

Group Handbook



CIRCLEof**Parents**[®]
Sharing Ideas. Sharing Support.



West Virginia Circle of Parents Network

June 2014



CIRCLE of PARENTS®
Sharing Ideas. Sharing Support.

Welcome to the West Virginia Circle of Parents Network!

The purpose of this handbook is to provide an introduction to Circle of Parents® and practical tips for Network members about starting, leading and sustaining Circle groups. The handbook includes material from the national Circle of Parents organization, as well as what we've learned from our Circle groups in West Virginia. In addition, each sponsoring organization receives a copy of the national *Circle of Parents Facilitator Manual* and *Circle of Parents Children's Program Manual*.

Membership in the WV Circle of Parents Network is open to organizations that support the Circle of Parents approach, send at least two people to a Network-sponsored training workshop for facilitators and parent leaders, and participate in occasional phone meetings to share questions and ideas with other members.



*Find out more about Circle of Parents online at:
Website: <http://www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents>
Network photo gallery: <https://wvcircleofparentsnetwork.shutterfly.com>*



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Part 1: The Basics of Circle of Parents



What is Circle of Parents?

Circle of Parents is a national network of parent-led groups, where parents and caregivers share ideas, celebrate successes and address the challenges surrounding parenting. Circle of Parents began in 2000 and now has groups in two dozen states. West Virginia launched Circle of Parents in 2012 with five pilot organizations, which have since grown to more than a dozen sponsoring organizations holding groups across the state.

Circle of Parents groups can be open to the general community or tailored to people who share particular interests or circumstances. All groups include these seven elements:

1. **INCLUSIVENESS:** All groups are free of charge. Anyone in a parenting role can participate. The only exceptions would be people with problems that jeopardize the safety of group members or children.
2. **TRUST:** Group members count on each other to listen openly, respond honestly and act with compassion. They know that all information shared in the group is confidential and never discussed outside the group, within the limits of the law.
3. **RESPECT:** Group members can expect to have their feelings heard if they choose to share them. They can also count on having enough time for everyone to speak. Parents, facilitators and parent leaders honor cultural traditions, boundaries and the needs of group members.
4. **EXPERIENCE-BASED:** Parents are the experts about their own families and their own children. Together, parents learn from one another about ways to strengthen their families. Group members provide non-judgmental support to one another.
5. **OWNERSHIP:** The group belongs to the parents who attend. Group members determine the content of meetings and the agenda, define their own goals in the group, model healthy interactions, assure that meetings take place consistently, set individual goals and act on their decisions.
6. **POSITIVE PARENTING:** Group members assist one another in developing positive methods of problem solving and recognize that violence at any level is not an acceptable form of dealing with problems and issues.
7. **SHARED LEADERSHIP:** Parents and group facilitators build a partnership to share responsibility, expertise and leadership roles. Members of the group hold each other accountable for the above values, ask for clarification if there is something they don't understand, and reach out if someone seems to be struggling.

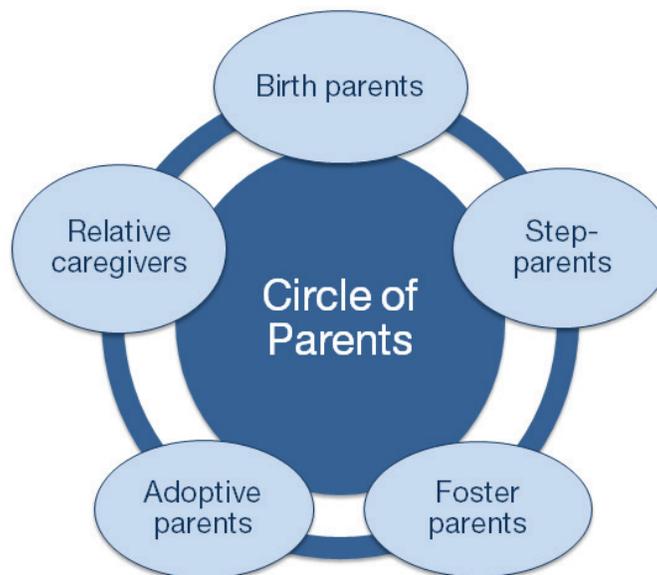
“It’s nice to be able to talk to others who may have been in my shoes.”
- WV Circle of Parents member



Why do people join Circle of Parents groups?

