

PROGRAM BULLETIN

Parents Anonymous®: The Model For Parent Education

This bulletin will assist professionals who work with families, particularly those in the fields of child welfare, juvenile justice, health and education, to better understand the tremendous success of the Parents Anonymous® Group model in helping to strengthen parents so they can provide safe and caring homes for their children. Each week, thousands of parents and their children participate in Parents Anonymous® Groups and Children's Programs that meet in diverse communities throughout the country. National research has demonstrated the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® Groups as community-based resources for parents who need education and support in order to create positive long-term change for their families.

All parents have the capacity for positive change and a critical factor in their change process is the opportunity to transform their attitudes and behaviors and to learn and practice new skills in a supportive environment. The

Parents Anonymous® Group model philosophically and programmatically embodies the most important dynamics of mutual support and adult learning as applied to parent education. In this bulletin, we will discuss some of these dynamics to provide insight into the tremendous success achieved by parents participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups throughout the country.

Professionals working with families in many different arenas are involved in helping parents respond to numerous problems and concerns. Often, when additional help is needed, the first resource to which a parent is referred will be a parenting class. Most communities offer such classes. They are time-limited, provide a structured agenda and are a useful resource for many parents. However, adults learn in unique ways and parents under stress have specific learning needs. Parents who are facing serious concerns and who participate in brief, general skill building classes do not have enough time to deal with their underlying



Our Mission:

Parents Anonymous® Inc. is an international organization that promotes mutual support and parent leadership in order to build and support strong, safe families.

Parents in Parents Anonymous® Groups participate in discussions related to communication, discipline, child development, parental roles, their own hopes and dreams for their children, effective strategies for helping children achieve independence and self control, and methods for successfully managing the every day stresses of parenting.

emotional issues, learn through repeated practice and achieve lasting behavioral changes to become more nurturing parents. Professionals, members of the courts, friends and family members can support parents by encouraging them to attend Parents Anonymous® Groups in their local community whenever help is needed. In addition to learning extensive new skills to enhance their parenting ability, group members provide critical ongoing support to each other as they develop new attitudes and transform their lives by making significant, long-term changes. When necessary, courts mandate parents to attend parenting classes. Parents Anonymous® Groups are an excellent resource for parents who are mandated to seek help. The mutual support environment of a Parents Anonymous® Group has been proven effective in reducing resistance and breaking through denial of the need for change.

Since 1969, Parents Anonymous® Inc. has provided effective community-based parent education and support groups that promote positive growth in the lives of families by providing encouragement and role-modeling from other parents and the professionally trained Group Facilitator. Parents Anonymous® Groups provide a supportive setting and the skills and tools needed by parents working to change their lives by examining their own feelings and attitudes and identifying solutions to transform their daily parenting practices. Parents Anonymous® Groups,

with a strength-based model of mutual support and shared leadership, are open to any parent whatever the age of their children or their current circumstances. Parents Anonymous® Groups are ongoing and open-ended, so parents can join at any time and participate as long as necessary. Parents in Parents Anonymous® Groups discuss communication, discipline, child development, parental roles, effective strategies for helping children achieve independence and self control, methods for successfully dealing with the every day stresses of parenting, their own hopes and dreams for their children and any other issues that impact their parenting behavior. To reinforce and solidify their new attitudes and skills, parents in a Parents Anonymous® Group practice new behaviors at home and discuss the results at the group each week. Opportunities to learn and change are found in the events taking place in the lives of parents participating in the Parents Anonymous® Group. Attitudes dramatically change and form the basis for integrating new knowledge and skills, so parents learn to successfully foster the healthy growth and development of their children.

Parents learn through multiple avenues and Parents Anonymous® helps parents learn in a holistic way. For example, we know that learning is both cognitive and affective. In other words, we learn cognitively, or intellectually, as in memorizing strategies for coping with stress. We also learn affectively, or through our emotions, as in learning

what it actually feels like to maintain self-control in a high-stress situation. Most parent education models focus on cognitive learning and supply parents with large amounts of valuable information and suggested parenting methods. However, parents must also learn affectively in order to fully integrate new skills and create long-term change in their behavior. How can parents who don't trust others become trustworthy themselves? How can parents who have never known a sense of security and safety ensure their children's safety and well-being? Through Parents Anonymous®, parents have an opportunity to experience the safety and caring of the group, to be trusted, and to know others who are trustworthy. They are able to take charge of their lives and their families while knowing that the group members will be available to support them as needed. In this setting, attitudes change and new behaviors are learned and incorporated into daily life. Through the mutual support of the Parents Anonymous® Group, parents grow stronger by developing new self-images that are more positive, capable and responsible.

