

INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

Over the years, Paul Mavromatis has worked with many families who have a child with a disability.

Today he draws on his experience in facilitating parent support groups to explain the benefits of joining these groups and what parents can expect from being part of them.

WHY JOIN A PARENT SUPPORT GROUP?

Hi, I'm Paul Mavromatis.

Parent support groups bring together parents who face similar challenges in raising and supporting a child who has a disability.

They provide a gathering that offers mutual support and understanding. Parents over the course of time build resilience, share knowledge of resources and emotional coping and develop strategies and activities which help them best support their child and themselves.

Parent groups offer the opportunity not only to receive support but, through sharing of all this knowledge and experience, to support each other.

Contact with others who are 'in the same boat' can be a revelation for many parents. The internet, for example, is a tremendous resource for linking people all over the world, who share the same issues and concerns.

Likewise, face to face support groups give parents a regular opportunity to share experiences that friends and family, no matter how empathetic they are, may not be able to truly understand.

The group work process affirms the knowledge and skills of each parent. The group recognises each parent as the expert in understanding their own child's needs

It can be an empowering experience for families, bringing them the confidence to be more assertive. As one parent told me recently, 'I let family and friends know about my needs and encourage them in ways that are helpful to me'.

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However, formal support groups aren't for everyone.

There are many reasons why parents may be reluctant to join a group.

They might fear that others will judge them harshly.

They may feel, that they will have to revisit painful emotions that they have safely filed away somewhere deep within themselves.

Perhaps they are a private person and may prefer to keep to themselves or they may have had a previous group experience that was not positive.

Preconceptions about what the group might be like may also be off-putting.

Finally being part of a group may sound like more hard work and yet another demand on their time and energy. These are all valid parental perspectives about groups and, again, I acknowledge and accept that groups are not for everyone.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

A group ideally comprises about 6–8 parents to enable everyone to be heard. There are usually one or two professional facilitators who ensure people feel comfortable and safe in the group and to facilitate the communication process.

Confidentiality and respect for the opinion of others is a foundation block for each group.

The first session is a 'getting to know you' session so that all group members get to know about the other parents and their families and feel less like strangers and more like friends who can confide in each other.

Sessions after that may include issues that parents have identified as topics they would like to discuss or there may be set topics. These may include things like where and how to locate further support and services or how to deal with daily living situations such as managing challenging behaviours or difficulties with therapy and schooling.

Here's what some parents had to say about their experience of participating in a support group:

'In my everyday life few, if any, understand the stresses that I go through. I don't really bother telling people anymore. The people in the group were great and I felt really understood and supported.'

'I got so much information.'

'I felt a bit sad for some of the others, but I also found that I had information that was helpful to them and it felt good to be able to be supportive to other parents.'

'I used some of the ideas I picked up from the group to help me get a better deal for my child at school.'

'I realised after our talk in the group that I need to recharge my batteries too sometimes, so I give myself a little more space these days.'

'I'll really miss our times together.'

Many Australian disability services offer group programs for families who have a child with a disability. Check with your provider or phone the CP Helpline on 1300 30 29 20.

CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation website - www.cpfoundation.com.au