Anyone in a parenting role is welcome to participate in Circle of Parents groups. Biological parents, step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents and other relative caregivers all benefit from the parenting information and support provided in Circle groups. Some groups are broad-based, while others focus on particular family situations, like grandparents raising grandchildren or families of children with disabilities.

People who participate in Circle of Parents groups



People join Circle of Parents for a wide variety of reasons. Some are looking for information about child development in general or about the special needs of their children. Some want ideas for dealing with stress or challenging situations with their children and families. Many say they enjoy the opportunity to socialize with other parents.

Circle of Parents is also a good place for members to develop leadership skills within the group and beyond. Some groups get involved in advocating for public policies and programs that help make their communities better places to raise children.

It's important to note that Circle of Parents groups offer mutual self-help, not therapy. Circle groups are non-professional in nature and based on members sharing their personal experiences with each other.

“I know that people need people, and it helps sometimes just to be able to express yourself, and actually have people not just hear what you are saying, but to have them really listen.”

- WV Circle of Parents member



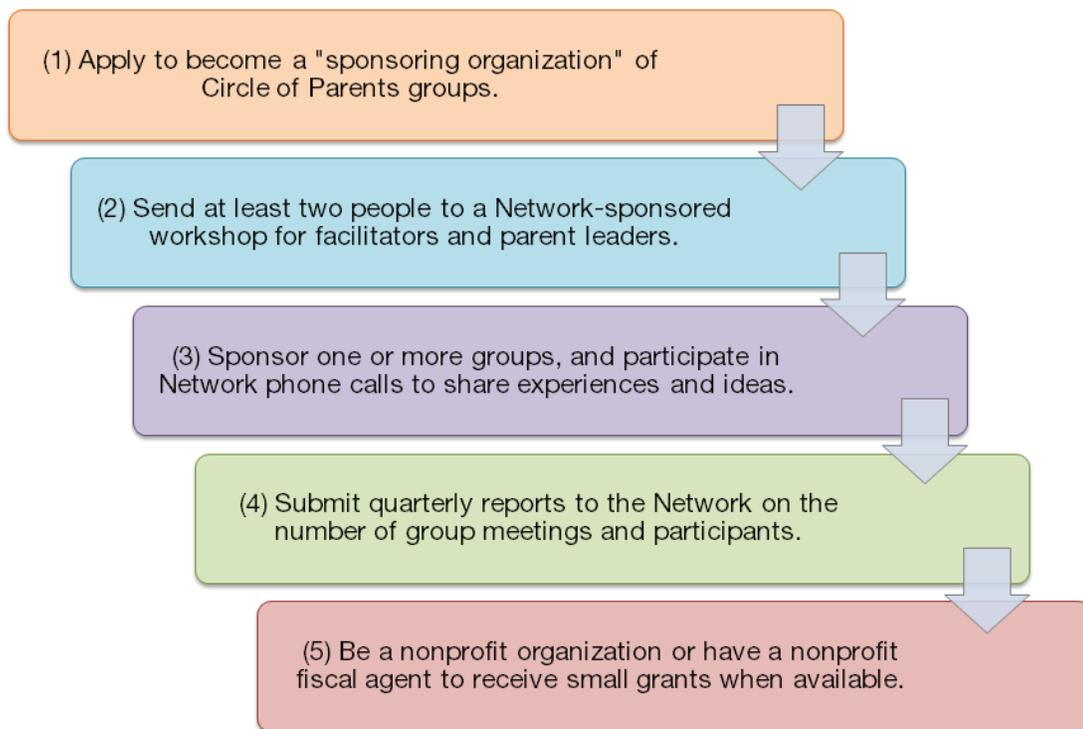
People might attend Circle groups in addition to therapy, but not in place of it. Group facilitators and members often have suggestions about resources members need beyond the group.

