

Setting up a parent group...



Feeling alone in your battle to help your gifted child?

If there isn't a group already in existence somewhere near you, then why not start one? Creating a group for parents like yourself can be an immensely helpful step for everyone involved.

Your vision

A parent organisation can be simply a small group of parents meeting informally, or a highly developed organisation with a range of functions, or something somewhere in between these two extremes.

In practical terms, it makes sense to begin with the simplest option, and let it grow from there. Other possible functions are listed below, and as you will see, they require time and energy and sometimes money. These things may happen eventually and could be what the group works towards, but (a) it never works to take on too much at once, (b) as parents, everyone in the group will be already extremely busy and may not have the time to take responsibility for a range of extra chores.

The value of the group for its members

Thus its first role is likely to be simply to provide an opportunity for the parents of gifted children to meet other parents of gifted children and to find that they are not alone in the issues they have faced. Being the parent of a gifted child can be a lonely and often a puzzling experience. There are so many questions for which it's not easy to find answers. Why is your child different from other children? Can he or she really be "gifted"? If he or she *is* gifted, why is he or she not enjoying school? What should you expect the school to do for your child? Should you expect your child to achieve highly at school? How much should you "push" your child to succeed at school? Will your child be accepted by other children? What will other parents think about your child – and about you – dare you say your child is gifted? Et cetera!

Being able to speak openly about your child as gifted and to share your concerns and also your successes in finding answers can be a deeply reassuring and constructive experience. Later, as group members get to know each other, you may be able to plan shared activities for yourselves or the children, pool resources, bring in speakers, and so on. Ultimately your group may act an advocate to help bring about better provision for gifted children in your local school or more widely.

Getting started

How will you get your group launched? Your child may have one or two gifted friends. Their parents or children are a first starting point. Have a coffee morning and suggest the idea.

Some of these parents may know of other parents who could be interested. Initially, this might provide all the numbers you want to get the group going. But eventually you will also want to grow, so discuss with your initial group holding a meeting to attract more members. If they think this is a good idea, then the next obvious thing to do is to sort out the practical details:

- Where will your meeting be held?
- What's a good time to hold a parent meeting?
- Should you provide a cup of tea/coffee and a biscuit to welcome people as they arrive? (Reality check: you will probably need to fund this yourself for this first meeting).

Plan your agenda

What do you want to have achieved by the end of this first meeting? Don't try to achieve too much at once, but some points to think about:

- Remember to record everyone's names and contact details as they arrive.
- After introductions, it could be useful to get people into small groups to brainstorm things they'd like the group to do or topics they'd like to see the group discuss.
- How often would the group like to meet? Important: set a definite date for the next meeting.
- How will the meetings be organised on an ongoing basis? Can the group elect a team of two or three people to work to plan, say, the next three meetings to get things under way? This is crucial. Otherwise it will all be left to you!

That's actually probably enough for a first meeting!

Now, how will you let other parents know about your group? One way that has worked in New Zealand and may also work for you is to ask your local schools to put an item advertising a parent meeting in their next school newsletter. If you're shy about using the word "gifted" in your notice at this early stage, use a phrase that would make you yourself prick up your ears if you heard it. Here's an example:

Have you got a child who never stops asking questions? Loads of curiosity, lots of imagination, a quirky sense of humour, you never know what's coming next? So have we! Come and join a group of parents with offspring just like yours!

10 am Monday Aug 7 at 3 Coppers Rd. Please ring Mary on 942 3576 to RSVP.

After your meeting...

The people who've agreed to plan the next three meetings need to meet to review the brainstormed list of topics. Which seem to be the most popular? Which can you readily organise? (A *tip*: it's a good idea to think fairly early on about a session examining what giftedness actually means).

How will the chosen topics be advertised to members? Do you need to send out a reminder before the next meeting? (Probably a good idea). How will you do this? Can you create an email group list or a "telephone tree"? Who will do this?

Once your group gets under way, you might want to promote it a little more widely. Your local newspaper may have a free local events column – these do get read – or might even be prepared to run a short story on this. (*A tip*: it's not a bad idea to write your own media release – papers are often happy to publish something that comes already written requiring no effort on their part. This is a good way to make sure what appears in print is accurate! Make sure you include your name and contact information).

