

## What's A Support Group, Anyway?

If you're new to homeschooling, the term "support group" may conjure up visions of people sitting in a circle with discussion being led by some type of mental health professional. "Hi, my name is Gertrude, and I'm a homeschooler." Time for a vernacular adjustment!

Homeschool support groups, like clouds, take many shapes and forms, each group changing to meet the needs of its members. They come in more flavors than Baskin Robbins' ice cream. One size doesn't fit all, either. While some groups seem to work more harmoniously than other groups, there is no single group that makes 100% of its members happy 100% of the time. Nor do 100% of the members take 100% advantage of all the wonderful opportunities available to them through their support group.

Is joining a support group something you need to do? What types of groups are there? What type should you join? How will you find one? What if none exists in your area that meets your needs? What can you expect from a support group? What will be expected of you?

Slow down! We'll try to get to all that, but first, let's take a brief look at a few general categories under which support groups can fall.

### The National Group

NHEN is an example of a national support group. Its membership consists of homeschoolers from all across the US of A. (We even have overseas members!)

A national group's focus is to serve homeschoolers in all areas of the country. The services provided by such a group varies from group to group and can be as specialized as providing a network for a particular ethnicity, religion, or curriculum or as broad as providing general information about homeschooling.

### The State Group

State groups seem to share some commonalities. They usually stay abreast of legislative happenings in the state they serve; they usually try to keep updated listings of support groups in the state; and they usually work to keep homeschoolers informed about conferences and conventions around the state. Geographical borders, of course, determine a state group's outreach, although many state groups willingly cross state lines in joint efforts to help strengthen and empower homeschoolers.

From there, state groups begin to differ in scope. Some state groups provide publications of interest to members only while others provide publications that any state homeschooler, even non-members, might be interested in reading. Some are quite formal with a board of directors, non-profit status, and incorporation. Some are more informally structured. Some are quite exclusive, serving only homeschoolers that meet specific criterion; others are happy to include any homeschooler requesting information or services the group provides. Some state groups serve as umbrellas for affiliated groups that exist under the larger group's bylaws and guidelines. Some state groups are networks of homeschooling parents trying to establish connections across the state in order to unite homeschoolers within its borders.

### The Local Group

Here's where the nitty gritty support really comes in. Homeschooling families get together to play, to learn, to visit, to share, to strengthen each other's conviction to homeschool, to socialize, to help, to camp, to buy and sell, to picnic, to write, to read, to talk, to do all those things that people do together and to do those things with others who have chosen similar educational paths for their children. It gives the kids opportunities to be with and form friendships with other homeschooling kids. It's parents networking and forming support systems with other homeschoolers.

Here are some things a support group might offer its membership:

- Directory (way to contact other homeschoolers!)
- Meetings (with or without speakers)
- Park days
- Play groups
- Field trips (possibly with group rates)
- Learning co-ops
- Child care co-ops
- Organized sports
- Special interest clubs (chess, photography, foreign language, insects, etc.)
- Reading groups
- Theatre groups
- 4-H
- Scouts
- Spelling bees/geography bees
- Mom's/Parent's nights out

- Used book sales/swaps
- Newsletter
- Legislative information
- Year books
- End-of-year recognition ceremony, graduations, and other school-ish milestone markers
- Email lists through which members communicate
- Much more

No, not all groups offer all of these things. Remember, groups come in all shapes and sizes. Here are some examples:

### **The Very Informal Group**

This may be no more than a regularly scheduled park day. There may be no dues, no newsletter, and no official leaders - just a group of homeschooling families who enjoy getting together for some relaxed social time. Many homeschooling groups begin with this informal structure. A variation of this might be a group that does a small newsletter and maybe one or two field trips per month.

### **The Moderately Structured Group**

This group usually has some sort of leader or coordinator - maybe even a small group of them - that may change periodically and serve to keep the group in adherence to a mission statement. Park days and, perhaps, regular roller skating days remain the backbone of this group. The newsletter is informative and the main form of communicating activities and announcements to members. It may also have a member directory and a phone tree. Regular membership meetings might be only quarterly or semi-annually. It may have written guidelines to which members are held. Members volunteer to coordinate the various activities of the group as the need arises.

### **The Highly Structured Group**

In addition to a mission statement, this group probably has a constitution or by-laws governing its structure. These are usually larger groups that have grown out of smaller, loosely or moderately structured groups over time. A board of directors, elected by the membership or otherwise appointed to serve the group, meets regularly. The board members may have structured committees comprised of member volunteers who carry out the many functions of the group. The highly structured group may have non-profit (501c3) status and may even have reason to incorporate. This type of group is more likely to have a wide array of events and activities, even ceremonies. Activities that require higher degrees of coordination, like geography or spelling bees, scout troops or 4-H, are more likely to grow out of these larger groups. A newsletter and probably a website are sure to be available.

In addition to the above, there is every conceivable combination therein. Large groups with no formal structure at all, small groups that have already obtained non-profit status, medium-sized groups with no newsletter, small groups with websites, you name it! There are even support groups that are extensions of charter schools and independent study programs. Every group is as unique as the members of which it is comprised and an entity unto itself.

Every kind of group has benefits and drawbacks that make them appealing, yet less-than-ideal. We know this to be true of any group or club, not just homeschool groups. Some people really do not like large, highly structured groups. Others enjoy the plethora of creative events and activity options that emerge from larger groups. Homeschoolers who enjoy the challenge of advocating homeschooling in political arenas may well enjoy the clout and backing they can garner from a large, highly visible support group. Someone with small children, new to homeschooling, and a bit overwhelmed by the prospect, may prefer a weekly afternoon at the park to field trips and monthly group meetings with speakers.

### **Here's one more factor to consider:**

#### **Inclusive vs. Exclusive Groups**

Without dissecting terminology, the inclusive support group is open to all homeschoolers (perhaps limiting to a particular geographic area), whereas the exclusive group is open only to those who fit a particular religion, ethnicity, curriculum, parenting style, or other established criteria.

In and of themselves, exclusive groups are not a bad thing at all. Technically speaking most homeschool support groups are exclusive in that their memberships are limited to homeschoolers. Where the problem lies is when a lonely homeschooler is in need of human contact with other homeschoolers but is unable to find that connection because they do not fit snugly into a strictly defined mold. Inclusive groups are essential for that very reason.

Let's take a look at one more type of group, one that has evolved out of the technological revolution: Online Support for Homeschoolers

by Carol Moxley