

Resources for Kinship Carers



**How to run
a successful
support group
and be an
effective carer
advocate/
representative**



GPV/KCV acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of our great land and offers respect to Elders, past and present.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that the Aboriginal culture existed in Australia before European settlement and consisted of many community groups. Further, we acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that laws and policies of the past have inflicted grief and suffering on our fellow Australians and regrets the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

GPV/KCV believes that a society that is inclusive of all is crucial to individual and community wellbeing and will behave with respect towards all irrespective of their race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background.

GPV/KCV acknowledges 13th of February as National Apology Day, the anniversary of then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivering the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008. GPV/KCV will take steps that promote a happier and healthier future for Indigenous Australians, particularly the children and young people.

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Key words which influence GPV/KCV approaches are: Truthfulness, Confidentiality, Inclusiveness, Integrity, Constancy, Gratitude, Commitment, Compassion

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Part 1

How to run a successful support group



Power through support

The kinship care movement needs to be based upon a system of effective groups that support, inform and promote the work of kinship carers. Kinship carer support groups are a powerful way to exchange information, provide one another with emotional support, and learn new strategies to deal with the unique challenges faced by kinship carers.

Part 1 of this booklet contains some helpful hints about conducting an effective kinship carer support group. This is a joint effort between Vermont Kin as Parents (US) and Kinship Carers Victoria (Australia).

Getting started

It is important for the support group to be inclusive, allowing carers from all walks of life and situations the opportunity to attend. Therefore, it is important to:

- Find a time to meet that will suit the greatest number of members. In order to accommodate members' different needs it may be necessary to alternate day and night meetings.
- Find a place to meet that is easily reached by members and is a safe space where opinions can be aired without being overheard.
- Advertise the meeting dates and venues as broadly as possible, using local newspapers, word of mouth and distribution of flyers.

Clarifying your purpose

It is important to state the purpose for the support group from the outset. There are a range of reasons for a support group to exist:

- To exchange information
- To provide emotional support to members
- To learn new strategies about what works
- To influence other people so they better understand your work as a carer.

It is up to each support group to decide how much emphasis they place on each of these possible purposes. This matter should be one of the earliest issues the support group decides.



Appointing a leader

The support group should have a leader/facilitator whose job it is to mentor the group by ensuring that:

- all members feel free to come and share their children's and their own experiences about kinship care. The culture of kinship carer groups is essentially an oral one, based on carers getting together to tell their stories about their own and their children's experiences. These stories lead to demands for change throughout the system.
- the rules of the group are adhered to by all. These include rules of confidentiality, which are particularly important given some of the personal details attached to some stories.
- information offered to the group is reliable.

It is useful for the group to appoint its own leader from amongst its members, and to also seek the services of a professional facilitator.

The work of the leader/facilitator as described above can comfortably be divided – and probably should be divided. Support groups work best when they are aided by a professional facilitator. For example; a professional facilitator is the best person to ensure that information is accurate and up to date.

Profile of an unsuccessful group



Profile of a successful group



A checklist for a successful support group

BUILDING MEMBERSHIP

An effective kinship care support group attracts people from all walks of life.

Does your support group include:

- Women
- Men
- Working carers from a range of occupations
- Carers isolated due to a lack of transport
- Carers from a range of ethnic backgrounds?

EMPLOYING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

A good kinship care support group employs democratic practices.

Does your support group:

- Notify members of meeting times, dates and locations with plenty of notice
- Actively encourage everyone at the meeting to have their say
- Publish a plan of local meetings and activities in the area relevant to kinship carers
- Ensure that everyone at the meeting has eye contact with each other?

KNOWING RELEVANT POLICY

An effective kinship care support group informs members of the latest policy changes affecting their work.

Does your support group give members:

- Copies of relevant policies
- Access to experts to help interpret these policies?

ENHANCING CARERS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

An effective kinship care support group provides activities designed to strengthen carers' understanding and skills.

Does your support group:

- Offer seminars, in-services or guest speakers to discuss issues
- Provide up-to-date information on changes to DFFH or other relevant organisations' policies?

WORKING WITH ALLIES

A good kinship care support group relates to a range of agencies which have an impact on kinship care.

