

Suggestion Circle

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Parents come to support group for a variety of reasons. Some are desperate for help with their child's behavior. Others are frustrated at the lack of understanding and support in the community. A few might just be feeling lonely or isolated and just need the company of others who know what they are going through. Almost everyone comes with at least one serious problem or issue for which they would like to find solutions.

Too many times, the group discussion turns into a complaining contest. One person may try to dominate the discussion; another may be too timid to speak up, when perhaps that is the person who has a workable solution. Some parents may become judgmental, hostile, or inappropriate in their eagerness to solve someone else's problem. This leads to feelings of discomfort, discouragement, or defensiveness. This is not what the parents are seeking. What they really could use is the understanding and support they came for in the first place.

Here is a technique that was given to me by a wise mentor several years ago, when I was new at leading support groups. It is called "Suggestion Circle." This is how it works.

When a parent has expressed a serious issue or problem and others feel compelled to help provide a solution, announce that you are going to try this "Suggestion Circle" for the parent.

Everyone sits in a circle facing each other, close enough to speak in a gentle voice. Give the parent having a problem (PHP) a pad of paper and a pen. Ask the PHP to state the problem as clearly as possible. Give the group a few minutes to ask questions just to clarify the information (the age of the child, the level of disability, current situation). Sometimes there are two or three problems all rolled into one situation. Help the PHP identify which is the priority problem to be addressed. Once the problem is stated and understood by everyone, you can begin. Here is the process:

1. The parent with the problem (PHP) remains quiet, does not speak or answer any questions, only listens and writes down all the suggestions of the others.
2. No one can give any indication, by word or gesture, of approving or disapproving any suggestions, including the PHP. Each person must remain without judgment.
3. The others take turns starting with the person to the left of the PHP. The person sharing can hold a "Talking Stick" to show they have permission to speak. The person can say "This is what I might try..." and can make one suggestion in one simple statement. Then that person passes the Talking Stick to the next person on the left.
4. Each person can make only one suggestion at a time – one suggestion only – each time their turn comes around. They may need to be reminded of this rule.
5. If someone does not have a suggestion, they say, "Pass."
6. The others can pass every time, or give a suggestion every time. The turn goes from one to another, around the circle, as long as there are suggestions to be shared.
7. After everyone in the circle says "Pass," that means all the suggestions have been voiced.
8. Ask the PHP if there are suggestions that might be tried during the time before the next support group meeting. Ask the PHP to commit to trying a few of the suggestions and reporting back to the group at the next meeting.

This method brings many solutions in a short time, with feelings of satisfaction by all.