



Parent to Parent USA Guidance for Recruiting And Training Support Parents

Parent to Parent USA (P2PUSA) is a national non-profit organization committed to assuring access and quality in parent to parent support across the country. The following guidance is based on research¹ and the knowledge of experienced Parent to Parent Program Directors.²

There are several different strategies to consider when recruiting and training Support Parents:

- **In the early developing stages** of a Parent to Parent program, it is understandable that you may want to build a base of trained Support Parents as quickly as possible, however, experienced Parent to Parent program directors recommend starting with a small number of Support Parents. Beginning slowly will allow you to ensure that quality training and support is available to each Support Parent and that your program has the capacity to give each match the follow-up support it may need. Starting small and gradually increasing the number of active Support Parents will enable you to provide quality service.
- **Think about how you will find prospective Support Parents** and who might assist you in the recruitment process. If your program has a sponsoring agency, the sponsoring agency and/or other community agencies providing services to children with disabilities as well as other parent groups may be able to assist in the location of prospective Support Parents. Confidentiality usually prohibits these agencies from releasing parents' names, but agency personnel will often forward information about a Parent to Parent program activity to their parents. You simply supply the agency with information that they might include in their newsletter, or prepare a mailing in sealed and stamped envelopes and request that the agency attach the address labels of the families. In a newsletter article or in mailed information, be sure to include information that tells the parents how to communicate their interest in becoming a Support Parent and how to request additional information. Once interested parents contact you and voluntarily share their name and address, you can begin to communicate with them directly and will no longer need the assistance of another agency.
- **Make certain your cadre of Support Parents represent the diversity of the families you are serving.** Your cadre of Support Parents should be diverse in terms of special health care needs, disabilities, or mental health issues, socio-economic status, family structures, and

¹ Singer, G.H.S., Marquis, J., Powers, L.K., Blanchard, L., DiVenere, N. Santelli, B., (1999) A Multi-site Evaluation of Parent to Parent Programs for Parents of Children with Disabilities. *Journal of Early Intervention*, Vol. 22, No 3. 217-229.

² 2010 Parent to Parent USA Organization Survey



cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They must be willing to participate in all training sessions and participate in program evaluation. The more diverse your core of Support Parents, the greater capacity your program will have for matching parents.

- **Some Parent to Parent programs hold an introductory meeting** for prospective Support Parents to explain the Parent to Parent program and discuss plans for training. Other programs meet or talk individually with parents who have expressed an interest in becoming Support Parents. Either way, it is important for parents to have a chance to learn more about the role of the Support Parent, the training, and the match, before they decide whether or not to take the training. Similarly, it is important for the program coordinator to meet prospective Support Parents and to learn more about why they are interested in becoming a Support Parent and where they are in their own family lives.
- **Screening.** Whether through a group meeting, an individual conversation, or as part of the supporting parent training itself, most Parent to Parent programs screen prospective Support Parents in terms of their:
 1. Comfort in talking about their adjustment to their family situation
 2. Ability to reach out and provide support to others
 3. Ability to cope with other people's problems
 4. Understanding of their own values and beliefs and respect for others who may not share these same beliefs
 5. Communication skills
 6. Maturity and empathy
 7. Availability

Some sort of screening process gives the program coordinator a chance to get to know the diversity amongst prospective Support Parents. Some programs ask potential Support Parents to complete an application prior to attending a Support Parent training providing program staff with initial information.

By participating in a quality training program, Support Parents come away with applicable skills in communication and empathetic listening. Moreover, a comprehensive training program provides Support Parents with opportunities for self-evaluation and a time to look closely at their own values, beliefs, and actions. Strong communication skills, a solid knowledge base about community resources, and a firm sense of self and respect for others are all essential characteristics of a Support Parent.