Does your kinship care support group have contact with local groups such as:

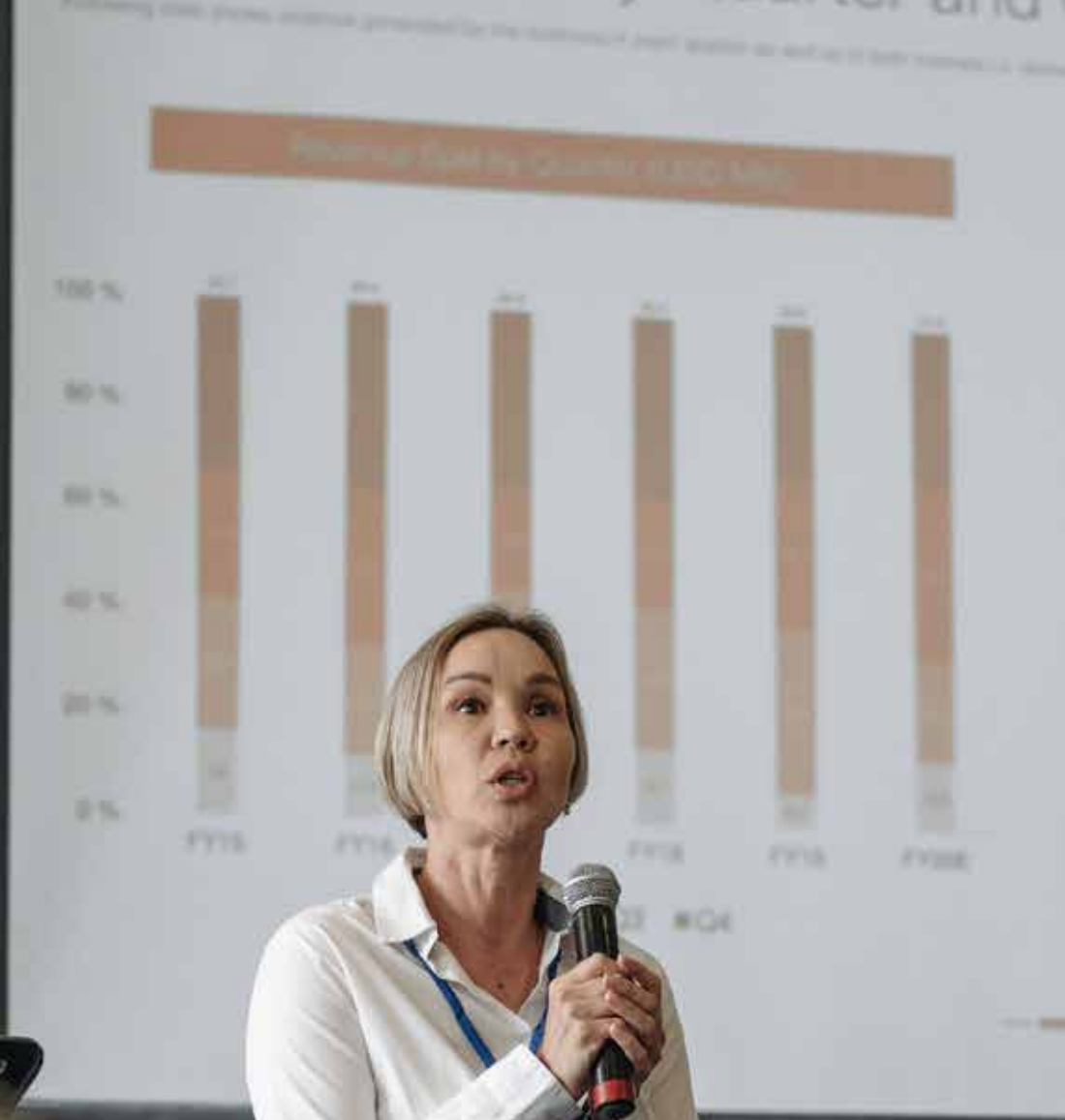
- Local council
- Members of Parliament
- Community groups
- Government departments

CELEBRATING SUCCESSES

An effective kinship care support group celebrates its successes.

Does your support group:

- Reflect on and celebrate its successes
- Keep old photographs and documents in a safe place to build up a history of the group
- Invite past members to special activities?



Part 2

Being an effective kinship carer advocate/ representative



Participation through representation

The kinship care movement needs to be efficient and effective in the ways it works to achieve increased recognition, rights and support for kinship carers.

Using some kinship carers as representatives arguing the case for all kinship carers is a democratic and proven way of ensuring that kinship carers' voices are heard.

