Objectives

What are you hoping to accomplish with your Pathways gathering group? Objectives might include creating community, increased visibility, networking, educating on options, and educating with a focus on a particular philosophy or set of options. Educating on options by putting information in front of parents is different from a focus on one particular approach to parenting (for example, vaccines). Either is an acceptable focus for your group, and will attract and maintain different attendees.

Here’s an example:
A mom attends a gathering group on the recommendation of a friend. This mom experienced a cesarean birth and breastfeeding challenges and is seeking community. If the focus of the group is to promote natural family living, she may be the recipient of unintentionally off-putting remarks from attendees or even facilitators, such as, “That wouldn’t have happened if you had used a midwife and had a home birth. That’s the cascade of intervention. Start planning your VBAC now.” While potentially accurate and sound advice, this particular mom is not at all ready to hear it. She leaves feeling judged and upset, taking much of what she heard at the gathering as “out there” and offensive. She does not return. This mom is a match for a group that explores options and is largely focused on community-building. A year of processing and exploration later, this same mom might be seeking a group that is more agenda-based. Not every group will work for every person.

No chosen focus will meet the needs of every parent. You’ll have the most success when you identify your priorities and market to the people who are most likely to be a match for what you’re offering. Participants will come back for more when they feel they are in the right place.
Objective | Reason for objective | How you will meet it
--- | --- | ---

Target Audience

Who do you envision attending your group? Are they fresh parents or experienced? Do they live a particular lifestyle? Eat a particular way? Are they chiropractic patients? Do they make particular parenting choices, such as natural birth and not circumcising?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your target attendee</th>
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<tr>
<td>Where do they live?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where are they in their parenting journey?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do they share lifestyle choices?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are they looking for?</td>
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Setting the Structure of the Group

Now that you know who will be attending your group, it’s time to begin to build it.

- *Where will you hold your group?* Will it be held in your waiting room? If so, will it be during patient hours or down-times? Each has its benefits. During patient hours you’ll have a stream of people coming through, so you can market in real-time. You’re more likely to recruit spontaneous attendees. On the downside, it doesn’t allow much for private sharing, which is the benefit of offering the group during downtimes. There may be extra distractions that make it hard to get any momentum going. Will you use tables? Chairs and open space for play?

THOUGHTS ON LOCATIONS:


DESCRIPTOR TARGET ATTENDEES:

- *How often will the group meet?* More frequent meetings (monthly or weekly) foster relationship-building and momentum for the group to build. They also require more time, in-person, answering logistical questions and promoting the group. Quarterly meetings have more of a seminar-like feeling to them. Not as much intimacy built, but less work goes into them. These can be challenging in terms of community building and building a base of attendees. If people miss a meeting, it’s half a year before they re-enter the group.
Tying in With the Community

Take a deep breath and dedicate time to exploring offerings in your target community. I’m not talking a quick google search here. I’m talking about digging deep. Find blogs that offer suggestions to parents in the community and hit all the links. Conduct searches. Change your keywords and search again. Record this information. You will be coming back to it. How long will this take? It depends upon your familiarity with the process. It may take you a few hours or twice as long as that. Either way, it’s a worthwhile investment.

As the facilitator for a new Pathways group in Philly, I conduct this research for my group on an ongoing basis. What am I looking for?

- *I’m looking to see what is offered.* What is being offered? Is it free or paid? Ongoing or six-week sessions? Is it for a targeted age group or all parents? What are the qualifications of the facilitator?

- *I’m looking to see where they are offered.* Parents are hoping to find support close to home. Develop a sense of what is available within a reasonable commuting time. It’s helpful to know what’s perhaps a bit further away, but within reach for families who need it. Part of helping parents to resource is being the person who knows where those resources are.

- *I’m looking to see when they are offered.* When I did my search, I printed out a blank month’s calendar and added all the events I could find, including times and locations. Experience has shown me that Wednesdays are a great day to offer support groups. They are rarely rescheduled due to holidays and long weekends and have always felt like a great fit. Experience has also shown me that I am not unique in this conclusion. One of my objectives in creating a calendar of offerings is to see how my group potentially balances present community offerings. If I choose Wednesday from 10-noon (which I did, by the way ; ) without looking at the full picture, I am helping neither myself nor the community. If my group is at the most popular time, I may be perceived as competition rather than a companion to other parent-related businesses, and lose the opportunity to network. I also am diluting my potential attendee-group. Parents are more likely to go with the sure thing that has a reputation than to take a chance on my new group. The idea is to gather all you can information-wise, and make an informed choice.
Facilitating the Group--Skills and Strategies

Take a moment to reflect upon classes or groups that you’ve participated in. What it was about certain experiences that helps them stand out? Generally, these responses are predictable. A topic that interests you makes a difference. Let’s assume that your self-selecting audience of parents is interested in the information you have to offer. Pathways generates discussion guides available to facilitators with each season’s issue. You may also choose to generate subject matter based on your objectives. So topic-wise you should be in a good place.

You’ve created the opportunity, actively marketed...what’s left then? A sizable chunk. What’s left is creating a safe, welcoming, and engaging experience for those who attend. This is the part that will have people coming back and spreading the word. Going back to adult learning events you’ve enjoyed in the past, consider this: If the subject matter is interesting but the presentation is monotonous or you feel emotionally unsafe, can you absorb the material in the same way? Of course not. You’d skip it if you could, and people will skip your group if this is their experience.