Money

The question of finance is a tricky one. There are inevitably costs in running a group like this. In the beginning, these costs might be negligible – possibly just tea or coffee when they arrive.

If you have a speaker, a greater cost may be involved. Your members need to know in advance that there will therefore be an entry fee. You also will need to ensure enough people are coming to cover these costs, which means someone will need to take bookings. This could be one of your planning team, or another parent might take this on as their specific responsibility.

As the group grows and takes on other functions, there will come a time when it will need a membership fee. Such a fee requires someone to take responsibility for the collection of those fees and all the bookkeeping that involves. However by the time the group gets to that point, it should have evolved a proper committee structure.

Speakers

When the group does decide to invite an outside speaker, someone who is an expert in the field, points to cover include:

- Does the speaker expect a fee? Most people will come for nothing to speak to parents but others are dependent financially on being paid for such engagements. Check this out in advance before you actually book the speaker.
- Check whether the speaker needs accommodation or travel costs.
- Check whether he or she needs any equipment that you will be expected to supply
- Give a very clear time limit for his or her delivery. Questions and discussion are in addition to this, but also need to have a time limit.
- Have someone prepared to introduce the speaker and to thank him or her at the end.
 - That person can also tactfully act as timekeeper to ensure that everyone, including the speaker and parents with babysitters, gets away on time.
 - If you're not paying your speaker a fee, it's a nice gesture to give them a small thank-you gift. Flowers are often chosen, but if your speaker is travelling, flowers can actually be awkward (and expensive to buy). Nice toiletries, such as a quality hand-cream attractively packaged, can be a very acceptable alternative; a bottle of wine is another popular alternative.

Thinking about committee structure

When the group has reached a stage where it has a range of functions and needs a proper elected committee to manage its activities, then all the usual procedures for setting up and

running such a committee will come into action. You will almost certainly find your existing members include several with plenty of experience in these procedures. If not, there is information on the internet and libraries generally have books which deal with this topic. But you will want to keep it simple. The essential roles are the traditional three:

- (a) a chairperson to keep meetings on track
- (b) a secretary who keeps simple records of decisions made
- (c) a treasurer who keeps careful account of all financial matters.

There may be other roles that emerge as your group grows, but for now, these are the key ones.

However, like all organisations, parents' groups need to think about group maintenance – how will they continue to attract members and to let people know about their functions? A group might develop a newsletter to help with this, or tap into other PR sources, such as those mentioned earlier. However it is done, this is a vital aspect of effective organisation and something you will need to bear in mind.

Other possible functions for the group

The organisation may remain simply at the informal group level for quite some time, but sooner or later, members are likely to seek to use their collective experience to expand the activities of the organisation. It's sensible to take one step at a time, but ultimately the organisation could have a number of roles. For example:

- Providing workshops which inform and educate the parents themselves about giftedness and its implications for learning and for emotional and social development, and about the many associated issues that arise – eg how to decide whether a child is gifted, selecting a school, what one should expect of a school, what to do when one child is gifted but a sibling is not, helping the child at home, children who are “twice-exceptional” – gifted but also with a condition such as dyslexia – and so on.
- Providing a member to act as a “support person” when a parent needs to talk to a school and is apprehensive about doing so on their own.
- Running weekend and holiday activities for the children themselves.
- Running occasional residential camps with a special focus (eg a camp with a focus on archaeology or creative writing).
- Providing support for programmes in schools (eg somewhere in the online course I quoted parents who had special professional skills and who had very usefully come in to take a session with my gifted programme children – one parent was a vet, for example).
- Developing a newsletter and perhaps, long-term, a magazine to share information about giftedness and news about events and activities; one of the functions of this would be to help build membership.
- Making representations to Government on issues related to gifted children.

This is not a complete list of all the possibilities, but it gives some indication of how, over time, the organisation can grow from being an informal group to a body with some wider influence.

Children's activities

Eventually, the group might also want to provide activities for children, geared specifically to the types of topics that appeal to gifted children.

It needs to be stressed that this is NOT a gifted learning programme – that is quite different and involves eligibility criteria, regular attendance, a planned programme over a period of time, appropriately qualified teachers, and evaluation of the child's responses and progress.

