

Guidelines for setting up a peer support social group for autistic adults

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Introduction

Social groups provide a safe place where autistic people can socialise comfortably, where social 'mistakes' won't be judged, and where they can learn social skills with a peer group that understands them. It can be enormously therapeutic for autistic adults to meet other people experiencing the same challenges.

The aims and objectives of social groups for members include:

- to provide safe social environments
- to facilitate social opportunities and activities
- to foster the development of social confidence
- to widen members' range of social experiences.

The ultimate goal of a social group is for the people involved to progress to socialising in a mainstream environment.

Where to start

If you are considering setting up a social group, you will need lots of initial consultation to find out what the group wants. You will need to be properly guided by them and not by assumptions about what you think they would like to do. This group may already exist, or you may have to advertise for members.

Start small. You don't need lots of people to start a social group; it could begin with just three or four members. However, whether you have four or 40 people attending, make sure you get all their contact information so you can keep them informed about planned activities.

Planning

Many social groups like a mix of social activities and discussion. The activities and events you decide to run will depend on the group of people attending. Things you should consider when planning activities are:

- **the age range of the group.** In general, group members may prefer activities associated with people of their age. For example, younger people may enjoy youth club activities such as pool, music, computer games etc, whereas older people may be more interested in outings such as bowling, the cinema or going to the pub.
- **sensory issues.** These are very common for autistic people, so try to avoid places or activities with loud noises, smoke, intense odours, crowds, severe lighting etc.
- **the needs of the group.** You may have people interested in joining the group who have diagnoses from across the spectrum and, as a result, may have different needs. There may be other members who have mobility needs. These differing needs should be taken into consideration in your planning, and everyone should be treated as a valuable individual.

- **the interests of the group.** Some members may have intense interests; see if you can involve these in your planning.
- **cost.** Try to keep the activities free or as cheap as possible so this doesn't put people off attending. You might need to do some fundraising or apply for grants in order to subsidise activities.
- **the number of volunteers required.** Consider how many volunteers you will need to run the group. This will vary depending on the size of the group and the nature of the activity.
- **health and safety.** Make sure all your activities and events are risk assessed.

The activities and events you decide to run can just be things you usually enjoy with friends and family, such as going to the pub, cooking, gardening, shopping, playing video games or meeting for a coffee. You might want to do the same activity each time or vary it. You might even incorporate some fundraising into these activities.

It is also good to include some formal social skills learning, if possible. An ideal way of delivering this is to bring in speakers who are similar to your group members; for example, who are of a similar age or have similar interests.

Don't worry if the group members aren't initially as enthusiastic as you about the group. Taking part in social activities can be difficult for some people, so they might just be apprehensive. Friendships might not develop immediately either, but persevere, as friendships may form as the group develops.

Always try and provide name tags for people at activities, as they can help members to remember each other's names and begin conversations. You could create a photo board if that is something your members are comfortable with. Taking group photos at activities also helps members to feel like they are part of a group.

Don't expect everyone to come to every meeting or activity; sometimes people are just busy. To help you plan, ask for an RSVP for activities, so you can have a rough idea of numbers.

Finally, try and keep computer files or a scrapbook of the events and activities you planned, so you can reuse resources later and remember what you have done, what worked well, and what you might not try again. Gain regular feedback from your members by issuing feedback forms or similar, so the ideas for activities come from your members and not just the volunteers.

Facilitation

The facilitator should:

- be an appointed volunteer
- have agreed contact details for all members
- identify other volunteers to assist in facilitating the meetings, agreeing on their levels of commitment, the size of the group, the location and regularity of meetings, activities, any risks in relation to individuals, and mechanisms for feedback and planning
- communicate the aims and objectives of the group to potential group members
- identify, with the help of other volunteers, suitable, safe, and accessible venues and liaise with venues
- share any details of the venue type, location and ambience/atmosphere with members; for example, noise level, public access, and the level of commotion/activity
- share any details of transport links to the venue and any transport arrangements, eg independent or supported travel.

Attendance

The facilitator, alongside the other volunteers, should consider who is able to attend the group. Such as:

- an official autism diagnosis is not necessary as long as the person is on the diagnostic pathway or self-identifies as autistic
- is there a catchment area for members?
- the size of the group
- the compatibility of individuals, eg whether members share the same interests
- members' support needs
- the age range of members
- can people initially attend with parents/carers?

Establishing shared expectations

The facilitator, along with the group members, should establish:

- a joint code of conduct of what is acceptable behaviour within the group, for example, respecting the personal boundaries of other members by not asking probing personal questions (see an example of a code of conduct in the resources section)
- the group's aims and objectives
- a group sign-in sheet with the members' contact details, with the option to be removed from the group membership

- an initial review period to check whether everyone in the group is happy with the way the group is being run
- an ongoing review process to deal with changes in the needs of the group or individual members
- the responsibility of group members with regards to:
 - contributing to the group
 - commitment to the group
- a process for communicating issues to individuals
- a process for communicating a member's removal from the group if their behaviour is deemed inappropriate based on the group's agreed code of conduct.

Membership profiles

Each group member should have a membership profile. The membership profile should include:

- preferred name and pronouns
- preferred method of communication
- likes and dislikes, details on sensory issues or triggers, details of calming strategies if feeling upset or overwhelmed, an opportunity to read and agree to the group's code of conduct.

The facilitator should be aware that personal details should be retained only in accordance with the terms of the *Data Protection Act*.

Evaluation

It is useful to evaluate the success of the group in some or all of the following areas:

- numbers of people attending
- repeat attendance
- skills development
- skills acquired
- self-evaluation questionnaires
- verbal feedback
- enjoyment and atmosphere.

Conclusion

These guidelines do not set out to provide 'rules of operation', but rather to alert facilitators and groups to some of the issues to consider when setting up a group. Autistic people need and want the opportunity to meet others in safe social situations where their challenges are recognised and understood.