Generally, training is provided to groups of 8-12 parents, as this group size is small enough to foster comradeship and intimacy but large enough to stimulate the sharing of diverse backgrounds and ideas. Some helpful strategies to consider as the training program is designed are:



- Decide who will provide the training sessions. Experience has proven it most effective for the staff person(s) responsible for making matches also be the trainer.
- Consider the numbers of sessions, dates and locations. Some programs offer 1-3 hour sessions over a several week period, while others develop a more concentrated program consisting of 1 or 2 full-day sessions. The time and location of the training sessions should fit the preferences of the group members.
- Offer childcare and refreshments to make it easier and more enjoyable for the participants to attend the sessions.
- Consider the use of local community resource persons as speakers.
- Plan a “graduation” party to honor the new Support Parents, and award certificates to all who complete the training.

Just as the format for the training varies by program, so too does the content that Parent to Parent programs include in their training. Parent to Parent USA endorses the following content areas:

- Program orientation including expectations; referral, matching, follow-up and evaluation processes
- active listening and communication skills
- self-reflection/self awareness
- sharing family stories
- role play
- adjustment/adaptation process
- cultural diversity
- national, state and community resources
- positive philosophy
- advocacy
- leadership
- confidentiality

When asked which of these content areas are most important, Support Parents rated listening skills as the most important.

Results of the national study to determine the effectiveness of Parent to Parent support indicate that Referred Parents who have more contacts from their Support Parent find Parent to Parent support to be more helpful than Referred Parents who have fewer contacts. Thus it will be important to emphasize in the training the importance of having a Support Parent make at least 4 contacts in the first 8 weeks of the match, and then to continue to make on-going connections easy for the Referred Parent.

Interviews with Referred Parents also suggest how important it is for the Support Parent to initiate contacts with the Referred Parent – and especially at the beginning of the match. Some Referred Parents may not feel comfortable calling the Support Parent, and yet if the Support Parent calls them,



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they are delighted to have a chance to talk. When training Support Parents, be sure to let them know that they are responsible for initiating contact in a match.

There are many excellent training materials for Support Parents that have been developed by Parent to Parent programs across the country. These training guides provide content, suggested resources and materials, sample handouts, and suggested group and individual training activities for the total sequence of training sessions. Please visit (www.P2PUSA.org) to locate programs willing to share these materials.

In addition to the training for Support Parents, Parent to Parent programs often provide other support for their Support Parents. The types of support offered to Support Parents include:

- **A manual for Support Parents.** This manual typically contains handouts related to the content of the training, a summary of the forms used by program coordinators to document the progress and outcome of each parent match, as well as information about community and state resources available to families.
- **1-1 consultation with the program coordinator.** Once a Support Parent begins the matched experience, there may be questions that arise around which the Support Parent might benefit from 1-1 consultation with a program coordinator. Parent to Parent programs believe not only in the importance of training parents before they start serving as Support Parents, but also in individualized follow-up support for Support Parents once their matches begin.
- **On-going training opportunities.** Many programs offer Support Parents the opportunity to participate in on-going training sessions with other Support Parents. These training opportunities vary depending upon the needs and requests of the Support Parents, but they often include time for Support Parents to brainstorm together about common issues related to their matches (without identifying names of families) and for program staff to share evidence based practices.
- **Annual recognition events** thanking veteran Support Parents.
- **Leadership Training.** The support both given and received by another parent has been termed “the cradle of leadership” because it is often through this relationship that parents discover within themselves their voice for advocacy. Many Parent to Parent programs provide opportunities for parents to build on their strengths by offering training for emerging leaders in policy, health care financing, advocacy and other areas of leadership development.

It is important for Support Parents to know that the support of the Parent to Parent program continues even after the initial Support Parent training has ended. A Support Parent who is fully supported by the program both before and after a match begins will be better able to personalize the support they provide to the Referred Parents.

Resource Parents - Untrained Support Parents



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While Parent to Parent programs are committed to the importance of matching trained Support Parents, occasionally and most often when a trained Support Parent is not readily found for a particular match, programs will ask an untrained parent to participate in a match with a Referred Parent. Generally, untrained parents are parents known to a program but for whom participating in training has not been possible. While these parents have not completed the typical Support Parent training, programs do provide them with an abridged version of the content that is included in the support training sessions with program staff reviewing information one-to-one either by phone, e-mail, or in person.