Virtual Parent Groups

Parent groups are one way to continue your strength-based relationships with families. Below are some considerations, ideas and strategies for implementing virtual parent groups.

Thinking about offering virtual groups? Here are some things to consider:

- Ensure virtual services are allowable within your model or program setting.
- Confirm program staff have access to a reliable internet connection and proper equipment—such as computer, webcam and headset—at home or in the office. If not, consider investing in a hotspot or providing necessary equipment. Access to a strong internet connection and equipment will maintain the flow of the session and maximize participant engagement.
- Contact the curriculum developer to find out if an online adaptation is available.
  - Most curricula developers have adapted or are working quickly to adapt their learning objectives and activities to virtual services.
  - Verify if you should adjust the length of each session. For example, if in-person sessions were 2 hours per day you may consider 1 hour per day, twice a week, virtually.
  - Consider the maximum number of participants per virtual session. For instance, 12 to 15 may be too many, so consider 8 to 10 or even 6 to 8 so all have time to share in meaningful discussions.

Planning to offer virtual groups? Think of these next steps:

- Select a platform to use for group virtual services that best meets your program needs.
- Consider costs and benefits of using a free versus fee-based platform.
  - Free accounts typically have a time limitation.
  - Some platforms offer access to virtual breakout rooms. These may be useful if something unexpected happens during a session and you need to meet privately with a participant.
  - Some platforms offer the option of assigning an alternative host. This may be useful if one facilitator must tend to individual participant needs during the group session.

Group Facilitation Tips

- If possible, have a main facilitator and co-facilitator determine each of their roles.
- Have contact numbers for all participants available to you to assist with technology and login, as needed.
- Start the group with a fun, interactive icebreaker to get everyone loosened up and ready to interact.
- Monitor the chat and bring forth questions and comments, when appropriate.
- Have the names of the participants' children at hand during the group. When referencing their children, use their names instead of saying "your child." This helps to strengthen your relationship with the participants.
- Change the pace of the session every 15 minutes.
- Show videos during the sessions.
- Engage parents in an activity.
- If funding allows, send parents incentives for participation. These should be age-appropriate and educational, as well as fun. Mail incentives to them with a personal note.
- Incorporate the incentive into the curriculum, if possible.

- Ensure all program staff are trained in using the platform. It's important to feel comfortable:
  - Enabling and disabling your microphone and video.
  - Monitoring the virtual chat room for questions or comments (if available).
  - Sharing your screen, videos, and other resources (if you have the option).

Ready for your first virtual session?

- Call each parent to welcome them to the group, assess their needs, and learn about the family. Having a conversation before the first group session is an important step in building and maintaining strengths-based relationships with parents and families.
- Plan the session and related activities.
- Test the technology and equipment.
- Send the links, announcements, and reminders to the parents. Day-of reminders will decrease no-shows and improve attendance. Consider including a brief video of the group facilitator introducing him/herself and welcoming the participants to the group. This may decrease parents' anxiety about the group and improve attendance rates.

During your first virtual session:

- Spend time going over the technology; do not assume participants know how to use the platform. This is time well spent and will reduce wasting time in future sessions. Ask participants to practice:
  - How to mute/unmute the microphone. What does muting mean for their experience? (i.e. They can hear you, but you can't hear them.)
  - How to start/stop sharing their video. What does sharing their video mean for their experience? (i.e. They can see you, but you can't see them.)
  - How to post in the chat room (if available). Explain the difference between a private message to the facilitator and a public message to the entire group.
  - Note: You can use these technology practice sessions as icebreakers to help people feel more comfortable with the group. For example, you could ask people to practice unmuting themselves by sharing a fun fact.
- Brainstorm with participants to develop group agreements. These may include:
  - Asking everyone to find a comfortable space that allows for private discussions. Parents may share sensitive topics and struggles.
  - Asking parents to mute themselves when not speaking to minimize background noise.
  - Establishing breaks if the session will be longer than 1 hour. Assure parents it's okay if they need to stop sharing their video to tend to their children's needs.
- Review program expectations:
  - Discuss required number of sessions for successful completion and schedule.
  - Discuss make-up sessions (if available).

After each session:

Call each participant and assess their satisfaction, needs, and progress. Checking in weekly will provide an opportunity for you to tailor upcoming group sessions to address the parents' interests.

Adapted from resources for the Brazelton Touchpoints Center Virtual Service Delivery series