The sorts of activities organised by a parent group require none of these things, except sometimes expert people to take a particular activity. The purpose of these activities is simply to allow the children to meet and enjoy the company of other "like minds" while engaging in interesting activities they might not normally have a chance to access. For example, one set of holiday activities included an artist who took a hands-on session showing children interested in art how to paint like the ancient Egyptians, another person who taught hieroglyphics, a scientist who got the children involved in finding out what tiny creatures live in and under the soil, a trip "behind the scenes" at the museum, and so on.

How can such activities be organised?

One model which has worked very successfully in New Zealand for many years is the "Play Centre" model. Although it is designed for preschoolers and has nothing to do with gifted programmes, nevertheless it provides a good organisational structure which can be used by other parent groups.

Play centres provide a venue where young children have an opportunity to work with a wide variety of resources chosen for their combination of high interest and learning relevance. For example, there are lots of jigsaws, construction equipment, painting materials, measuring and weighing equipment (in various settings, such as a kitchen corner and a sandpit), books to read from, dress-up materials for dramatic play, and so on.

But what's interesting and useful about play centres is the structure for the parents. Every mother (and these days often fathers too) is expected to be a "parent-help". This means firstly that every mother takes part in a short course run by the play centre which teaches them about child development at this age. Then every mother is expected to take her turn on a rostered basis as one of the parent-helps at the session her child attends. While she is being a parent-help, she is actively using the knowledge gained from the course to observe and assist children in their learning experiences. Even those mothers who are not parent-helps on the day are encouraged to stay anyway. All the parent-helps – in other words, all the parents with children at the centre – are involved in regular meetings to discuss what is happening at the centre, what is planned, how children are progressing, any decisions that need to be made, etc. Some mothers take a more advanced course and become play centre "supervisors". They have more responsibilities, and there must always be a supervisor at every session.

This structure works for several reasons. It means parents have genuine ownership of what happens at the centre. It ensures parents receive relevant education about children's needs at this stage. It builds parental confidence. It helps parents to make friends with other parents – often friendships that last a lifetime. It provides opportunities for some parents to move through to more advanced courses. It ensures the activities for the children are

constantly being monitored by people who have both a vested interest in the children themselves and some basic knowledge about the learning that is happening.

These are all important considerations for running activities for gifted children too. Participating parents need to feel they have some ownership over what happens, and they also need to take some responsibility for ensuring it all runs effectively. The play centre model suggests that you have a small management committee (equivalent to the “supervisors”) to take on certain specific responsibilities, but it also suggests that all parents should be able to participate in the major decision-making about what the group will do and all parents should be involved in learning, but also that all parents must accept that they have some responsibility to help with the overall running of the group.

Planning these activities requires a dedicated team of people – not a large team, but certainly a group of reliable people with the time available to take on such a responsibility. Apart from organising what is going to happen, there also need to be decisions about things like organising a venue, setting up, clearing up afterwards, and so on.

Also vitally important: very clear and firmly managed guidelines about acceptable behaviour from the children and acceptable actions a supervisor can take if a child breaks these guidelines. A not uncommon complaint is that some parents of highly persistent gifted children have basically given up and exercise little parental control. This is no more acceptable in this situation than it is at school. And clear guidelines about parents’ responsibilities. Are they supposed to stay during sessions? What are the expectations on them?

Safety matters – have emergency contact numbers for all children and also for emergency services. Have basic first-aid equipment. Make sure you know if any children have allergies, and that you are able to deal with that – as you would at school – in this situation, and make sure all parent supervisors know these things too. If the venue is not a school, check for safety considerations before confirming a booking.

Finally...

This short article has covered a lot of territory, from a coffee morning in your own home with two or three parents with a similar situation to yours right through to a fairly full-grown organisation. You might never get beyond that initial small group – and that’s absolutely fine. What matters is that you are not alone, that you have other parents to share with, that you support each other in dealing with these complex youngsters and the issues they – and you – sometimes face living in a non-gifted world. Or you may find yourself eventually becoming part of a larger organisation. That’s fine too. Both are needed, and both can make a difference, for parents and children.