How does the WV Circle of Parents Network work?

The WV Circle of Parents Network is sponsored by TEAM for West Virginia Children, a Huntington-based nonprofit organization. TEAM receives funding from the state Department of Health and Human Resources to help organizations start and sustain groups.

The Network has two co-facilitators that coordinate workshops, conference calls and data collection. The Network accepts applications from new sponsoring organizations as funding permits.

Five Steps for Membership in the WV Circle of Parents Network



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Network photo gallery: <https://wvcircleofparentsnetwork.shutterfly.com>

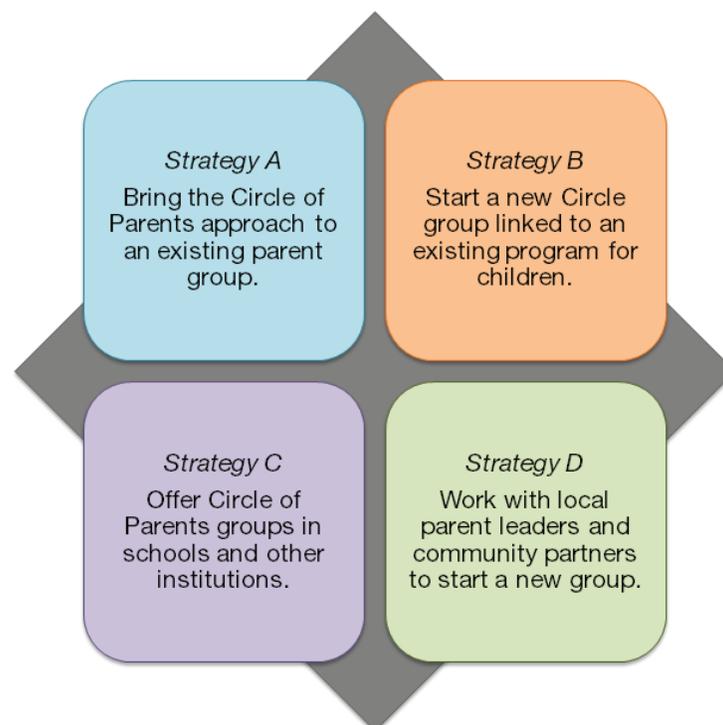


Part 2: Getting Started

How do you form a group?

Successful groups are responsive to the issues and concerns of their particular members. There is no one approach that fits all communities, but it always helps to find a core group of parents and build from there. If you keep the focus on the quality of the group experience, the number of members will grow as current members recommend the group to other parents they know. Successful Circle of Parents groups in West Virginia have used four key strategies to launch their groups.

Strategies for starting a Circle of Parents group



A. Bring the Circle of Parents approach to an existing parent group.

Becoming a Circle of Parents group is one way to make existing groups stronger and provide a network of groups to learn with and from. For example, the Starting Points Family Resource Center in Mercer County sponsored a support group for parents of children with Down Syndrome that decided to become a Circle of Parents. The Ohio County Family Resource Center did the same thing with a group it supported for parents of children with autism or other special needs.



