

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



Introduction & Importance

Informal support groups are a well-established way to support resilience in children and youth who have experienced abuse. Group facilitation skills that are helpful to children and youth advocates are; choose support group topics that promote resilience, choose activities that support outcomes of the program, give all group members voice, make group members feel comfortable to share, manage negative behaviors in group settings, etc.

How to Start a Support Group

Group Ratios

Before starting a group, advocates should consider how many adults will be working or volunteering for the group. ChildCare.gov states, Low child-to-adult ratios and small group sizes help ensure that the children get enough one-on-one attention from an adult who is available to take care of each child's unique needs. This responsive caregiving is extremely important to the children's social and emotional development, physical well-being, and overall learning.

This one-on-one attention helps children feel safe and secure and reduces feelings of being overwhelmed—for both children and adults. A smaller group size with enough trained adults present is easier to manage. Because adults are better able to watch and respond to a smaller group, children will be less likely to get injured or sick.

Below is a chart adapted from ChildCare.gov that provides some general recommendations from early childhood experts on ratios for adults to children in group settings. ChildCare.gov is operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human services, Administration for Children and Families, and Office of Child Care.

Chart Terms

Child-to-Adult Ratio: The number of adults who are present to teach and care for your child and the other children who are playing, eating, and sleeping together in a group is known as the child-to-adult ratio.

Group Size: The maximum number of children in a group is called the group size.

Child-to-Adult Ratio Chart

AGE	CHILD-TO-ADULT RATIO	GROUP SIZE	TOTAL NUMBER OF ADULTS NEEDED TO BE PRESENT IN A FULL GROUP
Infant (Birth to 11 months)	1 adult to 3-4 infants	No more than 6-8 infants	2 adults to 6-8 infants
Young Toddler (1 to 2 years)	1 adult to 3-6 younger toddlers	No more than 6-12 young toddlers	2 adults to 6-12 young toddlers
Older Toddler (2 to 3 years)	1 adult to 4-6 older toddlers	No more than 8-12 older toddlers	2 adults 8-12 older toddlers
Preschooler (3 to 5 years)	1 adult to 6-10 preschoolers	No more than 12-20 preschoolers	2 adults to 12-20 preschoolers
School Age (5 years and up)	1 adult to 10-12 school-age children	No more than 20-24 school-age children	2 adults to 20-24 school-age children

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



Forming the Group

When starting a support group, it is important to consider what the purpose of the group will be. There are many different reasons to start a support group, so choosing one mission or purpose can be beneficial. Examples of group purposes are peer-to-peer mentoring, resiliency, tutoring, life skills, advocacy, support or social. Many of these may be combined, for example, a group that fosters resiliency through activities would also promote social interaction for youth.

If groups are created out of a specific need from the youth in the community, it is important to consult with the youth to design the activities or programming the group offers. Once a purpose is chosen, one next step is to decide what kind of activities the group will participate in each meeting. These can vary, including social events, skill-building, social connections or training.

Recruiting Participants

Finding youth to engage in your group can be challenging, but here are some places you can start. Advertising your group in areas where youth are likely to see it, including at counseling services, local schools, or other local organizations working with youth is a good first step. If appropriate, reaching out to any of these groups may provide some information on potentially interested youth:

- Service providers working with youth
- Youth and young adults you know in the community
- Facebook groups that promote your group's goals or mission
- Youth and parent support groups in your community

Obtaining Group Spaces

- Location for meetings must be inviting and non-threatening to youth
- Transportation and/or accessibility are factors – check to see if your adult supporters can help with them
- Host organization could and should provide resources
- Have youth create decorations for their own space (creates a sense of ownership and inclusion from the beginning)
- Find furniture in a space so youth feel comfortable engaging and could possibly remain anonymous (i.e. making sure if group is at school it is not during school hours)
- Include food (if appropriate)

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



Establish Group Norms, Guidelines, etc.

Establishing group norms or guidelines in the beginning helps group participants understand, recognize, and take ownership of how everyone is expected to be in the group space. Below is an example activity of how to set up group norms.

Materials Needed

- Flipchart or large sheet of paper
- Markers

Preparation

- Before activity write NORMS on the top of the flipchart paper.

Instructions

Introductions

- Facilitator asks the whole group to answer the following, one at a time:
 - Their name, school, grade, and something else about themselves (it can be anything)

Beginning Discussion

- Facilitator has anyone answer (being mindful to not have any one person dominate the conversation):
 - What comes to mind when you think of support group?
 - What challenges might we face as a newly formed support group (meaning we have newcomers)?
 - What are some things we should learn about each other so we can work together well?
- Facilitator: We want to get to know each other and set norms that can help us work together well as a group!

Creating Norms for the Year

Facilitator explains, “We want to make sure that this space is a safe and brave environment for each of us to try new things, make mistakes, and grow because of them.”

- Facilitator asks the whole group to answer, one at a time:
 - Where is a place you feel like yourself?
- Facilitator has anyone answer (being mindful to not have any one person dominate the conversation):
 - What makes that place feel safe? What do you like about being there?
 - How do you act when you’re feeling like you can be yourself?
 - What’s it like to hang out in a place that’s the opposite of that?
 - How do you act differently when you’re uncomfortable?
 - What kinds of things do people do to make a place feel uncomfortable or awkward?
 - How would you like someone here to address those behaviors?
 - How can we behave to make this a safe and brave place where we can be ourselves?
 - Begin writing these responses on the NORMS paper
 - Ask them to clarify by asking “What does that look, sound, feel like?”

