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# Involving Children in Circle of Parents



West Virginia Circle of Parents Network

June 2017





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The involvement of children is an important consideration of every Circle of Parents group. First and foremost, we want to assure that no parent is excluded from participating in Circle of Parents because there is no one to care for her/his children during the meetings. In addition, involving children can provide opportunities for families to get to know each other better and for children to engage in activities that enhance their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

West Virginia has a wide variety of Circle of Parents groups in terms of size, frequency of meetings, and the needs and preferences of group members. It is up to each group to decide how child care will be addressed and how children will be supported if they are present. In some situations, the decisions about involving children are made at the time the group is being formed. In other cases, the process is more gradual, where groups take more time before making decisions about involving children.

The following are some helpful examples of the different ways Circle of Parents groups are involving children. Further guidance regarding children is included in the West Virginia Circle of Parents Group Handbook, available at [www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents/](http://www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents/).





## Upper Kanawha Valley Starting Points

West Virginia's first Circle of Parents group was started by a family resource center located in a rural Kanawha County elementary school. The center – called Upper Kanawha Valley Starting Points – also sponsored a Parents As Teachers home visiting program and had previous experience with playgroups. Adding a Circle of Parents group felt like a perfect fit.

“At the time, parents were wanting us to have more playgroups,” said center director Diane Hughes. “So I just saw it as another opportunity if they came to a Circle of Parents group for themselves while their children participated in a playgroup. Our playgroups always have a little bit of free playtime, and then we go into another hour or so of guided group activities and open-ended craft activities. They have story time, music time, and lunchtime. That gives them a little bit of an idea of what to expect when they go to preschool or kindergarten.”

Parents play a major role in shaping their Circle of Parents group and the children's playgroup. They decide how often to meet, which has been weekly during the school year, with summers off. They provide ideas for activities and snacks. They also assist the staff person who conducts the playgroup. Each member takes a turn with the playgroup about three times year.

“If you have a children's program you need to have it staffed sufficiently,” said Diane. “You need to have a good ratio between adults and children. Our current staff have had their background checks through the Americorps program that funds their positions. We have also had several volunteers who had their background checks through the school system because they volunteer with the schools. We do not leave any child alone with a volunteer, and no volunteer is allowed to assist children in the bathroom.”



Beyond the regular meetings, the group members plan special activities with their children and sometimes the whole family. “In the beginning, they wanted to plan fieldtrips with the children,” Diane said. “We had a member who had a set of twins, and she struggled with taking them out in public. We wanted to empower her to be able to do things with her children. So, we all went bowling. We went to the coalmine exhibit. We did all kinds of fieldtrips, and the other parents were there to help her.”

“Now they prefer to celebrate at the end of the school year. This year we’ve decided to rent a pool, and everybody’s going to bring a covered dish. We’ll use grant funds for hot dogs and chicken or whatever they decide for the main course.”

The social connections and support provided through Circle of Parents are immense, according to Kim Green, a parent who staffs the playgoup. “I’m not from around this area, and at first it was a struggle for me,” she said. “Being in the Starting Points program and the Circle of Parents really helped me. This has been my way of meeting people and getting resources and things that I needed in this area. I’ve made a lot of friends. That’s been a big thing to me.”



*For more information, contact Diane Hughes at [dchughes@kcs.kana.k12.wv.us](mailto:dchughes@kcs.kana.k12.wv.us), 304-595-5521.*



## Ohio County Family Resource Network

The Ohio County Family Resource Network (FRN) sponsors a Circle of Parents group for parents and caregivers of children with special needs. They hold a monthly meeting during school hours at the Children’s Museum in Wheeling. Once in a while a child attends the group, and the facilitator or parent leader engages him/her in activities at the museum while the parents meet.

FRN director Claudia Raymer is the group facilitator. As the parent of a son on the Autism Spectrum, she knows first-hand the problems that can arise when she brings him to a program that is not prepared to meet his needs.

“When I take Alex somewhere and they ask me no questions, I’m concerned,” said Claudia. “You need to be asking me is there anything we need to know? Is there anything that he really likes to do or really doesn’t like to do? For Alex, there are significant sensory issues to consider. But I know that if he is valuably engaged, you are not going to have to call me to come pick him up because he’s having behaviors.

“I think the most important thing is to get as much information as you can without turning it into this long intake form, because that’s also off-putting. Just get that basic information so that the chances are greater for success. And that goes for typical kids, too. You need to have that information.”

In addition to meetings, the Circle of Parents group sponsors three family events each year – a swim party at the YMCA, a roller-skating party at an indoor rink, and a movie party at a theatre. The group rents the facilities, which are wheelchair accessible, and adjusts the lighting and sound volume for



people with sensory sensitivity. The events typically draw a hundred or more people and have been a good way to let families know about Circle of Parents.

The events are open to any family with a child with special needs, siblings, friends, grandparents and anyone else they want to bring. “We know that kids with special needs get a social benefit from being with typical developing kids, so we always like to have typical kids there as well,” said Claudia. “And it’s good to let these typical kids see kids with all kinds of different abilities and disabilities, because that’s life. You’ve got to learn to interact with people with disabilities, so why not in a non-threatening atmosphere?”