- B. Start a new group for parents whose children attend an existing program.**
Parents whose children attend a common program may be interested in forming a group. For example, the Children’s Therapy Clinic in Kanawha County holds Circle group meetings for parents whose children attend programs sponsored by the Clinic. A group supported by Step by Step started with parents who volunteered in their public housing community’s afterschool program, and it grew to include other parents in the neighborhood.
- C. Offer Circle of Parents as an option in schools and other institutions.**
Participation in Circle of Parents is voluntary and can be offered as an option for people in schools and other institutions. For example, students at Riverside High School are required to be part of a school club, and the Upper Kanawha Valley Starting Points Centers sponsors a group for pregnant students as one of the club options. In Fayette County, the Maternal Infant Health Outreach Workers (MIHOW) program sponsors a Circle of Parents as one of the class options at the Day Report Center. The Pocahontas Family Outreach and Education Center sponsors a Circle of Parents for pregnant women and new mothers in a federal corrections facility.
- D. Work with local parent leaders and community partners to start a new group.**
Numerous organizations are starting groups from scratch, and the key is to identify and work with local parents who may know other parents who want to start a group. It only takes three or four parents to launch a group, and they will attract other parents who have similar interests or concerns. For example, Family Advocacy, Support and Training (FAST) started groups in Morgantown and Fairmont after a few parents heard about Circle of Parents and contacted FAST to help them start groups in their communities. FAST has successfully used Facebook as a way for current members to share information and to attract new members.

What do successful groups look like?

Creating a Circle of Parents group is similar to building a house. It starts with the foundation of understanding about the Circle of Parents philosophy and approach. Facilitators and parent leaders “frame” the house as they invite members and convene meetings. The walls and finishing touches are added as the group matures and grows.

It’s important to remember that this takes time! All groups go through a process, sometimes referred to as “forming, storming, norming and performing.” There may be challenges in getting the group started, or disagreements about when and where the group will meet, or struggles to figure out how to share leadership of the group.

“The unique thing about Circle of Parents is that it is truly a parent-led meeting. We talk about what is going on in people’s lives at that particular time.”

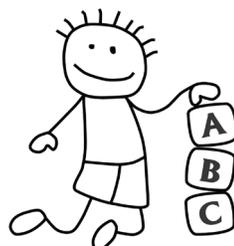
- WV Circle of Parents member



These are all normal growing pains. Start with a core group and grow from there. The following table offers guidance about what to aim for, now and over time. Further details about roles, group dynamics and how meetings work are discussed in Parts 3 and 4.

Benchmarks for Circle of Parents Groups

	Desirable	Acceptable
<i>Ownership</i>	All members share responsibility for the group and make the decisions about what happens at meetings.	All members share responsibility for the group and make the decisions about what happens at meetings.
<i>Membership</i>	Membership is open to any person in a parenting role who is able to function in the group.	Membership is open to any person in a parenting role who is able to function in the group.
<i>Leadership</i>	A trained parent leader chairs the meetings, and a trained facilitator supports the parent leader.	A trained facilitator may lead the meetings until parent leaders are identified.
<i>Meeting location</i>	Meetings are held in safe, accessible and clearly marked locations.	Meetings are held in safe, accessible and clearly marked locations.
<i>Meeting times</i>	Meetings are held weekly or bi-weekly. The more meetings members attend, the greater the benefit to both members and the group. Meetings last 60-90 minutes.	Meetings are held monthly only if this is the preference of the group, such as situations where members have to travel a long distance. Monthly meetings may last longer.
<i>Children's program</i>	A free children's program is provided if needed, based on the guidelines provided in the Circle of Parents Children's Program Manual.	The child care needs of members are addressed in some way. This can include scheduling meetings while children are in school or other programs, or providing assistance to parents in obtaining child care.





Part 3: Roles and Relationships

What does “shared leadership” mean?

Circle of Parents relies on a “shared leadership” approach, which assumes that everyone has something of value to contribute. The collective wisdom of the group is the basis for sharing information, skills and support. The facilitator’s role is to enable the group to find its own strengths, not lead it. Participants take ownership of the group, recognize and take responsibility for their own problems, serve as role models, and invite other parents to join the group.

All group members have opportunities to share and expand their capabilities. Not everyone has the interest or potential to lead a group, but every group member has something to offer, whether it is coffee-making, time-keeping or promoting the group in public. Each person is valued for his or her contribution, and the group as a whole is richer for it.

What do parent leaders and facilitators do?

The Circle of Parents model is built on team principles, with all members having equal voices. Each group has a parent leader and a facilitator who help organize and lead meetings, involve other members, and help the group grow and develop.

