

# Children & Youth Advocate Manual

## Section 11: Age-Appropriate Support Groups



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### 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 the wellbeing of the youth while achieving outcomes of the program, give all group members an opportunity to use their voice, make group spaces where members feel brave enough to share, manage negative behaviors in group settings, to name a few.

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### How to Start a Support Group

#### Group Ratios

**Before** starting a group, advocates should consider how many adults will be working or volunteering. [ChildCare.gov](https://www.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

**Adult-to-Child Ratio:** The number of adults who are present to teach and care for the 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.

#### Adult-to-Child Ratio Chart

| AGES                                     | ADULT-TO-CHILD RATIOS              | MAX GROUP SIZES         |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Infant</b><br>Birth to 11 months      | 1 adult to 4 infants               | 8 infants maximum       |
| <b>Young Toddler</b><br>1 to 2 years old | 1 adult to 6 younger toddlers      | 12 young toddlers       |
| <b>Older Toddler</b><br>2 to 3 years old | 1 adult to 6 older toddlers        | 12 older toddlers       |
| <b>Preschooler</b><br>3 to 5 years old   | 1 adult to 10 preschoolers         | 20 preschoolers         |
| <b>School Aged</b><br>5 years old and up | 1 adult to 12 school aged children | 24 school aged children |

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### 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 better design the activities or programming the group offers. Once a purpose is chosen, the next step could be to decide what kind of activities the group will participate in at each meeting. These can vary, including social events, skill-building, social connections, leadership skills, educational presentations, or training.

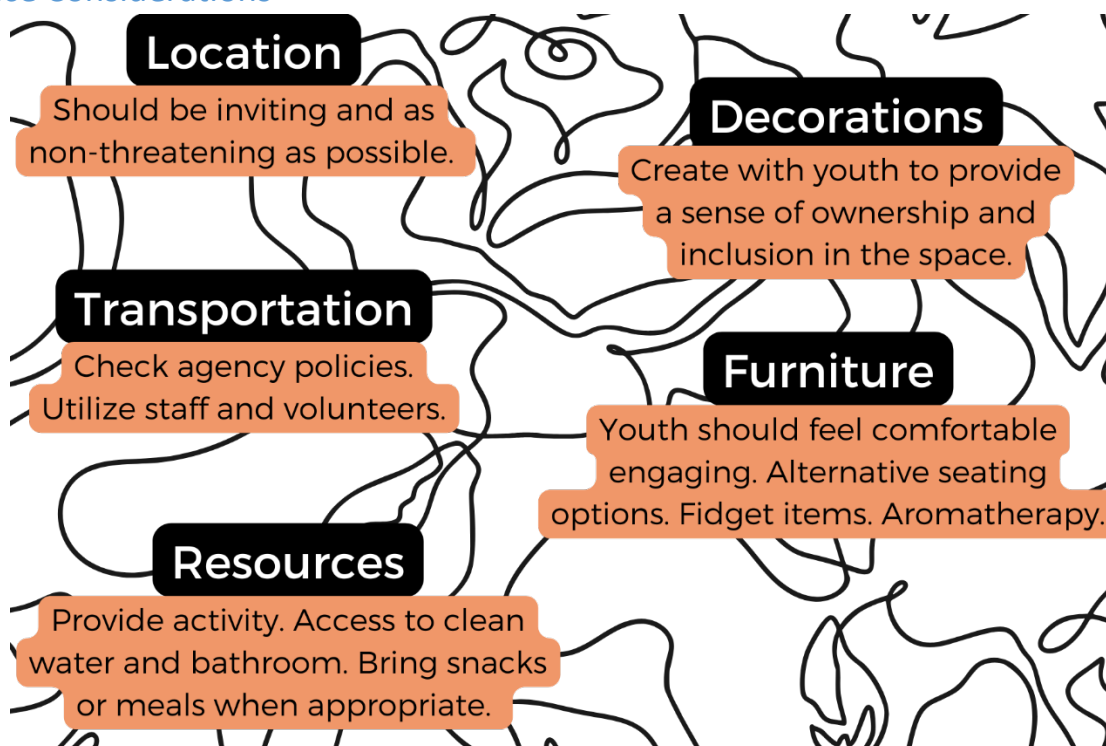
### Recruiting Participants

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. Passing out materials where youth typically congregate like libraries, skate parks, coffee shops, malls, shopping centers. 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.

Download the [Overview of Groups - Template](#) to help create relevant materials for your programming or groups.

### Group Space Considerations



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### Establish Group Norms, Guidelines, Activity

Establishing group norms or guidelines in the beginning helps 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. Adapt the language to better suit the youth you are working with, and that it is developmentally appropriate.

#### Materials Needed

- Flipchart, large sheet of paper, white board
- Markers

#### Preparation

- Before activity write NORMS or GUIDELINES 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

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**FACILITATOR TIP:** *Be mindful not have any one person dominate the conversation.*

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- Facilitator **ASKS** the following questions for anyone to answer:
  - What comes to mind when you think of a support group?
  - What challenges might we face as a newly formed support group?
  - What are some things we should learn about each other so we can work together well?
- Facilitator **SAYS** | 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 **ASKS** anyone answer the following?
  - What about that place makes you feel brave to be yourself? 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?”

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### 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

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

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**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.

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#### 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 when they join the group. To provide standards of how the group can be inclusive and welcoming to those who may want to utilize the program's services.

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### Example Activities by Age Group

When thinking of activities for groups, the number one piece of advice is to be **FLEXIBLE**. Having backup 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. Consider the attention span of youth when creating an activity that fits their needs.

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*TIP | Advocate Reminder | Don't be afraid to act silly and child-like to encourage the youth to participate and feel brave to open up in the space.*

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Having a game or free time at the end of the group can be helpful for the younger ages. Utilizing technology is great too; many advocates have suggested using websites like [Pinterest](#) to find support group ideas! Don't forget to reach out to your colleagues to overcome barriers to creating a group activity.

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*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!*

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

For this age group, make sure that you have plenty of volunteers/staff to 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. Providing youth with language to avoid being aggressive or passive. Another activity is to work with a protective caregiver and a toddler on how they interact with one another. Above all, ensure the room is childproof for safety.

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*TIP | Youth Feedback | Ask the youth in the group what is popular and trending in their worlds to adapt curricula and activities to be more relevant to them.*

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The following document [All Example Activities](#) includes the following:

- 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): To Identify and understand healthy coping techniques that feel natural to the individual.
- 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.

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*TIP | Mixed Aged Resource | Advocates have utilized various Disney shorts that relate to their themes and then have a reflection discussion.*

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- Family Activity: A timeline activity to show the historical journey a family has taken together.

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*TIP | Family Activities | Make sure that family activities strengthen the family bond. The activities can focus on healthy relationships, with an emphasis on self-reflection. If all else fails, have a game night to teach families to play non-violent, competitive fun together.*

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### 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.*

[Families Rising](#) 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. Checkout End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin's adaptation as to how this can be used in domestic violence advocacy work: [EA Ladder of Youth Engagement](#).

[Sesame Street](#) has a plethora of resources around talking with children around traumatic experiences. The [Sesame Workshop](#) YouTube account has multiple curated playlists on specific topics.

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.

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

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