Part 2 of this booklet contains helpful hints for kinship carer representatives drawn from various sources. However, they were first stimulated by a conversation held amongst kinship carers at a gathering in Vermont, US in October 2012. At this gathering collaboration between Vermont Kin as Parents (US) and Kinship Carers Victoria (Australia) was founded.

Carers have a special perspective

The unique situation and experiences of kinship carers means that they have a viewpoint which is unique and focused on the needs of children and young people. This unique view should be featured in the public discourse about children and young people.

Set medium and longterm goals

All negotiations/meetings should take place within a context of policy and principle that dictates how, when, and why you act. This broader framework will serve to remind you of the public purpose of your work rather than a private/personal purpose.

Tips:

- Talk with other carers to set goals you would like to see achieved in the short and long term.
- Have these goals verified by a wider group of the people you represent and make them available for all to read.
- Make sure the goals are subject to regular review and update where necessary.

Work with allies

The kinship care movement does not have enough political or industrial power to allow it to act alone. It is important to seek out allies. All allies should have similar ethics and goals to those of kinship carers.

Tips:

- Create a special campaign or project related to areas where your issues cross over
- Use media and government representatives as allies.

Prepare an agenda for meetings

Meetings should have a stated purpose and order of business. Without them many meetings disintegrate into talk fests that achieve very little. Subjecting volunteers to the possible waste of time attached to unproductive meetings will drive them away.

Tips:

- Set start and end times for meetings in advance, and stick to them.
- Before the meeting circulate a list of items that will be discussed at the meeting.
- Make a time to discuss any other business raised by members.
- Set a time limit for each agenda item.

Gather intelligence before meetings

Whether meeting with an adversary or an ally it is important to be aware of the issues that are important to them. Without this knowledge you cannot negotiate a mutual agreement.

Tips:

- Before the meeting, speak with other people who will be in the meeting to ascertain areas of agreement and disagreement.

Use evidence to support your position

Decisions need to be based on reliable evidence indicating what is needed. A balance of anecdotal (stories) and empirical (statistics) evidence is useful.

Tips

- Stories are powerful if they are used to back up arguments or requests rather than just told for their own sake.
- Gather statistics from other groups with similar issues (online research is a good place to start).

Dress and act appropriately

It is not important to dress and act as a business person. However, it is important to present a business like approach to your work as an advocate.

Tips:

- Dress neatly and avoid being too casual.
- Be on time and use the time you have effectively – speak calmly and keep on topic.
- Make sure everyone at the meeting is able to give their opinions, and don't be afraid to ask questions if there is something you don't understand.

Prioritise – but compromise too

It is important to remember that you may not be able to get everything you are asking for. There may be legitimate reasons why a request may be refused, such as financial or logistical hurdles that need to be overcome.

Tips:

- Set priorities in order of their importance
- Decide which things you can do without if necessary

Rock the boat if necessary

As a representative your aim is to advocate for change. Therefore, don't be afraid to be critical of things that are not working, and remember that you are trying to improve the lives of children and young people.

Tip:

- Say something positive to the people who you might be upsetting so that they understand that your comments are not directed at them personally. If you do pronounce something is not working properly, be ready to suggest ways it could be improved.

You are not representing yourself

When representing your group, you must advocate for the needs of the greatest number, and present the views of the group as a whole. This is true even if you personally do not agree with what you are being asked to say.

Tips:

- Rehearse what you are going to say with other carers so they feel confident with the line of argument you are going to put on their behalf

Report back to your base

The people you represent have a right to know how your negotiations are progressing, particularly if the need to compromise is evident.

Tips:

- Always keep written records of communications about your issues.
- Report back to the people you represent either in person or in writing, giving details of your progress, both good and bad.

Review your progress

As you progress, new issues may arise that may affect your choice of tactics. It is important to openly admit and discuss ways to recover from failures without assigning blame.

Tip:

- Use your allies to refine strategies and continue to gather evidence.

Empower other carers

Representatives should aim to empower carers and other representatives. Sharing information is crucial. Sharing ideas about what makes an effective representative is also crucial.

Abide by codes of confidentiality

There are times when information must be kept within the confines of the negotiation process. Use common sense to help you decide what information may be shared, and what should be kept confidential.



Stay grounded

Don't let yourself be seduced by being members of committees such as 'state committees' or allow yourself to forget what it is you set out to achieve. The needs of kinship carers, and the children and young people in their care should be your primary concern.

Celebrate successes

Advocating for change can be a long and arduous process. It is important to celebrate milestones along the way. While some may seem minor, it is important to remember how much you have gained.



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