Parent leaders are group members who are willing to contribute an extra effort to the group and, as a result, expand their talents and leadership capacity. Co-leadership is common in groups. Parent leaders may volunteer, be elected by the group or asked by the facilitator.

Beginning tasks for a parent leader may be as simple as arriving early to make coffee and greeting group members. As a parent leader grows confidence they begin to take on more tasks. The goal is for parent leaders to eventually conduct meetings.

The facilitator supports the parent leader and helps assure the smooth functioning of the group. Depending on the structure of the group, the facilitator may help publicize meetings, arrange the meeting location, and handle paperwork. During the meeting, the facilitator helps create an atmosphere where people feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves.

The most important role of the facilitator is to support the parent leader. Through positive reinforcement, encouragement to take risks and modeling good leadership, facilitators help parent leaders and other members develop their own skills. As the parent leader and the group mature, the facilitator steps in only as needed. In many cases, the facilitator is also a parent who participates as a member of the group.

“The things I love the most is that the parents solve their own problems. We are capable and empowering each other.”

- WV Circle of Parents member



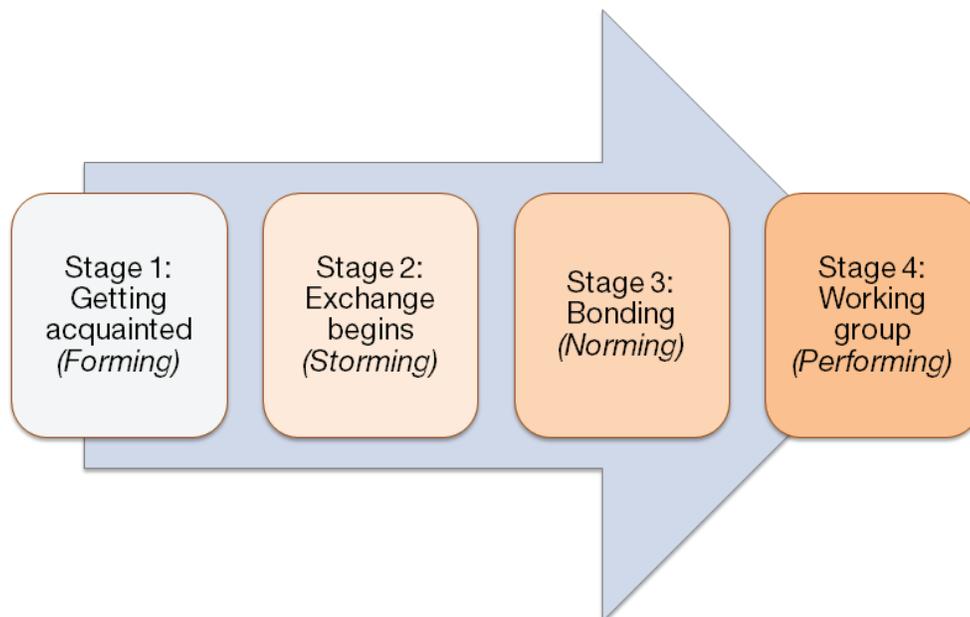
The facilitator and parent leader routinely talk before and after meetings about logistics, group process and meeting content. Frequent, open communication is key to good teamwork.

In Circle of Parents groups that provide an onsite **children's program**, designated staff (paid or volunteer) are responsible for the safety and nurturing of children while their parents are meeting in the group. For more detailed information about children's programs, see the *Circle of Parents Children's Program Manual*.

How do groups develop over time?

It helps a great deal to have a basic understanding of the developmental stages of a group. Groups go through several major phases and often move back and forth between stages. Throughout all stages it is important that the responsibility and ownership belongs to the members of the group.

Common Stages of Group Development



Stage 1: Getting Acquainted (Forming)

This is the stage where members come together. They have a desire to be accepted by the group and know that the group is safe. Serious topics are usually avoided in this stage. During this stage it is important to ask members to articulate what they expect to get out of the group. Boundaries or ground rules are established in this stage. Facilitators should provide clear leadership to develop a sense of purpose to the group and establish a framework for its members. To move to the next step each member must accept the risks.