Being a facilitator, then, is not just a willingness to spread the word, create marketing materials, and welcome attendees with snacks on the day of the event. Group facilitation is a skill and with any, can be improved through education and practice. Some characteristics of skilled facilitators include:

- Non-judgmental and accepting through not just words but actions as well
- Respect of attendees, to include confidentiality
- Avoiding over-sharing of our own stories; allowing participants to come to their own conclusions.
- Practicing self-care
- Effectively communicating boundaries for both oneself and the group
- Skills for managing challenges: differences of opinion, participants who over-share, groups who choose not to participate, and others.
- Ability to keep others comfortable and even entertained

Here are a few links to helpful information on starting and leading groups. Not every aspect will be relevant, but they contain strategies and suggestions based on a wealth of experience:


Not super in terms of instruction and dated powerpoint, but good info

http://www.parentcompanion.org/article/print/tips-to-start-a-parent-support-group

After reading through this section and the links above, reflect upon where you are as a facilitator. If you are hiring someone to lead your group, that person should also take some time to consider the following:

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<th>Do I have experience in leading groups?</th>
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<td>In leading groups in the past, have I been mindful of the points above?</td>
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<td>Where are my strengths in this area?</td>
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<td><strong>Where do I have room for growth?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is my plan for improving my skills in group facilitation?</strong></td>
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Marketing--Promoting Your Group

Here’s where your research on parenting support options pays off in yet another way. Remember the resources you compiled back when you were choosing your times and locations? That calendar and resource list of events you created? They are the launching point for marketing your group. Reach out to each, using email, phone calls and personal visits as appropriate. Ask about their offerings. Build relationships with individuals rather than solely posting on websites. Explore birthing options in your community and reach out there as well. Early parenting professionals--doula, childbirth educators, lactation professionals, nanny agencies, daycares, boutiques--all of these hold potential as networking opportunities.

Here’s what that prep work looks like:

- **Begin by choosing keywords for the location of your group.** For example, if your group is in a city narrow it down to the specific part of the city for a starting point. If you’re outside of a city, use the name of the town and also search by county or province. Next, choose your keywords. Generally “name of location birth community” is productive. So is “parenting name of location”. Or “parenting support name of location”.

- **Compile the information in a manner that will be useful to you.** This will differ depending on how your mind organizes things. If you have the technical skills, you could enter them all into a spreadsheet as you go. Others will benefit from cutting and pasting results into a Word document and then creating a spreadsheet as time allows.

- **Consider what information you want to save:** name of business/contact person/services offered/website/email/phone number? How do you want to categorize these? Next, plug them all in. When you’ve created this, you have two things: a resource list for parents and your potential marketing targets. Prioritize based on prior relationships, overlapping priorities, and location.

- **Create a basic marketing plan.** Consider what means you will use to reach out to your chosen targets. Will you email? Stop in? Make a follow up call? Meet for coffee? Some combination of all of these is likely your best strategy.
Great as your group is, people won’t attend if they don’t know about it. Actively marketing is an essential ingredient to the success of any venture. Consider the list you’ve created above. Which of those professionals or businesses will be your starting points for getting the word out? Collect your thoughts below, create an actionable plan, then act on it! You’re almost there!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of business/professional</th>
<th>Reason for marketing to them (working relationship, close-by, etc)</th>
<th>Strategy for marketing to this business/professional. Email? Walk-in? Coffee? Phone call? Follow up?</th>
<th>Reasons for choosing this strategy.</th>
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The Facilitator

Options abound here. Where do you as the doctor have the time or inclination to commit? If you want to lead the group but don’t have the time to market, you can pay someone else to do the business-part and you enjoy time interacting with the parents. You might lean toward the business end of things or already have someone in place, in which case, you can hire someone to come in and lead the groups themselves. Alternatively, you can source it all out and know that your commitment is creating community for families. Try one out, and make changes as appropriate. There is no one answer here.

Whether the facilitator is yourself or another, it will require the work described above. If you as the doctor do not have the time to invest in intentionally creating this group, outsource! Find a competent facilitator--someone knowledgeable and enthusiastic: perhaps a doula, childbirth educator, or parenting coach. Review with them the goals for your group, the investment it will require, and the great benefit that will be received by all. Then pay that person. Pay them to make this a priority rather than a hobby. Pay them to network with other groups. To reach out to practitioners. To have the group listed on local parenting event websites and in publications. To be the face and voice of this local support community. This can be accomplished in just a couple hours of work each week or month and will make all the difference. Give it a solid year of investment in your community before you evaluate your group. The rewards will surpass your expectations.

Time

Next to, “How can I create or revitalize my group in a manner that will thrive?” the biggest question asked is, “How much time will I have to invest in this?”

We are all varied in our efficiency and availability, rendering this a difficult question to answer. In order to lay out realistic expectations, here are the tasks and possible time frames:
• **Choosing a facilitator.** This could be yourself or an employee, or you may need to reach out to your community and meet with people.
  ○ Possible time investment: 5 minutes to a few hours

• **Creating objectives, target market, setting structure of the group**
  ○ Possible time investment: One to two hours

• **Group facilitation skills self-assessment and beginning exploration**
  ○ Possible time investment: One hour

• **Marketing research**
  ○ Possible time investment: One to five hours

• **Creating a basic marketing plan**
  ○ Possible time investment: 30 minutes to two hours

• **Initial marketing plan execution**
  ○ Possible time investment: Two to four hours

• **Ongoing marketing**
  ○ Possible time investment: One to four hours/month