Closing

- Have all the participants sign the norms list if they agree to the norms or guidelines
- Review them at the beginning of the meeting
- Have new people review and add to norms or guidelines (if applicable) then sign them if they agree with them

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



New Members to Existing Youth Group

Start with the New Member

Before the members attend a group, advocates should try their best to meet with the protective caregiver and youth to explain the logistics of group (see example logistics below). It may be helpful if you are able to show the protective caregiver and youth the group space. If appropriate, you could offer the protective caregiver and youth to observe how group works before confirming that they wish to attend. Some advocates have had current or “alumni” youth from group talk with the advocate and interested youth about the group as well, when appropriate.

***NOTE:** ALWAYS ask the protective caregiver and youth what they would like to do and follow their lead in the ways they would like to heal.*

Example Logistics

- When and where meetings are held
- Group norms
- Purpose of the group
- Mission, values, etc. (if applicable)
- Types of topics discussed
- Types of activities to participate in
- How many people are a part of the group

Youth Group Norms Addition

In creating the norms ask the youth questions about how we should welcome new members and how we expect to act to members that join the group. To provide standards of how the group can be inclusive and welcoming to those who may want to utilize the programs services.

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



Example Activities by Age Group

When thinking of activities for groups the number one piece of advice is be **FLEXIBLE**. Having back up activities in case the group dynamic changes or the youth are not willing to participate in or do not understand the activity. Checking the developmental charts (see [Child & Youth Development](#)) might help create activities for your groups. Remember the attention spans of youth when you are creating an activity that will fit their needs.

Having a game or free time at the end of group can be helpful for the younger ages. Utilizing technology is great too; many advocates have suggested using website's like [Pinterest](#) to find support group ideas!

All activities listed in this section of the Children & Youth Advocate Manual are for you to use and edit to best fit the groups you facilitate.

Infant (Birth-1) & Toddlers (1-3)

For this age group make sure that you have plenty of volunteers/staff to help take care of the many needs of the infants. Make sure that you are PRESENT and making positive connections with the youth as a positive role model. Be sure to be engaged with the youth by talking with them and truly listening to what they say. Model the behavior you want the youth to display. Having a space that is closed off is also helpful for this age group as they are learning to crawl and walk.

Providing toys with no small pieces that they would be able to choke on is essential. The focus for this age group should be on promoting development (see [Child & Youth Development](#)) and resiliency (see [Children & Youth Resiliency](#)). A suggested activity is to provide story time with topics you want the youth exposed to. Giving the youth language to not be aggressive or passive. Another activity is to work with protective caregiver and toddler and how they interact with one another. Above all make sure the room is [child proofed](#) for safety.

[Preschooler Activity \(3-5\)](#): An emotion body mapping activity to aid children in understanding how their body reacts to emotions.

[School-Aged Activity \(5-11\)](#): A 3-session respect-peacemakers activity to build support and community around how to respect each other.

[Middle School Activity \(11-14\)](#): Help youth to understand the importance of non-verbal communication.

[High School Activity \(14-18\)](#): Have the youth think about qualities they want to have in their relationships whether it be with friends and family or with dating partners.

[Mixed Age Activity](#): Critically thinking about the people in our lives that we trust to talk to about a wide variety of topics.

[Family Activity](#): A timeline activity to show the historical journey a family has taken together.

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 11: Age Appropriate Support Groups



Resources

[A Window Between Worlds \(AWBW\)](#) (all ages): This is a scholarship program that you would need to apply for before utilizing their resources. Through Windows Programs participants are able to express feelings in a different way, empowering them to reclaim self-worth and make meaning of their journeys. As they make art — by drawing, sculpting, painting, collaging, writing and more — participant’s voices are heard and future potential is seen, often for the first time.

[Break the Cycle: Activity Guides](#) (middle school and high school): This resource offers 10 different activities to facilitate with high school aged students around domestic violence and intimate partner violence.

End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin’s New Advocate Manual: [Support Group Facilitation](#) offers further information for support groups like open or closed groups, needs assessment, screening, confidentiality, facilitation, structure, and evaluation. This resource also provides different support group manuals and other educational components. *You will need a log-in to view this resource and scroll down to MEMBER-ONLY Resources.*

[Elementary School Small Counseling](#) (K-6): This is a blog that offers small group counseling activities based on specific topics like anger management, grief, self-esteem, and much more.

[North American Council on Adoptable Children](#) has compiled information on how to start a youth network as an advocate. Including the [Ladder of Youth Engagement](#) illustrates the varying degrees of youth involvement in groups.

Wisconsin Department of Health Services’ [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#) is designed to help adult facilitators engage young people, allowing youth to serve as true leaders for programs that affect them.

[West Virginia Department of Education: School Counseling](#) (K-12): Offers group lessons for specific age ranges and a wide variety of topics. Some of the topics are anger management, divorce, grief, self-control, and self-awareness. They also provide any handouts needed for the lesson.

[Youth and Child Advocate and Educator Manual of Activities and Exercises for Children and Youth](#) This PDF has 50+ different activities from body image to sexual violence. Each activity comes with instructions that include age level, activity description, and handouts needed!

Please notify the LGBTQ & Youth Program Director, [Cody Warner](#), if ANY links are no longer working.