Stage 2: Exchange Begins (Storming)

During this stage, members begin to voice individual differences. Members are learning what it is to be a part of a group setting and test the boundaries of what is appropriate for the group and what is not. It sometimes may feel like there are competitions or personality conflicts. There may be conflicts over leadership, structure, power and authority. It is important during this stage for members to be highly involved and voice their concerns to feel represented and understood. To move forward from this stage, members must move from testing to problem solving.

Stage 3: Bonding (Norming)

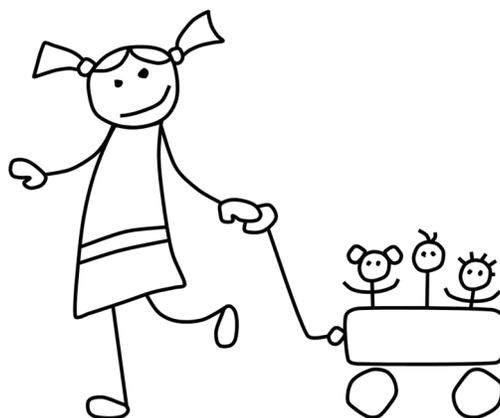
In this stage members begin to share common commitment to the purpose of the group. The parent leader should focus on achieving clarity of roles, structure and process of the group. Friendships and confidence builds. An interpersonal cohesion begins. Leadership begins to be shared. It is important in this stage that core members stay receptive to new members.

Stage 4: Working Group (Performing)

In this stage, the group is solidified. Members are actively participating in the group process in order to achieve individual and group goals. Moral is high and loyalty is strong. The group's members are focused and task-oriented. The facilitator's role is minimal. Parent leaders assume responsibility for structure, time and the organization of the group.

At some point during the lifetime of a Circle of Parents group, individuals or the group as a whole may feel that they have achieved their overall purpose. The individual may choose to move on. The group may choose to disband. It is critical to acknowledge early on that this is a normal stage of development, lest members feel they are letting down the group.

Groups close for other reasons, such as loss of a sponsor, site or other critical resources. When this happens, group members often stay in touch for ongoing support or until a new group may be formed.





Part 4: How Meetings Work

What does a Circle of Parents meeting look like?

All Circle of Parents groups have in common the seven basic elements described in Part 1 (inclusiveness, trust, respect, experience-based, parent-owned, positive parenting and shared leadership). Beyond that, Circle of Parents offers a flexible meeting structure that can be adapted to each group's preferences and circumstances.

Beginning a Meeting

Although there is no cookie-cutter way to begin a meeting, it can be helpful to create a ritual or routine to start each meeting. In the first meeting, it may be as simple as having people introduce themselves and proposing a few *agreements* or *ground rules* for the meeting. It's up to each group to decide on its meeting agreements. Some examples include:

1. Everything that is said in the group stays in the group.
2. Everyone is welcome to speak and encouraged to listen.
3. Respect each other, even when we disagree.
4. Start and end meetings on time.
5. Turn phones to vibrate or off.

Many groups use an *opening question* to help focus everyone's attention on the group's purpose. The parent leader or facilitator asks for someone to start and then goes around the circle giving all members an opportunity to share if they want to or pass if they don't. Examples of opening questions include:

- What are three things you're grateful for?
- What was the best advice you ever received?
- What are three things you're good at?
- What's one thing you'd like to change about yourself?
- How do people know when you're angry?
- What makes you laugh?

Meeting Content

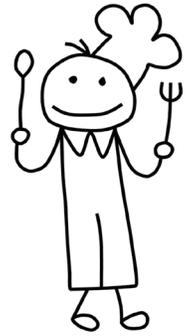
People have introduced themselves and are feeling a little more open to share. Now what do you talk about? The participants may be so comfortable with one another that they continue a conversation that has stemmed from the opening question. In most groups, it is the responsibility of the participants to generate the topic and content of a meeting. Some use *Parent Café* cards or *Parenting Tips* to start the conversation.

