, is a list of general tips to keep working on:

Keep a calendar

Keep meeting dates and times recorded.

Read the agenda

Always try to get the agenda ahead of time so you can prepare for the meeting. Even if there is no written agenda, you can ask the leader to list the meeting topics.

Review meeting minutes

Read the minutes through for accuracy and to make sure they record all important information.

Organize your thoughts

Think about and write down your comments ahead of time so that you will be prepared. Remember, you are an equal member of the group and it is important for you to offer not only your thoughts, but the ideas and opinions of all those you represent.

Keep learning

Build an in-depth understanding of issues, the budgeting process, and policy. A few good ways to find more information are to:

- Refer to the list of agencies listed in the back cover of this guidebook and contact them for free materials, training opportunities and to join their online listserves.
- Visit your local public library and ask the reference librarian for assistance in locating books on the topics listed in this guidebook.
- Use the computers at your public library to access the online resources listed throughout this guidebook.
- Practice good listening and communication skills.
- Ask other families where they find information about the topics and issues you care about.

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What skills will help me *participate in a meeting*?

To be effective in your role on a decision-making group, you need to have certain skills and the time to be involved. Every situation is different and will require a unique combination of your skills. You will learn most skills "on the job." Many skills can also be used in other areas of your life.

These strategies may help increase your participation in meetings.

Try to attend all meetings

Attending frequently will help you build relationships and understanding. This will also show your commitment to the mission of the group. If you can not attend all meetings, let the group leader know ahead of time, and make sure to get notes or meeting minutes from meetings you missed.

Use technology

You may be able to audio tape the meetings to help you remember later what was discussed. Let the group know if this is something you would like to do.

Take and keep good notes

Writing down in your own words what was talked about at the meeting can help you remember important points. Your notes can be a good reference when it comes time to follow through on your assignment.

Learn the 'lingo'

Learning the language, the words and the abbreviations used by members of the group can help you understand the conversation better too.

Try new roles

If possible, take your turn at leading the meeting, recording meeting minutes and timekeeping when you are ready.

Learn how to facilitate a discussion

After you have gained some experience, you may consider acting as a meeting facilitator or chair person. Facilitation is a learned skill that takes practice.

Be a mentor

Once you have been serving on the group for a while you may feel comfortable mentoring a new member to the group.

Listen for understanding

When you do not understand what is being said, ask "What I think I hear you saying is... (restate what you heard)." Then ask, "Is that right?" This gives the speaker a chance to clarify or add more information, if needed.

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What skills will help me *follow-up after a meeting*?

There will typically be materials to read and activities between meetings. Some groups have sub-groups that meet to carry out a specific task for the group. Organizational skills are important to have to help you meet the responsibilities of your role.

The following tips will help you accomplish what you need to during the time between meetings.

Refer to your notes

During the meeting, make a list of follow-up items and questions to ask. This will help you keep track of important information to refer to after the meeting.

Stay organized

Use a binder to store all materials so it is easier to locate information during the meeting. Make a separate labeled divider for: contacts, by-laws, ground rules, agendas, meeting notes, reports, projects, and reference materials.

Use technology

Electronic files that are sent to you ahead of time can be stored in a folder on your computer desktop for easy access. If you have a laptop, you can even type meeting notes into a document during the meeting.

Manage your time in the meeting and after the meeting

Set priorities and make sure your activities, meetings and discussions are focused on specific goals and outcomes that the group has identified.

Learn about the different decision-making processes

Using a clear process can help put all members of a group at ease, allowing the real work of groups to begin.

Learn to instill a sense of ownership in the final decision

Use open-ended questions to encourage discussions and engage all members in meaningful ways.

Learn to deal with difficult situations

Don't be afraid of data

Learn ways to understand and work with different types of data. Find out what questions the group is trying to answer with the data and take time to study the information.

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What skills will help me in *dealing with conflict*?

Conflict is a natural part of group dynamics, but it can be complex.



Here are some tips to help work through challenging situations:

General tips about group dynamics...

- **Keep an open mind**- You might learn something new.
- **Don't take things personally.**
- **Ask questions**- Find out the facts by asking "Who? What? When? Why?"
- **Stay focused on the topic**- Refer to the agenda as a reminder.
- **Take a break**- If you feel overwhelmed, excuse yourself for 5 minutes.
- **Remember the purpose of the group**- Keep children's health, well-being and learning at the center of the conversation.

Families Ask Questions

What if it feels like it's "us against them?"

"This has happened in meetings sometimes and I find it is helpful to try to find common ground that everyone can agree on and work from this basis. Finding one area of agreement usually leads to another and another."

-Cynthia, parent

How can I make sure my ideas are heard?

"Choosing the right words to say what's on your mind will go a long way to helping others understand your ideas."

-Chris, parent

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What skills will help me *facilitate meetings*?

Serving as a meeting facilitator for the first time can seem pretty scary to most people. Just like any other skill, meeting facilitation becomes easier with experience.

Below are some common strategies that good facilitators use:

Make everyone feel comfortable and valued

Most people will not participate fully in a meeting unless they feel comfortable with other members and believe their opinions will be heard.

- Allow time for 'small talk' before the meeting begins.
- Use open body language (uncrossed arms).
- Thank participants.

Encourage participation

Some members are outspoken and energetic. Others are quiet and reserved. As facilitator, you should balance these extremes so that everyone can equally participate.

- Encourage participation of quiet members.
- Use open-ended questions (questions starting with when, what or how).
- Divide into small groups.
- Put questions out to the group as a whole instead of to one specific person.
- Use flip charts, overheads and handouts.

Prevent and manage conflict

One of the best ways to deal with conflict is to prevent it. Some conflict is unavoidable. Some conflict can even help in discovering new options.

- Use team-building activities that help people get to know each other better.
- Set ground rules.
- Draw attention to things that everyone agrees on.
- Agree to disagree, but still respect each other.

Listen and observe

Throughout a meeting keep your eyes and ears open. Pay attention not only to the group as a whole but also to individuals.

- Listen actively before you speak.
- Scan the room to see how others are reacting to comments or issues.

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Ensure quality decisions

Quality decisions come from using good decision-making processes and reliable information/data that has been carefully considered.

- **Remind the group of decision deadlines.**
- **Review criteria and supporting information.**
- **Make sure everyone understands what decision-making process the group is using in each situation.**
- **Poll the group before major decisions to avoid surprises.**
- **Review the decision often.**

Ensure outcome-based meetings

As the facilitator, you bear primary — but not sole — responsibility for keeping the meeting on track and for getting done what needs to be done.

- **Review objectives for each agenda item.**
- **Keep group members focused** on the task at hand by providing objectives for each presentation, discussion, or other activity on your agenda. Remind members of the objectives as you take up each item.
- **Record decisions.** Your group must record activities and decisions. While taking minutes is not the facilitator's responsibility, you can assist by writing key decisions on newsprint, a chalkboard, etc. that members can see.
- **Develop an action plan.**
- For each decision, write down when action steps need to occur and who is responsible for these.