The events expand social opportunities and connections for the whole family. “I’ve heard from so many parents that they had never been able to go skating or to a movie with their children with special needs before,” said Claudia, “or that they’d never been able to go as a whole family, or that their typical developing siblings hadn’t been able to attend these types of activities before. I really cannot say enough about the family events.”



*For more information, contact Claudia Raymer at [OhioCountyFRN@yahoo.com](mailto:OhioCountyFRN@yahoo.com), 304-232-5600.*



## Mercer County Starting Points

The Starting Points Family Resource Center in Mercer County currently sponsors three Circle of Parents groups. One group is geared to working moms, another to parents of children with Down Syndrome and a new group for LGBTQ parents. The working moms' group chooses to meet over lunch while their children are in school or childcare. The other two groups have separate, supervised activities for children while their parents meet, typically once a month for two to three hours.

“To me the trickiest part with the kids is trying to accommodate a broad age range,” said center director Tammy Neal. “If you’ve ever worked within the churches or anything like that, you know it’s kind of like doing a Sunday School, but the hard part is you may have 4-year-olds and 10-year-olds in the group. So, we try to come up with a craft or a game that’s going to please everybody. In the Down Syndrome group, we did dance a lot because they like that. In the other group, they like to do crafts. The older ones like to feel like they’re helping the younger ones.”

Tammy’s daughter Alaina has been instrumental in staffing the children’s groups since she was about 16 years old, starting with an earlier group involving children with Down Syndrome. “Alaina was very comfortable with the kids,” said Tammy. “Her cousin was one of the children in the group, along with the cousin’s siblings, so she was very familiar with them. At the first few meetings the children just stayed with us, and Alaina played with them in the group. We were meeting at a church, and there was a play area where she eventually moved with them. And then we saw how much easier it was to talk with it being that way.”





The new LGBTQ group generally has 10-12 children at the meetings, including a few teenagers. Every month, two parents and two teens supervise the children's group, with the parents taking turns. When Alaina is home from college during the summer, she provides the adult supervision so no parents have to miss the meeting. Tammy is working with the group to come up with other qualified adults who can supervise the children the rest of the year.

It's messy at times, but worth it, according to Tammy. "Just don't overthink it," she said. "You can let things grow and evolve organically, meet people where they are and go from there. That's really the beauty of it. You can make it be whatever the parents and children need from it."



*For more information, contact Tammy Neal at [tneal@mercerchildprotect.com](mailto:tneal@mercerchildprotect.com), 304-425-2710.*



## Harrison County Family Resource Network

The Harrison County FRN partners with the WV Healthy Start/HAPI Project to sponsor a Circle of Parents group specifically for breastfeeding moms. The group meets bi-monthly, with the moms bringing their infants and sometimes toddlers. The group has space in a former WIC office, where the parents meet in one room and the toddlers play in an adjoining room with no door in between, so the parents can see and respond to them as needed. In the summer, the group meets at a park that has a playground and pavilion.

“Our members want their kids to be there with them,” said group facilitator Jodi McQuillan. “I think they would rather have their own eyes on them so they can do the correcting and use the teachable moments. That way the toddlers can learn those social rules, like we need to stay quiet, and you can’t run around. So, it’s a learning environment for them. I’m going through that right now with my own daughter, so I get it.”

Jodi says the downside of this arrangement is that parents have to be more careful about what they say around their toddlers. “I can say that personally I would be more open to talk if my daughter wasn’t there,” said Jodi. “And they can interrupt conversations because you have to correct them and things like that. So, it’s not always ideal, for sure. When we’re at the park where the kids are at the playground we can be a little bit more open.”



*For more information, contact Jodi McQuillan at  
Jfleshman@hsc.wvu.edu, 304-376-0086.*



## Monongalia County Family Resource Network

The Monongalia County FRN has collaborated with members of the Sudanese community in Morgantown to start a Circle of Parents group that involves children. FRN director Beth Elyard brought Kholoud Sharif and Batuol Kheiri to a facilitator training workshop sponsored by the West Virginia Circle of Parents Network in 2016.

The two mothers liked the Circle of Parents approach and decided to form a group. Their group meets in the evening every 3-4 weeks in the home of a group member. There are about a dozen families involved, and the group continues to grow by members telling other people about it.

Group members bring children ranging in age from toddler to pre-teen. The older children look after younger children, and the parents look out for each other's children. The children spend their time together in a separate room in the home, doing things of interest to them, such as watching a movie and using PlayStation. The mothers bring food and snacks to share with each other and the children.

Kholoud's and Batuol's families are helping build a sense of community in many ways beyond Circle of Parents meetings. For example, Kholoud and Batuol have become very knowledgeable about services and resources available to families in the Morgantown area, which they share with other families. In addition, the fathers take the children to play soccer on Sunday afternoons, including the children whose fathers are away. Beth said the rapport that Kholoud and Batuol have with other families has made it possible for them to help families that Circle of Parents would not have been able to reach otherwise.



*For more information, contact Beth Elyard at  
[frn@unitedwaympc.org](mailto:frn@unitedwaympc.org), 304-296-7525.*



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**West Virginia Circle of Parents Network**

*LaCrisha Rose, Network Coordinator*

blueeyes080882@yahoo.com

304-410-5888

[www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents/](http://www.teamwv.org/circle-of-parents/)