“The Circle of Parents group has helped me understand that I am not alone. Parenting is the hardest job that I have ever had. It helps a lot to talk to other parents who have faced some of the same things that I’m going through.”

- WV Circle of Parents member



Some groups incorporate guest speakers or parent education programs into their meetings. For example, several groups have offered CPR and first aid training into meetings. Some groups have held nutrition classes and had recipe swaps. Other groups have set goals to make positive changes in their lives. By setting goals, parents may have the opportunity to think through strategies, set milestones and find ways to support one another. A number of groups sponsor occasional social events, like cookouts and potlucks, to change the pace and to encourage both parents to attend.



Wrapping Up

A *closing question* helps people reflect on the conversation and brings closure to the meeting. It can challenge participants to think of ways to solve problems, offer support to one another, improve themselves or generate topics for future meetings. Some groups also have a box for questions and comments or hand out evaluation forms for feedback. Examples of closing questions include:

- What is one thing you'll take away from this meeting?
- How can you show your kids you love them this week?
- What is one thing you'll do for yourself this week?
- What new idea or way of thinking did you hear during the meeting?
- What is something new or different that you might try this week?

Out of respect for people's other commitments, many groups end their meetings at the agreed upon time. It's helpful to keep the room open for a half hour or so after the meeting for people who want to continue their conversations.



How do you prepare for a Circle of Parents meeting?

Once you've gone through the steps of getting a group started, there's the equally important task of maintaining the group. This is the responsibility of all members, and the facilitator and parent leader help coordinate the effort. Some key items on a meeting checklist are agenda, roles, room set-up and refreshments.



Circle of Parents groups don't typically use formal, written agendas. But there is agreement among members about when meetings start and end and how the meeting will flow. The group also decides if and when they want to schedule guest speakers or some other special event.

The facilitator and parent leader talk between meetings about how things are going with the group and what roles they will each play during the meetings. Whenever possible, the parent leader should "chair" the meeting, with the facilitator providing support as needed. The facilitator, parent leader and/or other volunteers arrive early to make sure the room is open and set up with chairs in a circle or around a table where people are facing each other.

Many groups have coffee, water and/or soft drinks available. Some also provide snacks. It's up to the group to decide what to offer, who will bring what, and how it will be paid for.



Part 5: Helpful Resources for Groups

West Virginia Circle of Parents Network is a great place for group leaders and members to share questions and ideas. Everyone who completes the training workshop for facilitators and parent leaders receives emails from the Network about monthly conference calls and other news of interest to Circle groups. A roster of current sponsoring organizations is posted on the Network's webpage at www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents.

Circle of Parents National Network has a website with information about the program, state contact people, and parenting resources at www.circleofparents.org.

West Virginia Strengthening Families is research-based strategy to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds six protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, social and emotional competence of children, and nurturing and attachment. Find more information and resources at www.strengtheningfamilieswv.org.

Our Children, Our Future Campaign is a broad-based coalition of individuals, families and organizations working together to eliminate child poverty in West Virginia. It offers valuable opportunities for groups whose members want to advocate for policies and programs that help children and families. Find out more at <http://wvhealthykids.org/> or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ourchildrenourfuturewv.

Prevent Child Abuse WV works to give children good beginnings by strengthening families and communities. This is done by implementing innovative strategies for effective programs, public engagement and sound public policy. Prevent Child Abuse WV is a chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America. Find out more about Child Abuse Prevention Month and other activities at www.preventchildabusewv.org.

Help Me Grow is a FREE referral service that connects families with critical developmental resources for their children from birth through five years. The goal of Help Me Grow is to successfully identify children at-risk and link them to the help they need. This is an especially helpful resource for Circle of Parents groups with members who are pregnant or have young children. Find out more at www.dhr.wv.gov/helpmegrow.