Creating An Effective Environment for Change

Becoming a parent is a major developmental transition for anyone. In an ideal world, all young people would grow up fully prepared to be loving and responsible parents to their own children, based on their own childhood

experiences, the positive role models in their lives and the long term support and help of their family and friends. Unfortunately, the reality of many lives is very different. Most parents love their children and want to provide caring homes for them. However, when many adults become parents, they are still struggling to reconcile issues related to their own development. Parents may be so overwhelmed with their own unmet needs that they are unable to focus as much as necessary on meeting their children's needs. Sometimes parents must have a safe and supportive place, such as Parents Anonymous®, to "unload excess baggage" from their own life experiences so their self-image can become more focused on their role as parents of their children and the joys and responsibilities inherent in that role. Once that transition takes place, parents are often ready and eager for ongoing help and support as they work to become more effective caregivers.

A structured parent education class does not provide an avenue for this vital internal transformation to take place. Sometimes, a referral to a structured parent education class may create additional problems for parents. If the self-image of a parent is still that of being a child to his or her own parent, needing approval and support and acceptance, it is unlikely that information about positive parenting techniques will elicit significant change. If anything, parents may feel anger, grief and loss about their own childhoods as they learn more about

The important Parents Anonymous® message, "Asking for Help is a Sign of Strength®," encourages parents to ask for help early so that prevention of child abuse and neglect can be achieved.

“We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning.”

– Carl R. Rogers

what is necessary for the well-being of children. If a parent attends a class and does not gain the help that he or she is seeking or make necessary personal changes, the parent is likely to come away from the experience with a sense of failure and a reluctance to make future attempts to change.

Barriers to Change

Much is known about risk factors facing parents and children throughout our country and about developing resiliency to overcome the impact of these factors. While education and support increase resiliency, the risk factors often present a barrier to gaining support and taking advantage of educational opportunities. For example, the following challenges, often faced by families involved in public child welfare systems and the courts, are also barriers to seeking and using the help that is available:

- ✓ Social and emotional isolation
- ✓ Lack of assurance about what is “normal,” perhaps leading to harsh self-judgment, self-protectiveness, or fear of speaking out
- ✓ Family rules about keeping secrets and lack of trust in others
- ✓ Lack of resources
- ✓ High stress and frequent crisis situations
- ✓ Lack of awareness of options for change and lack of hope in the possibility of change
- ✓ Exposure to inappropriate emotional expressions and misdirected targets, for example, blaming those in authority when hoped for results are not achieved
- ✓ Unmet needs from one’s own childhood

Parents in Parents Anonymous® Groups around the world are successfully transcending these barriers, changing their lives and giving their children a family life that will positively impact, not only their own childhood development, but their ability to model healthy parenting styles for their children. In many Native American Parents Anonymous® Groups, group members believe these positive changes will impact their families for at least the next seven generations. We believe they are right.

The Parents Anonymous® Principles

All Parents Anonymous® Groups and Children’s Programs are based on the following four guiding principles:

- ▲ ***Parent Leadership***
- ▲ ***Mutual Support***
- ▲ ***Shared Leadership***
- ▲ ***Personal Growth***

Essential Components of Mutual Support and Adult Learning and Change

As beliefs and attitudes change, parents become more ready to focus on skill building so their outward behavior is more reflective of their internal changes. Parents can then benefit from a learning model that incorporates best practices of helping adults learn, a model such as Parents Anonymous®, which is an excellent venue for continued growth and change. Multiple levels of learning are essential in order to create long-term behavioral change. At first, new information is heard and understood. Parenting skills and behaviors are discussed and the rationale for their use is explained. This takes place in Parents Anonymous® Groups and in almost any parent education program and is always valuable. Second, these new skills and behaviors are put into practice in the parent's daily life. This helps parents identify the more subtle issues involved in any new behavior and usually leads to the need for clarification and additional information. In a Parents Anonymous® Group, parents have the opportunity to learn and practice new behaviors and to share the results with other group members each week in order to refine their skills.

Third, a new skill or behavior becomes fully incorporated into the parent's repertoire and the learner becomes the

teacher as the parent shares the information with other parents who then begin to practice it in their own families. The strong focus on mutual support and parent leadership in a Parents Anonymous® Group ensures that all parents have opportunities to give help as well as to get help. Help within the group is reciprocal, so on any given week in a Parents Anonymous® Group, parents might hear some information for the first time, debrief their experiences in trying out other new skills at home, and help other parents learn skills they have already mastered. By reaching out and helping others, parents develop competencies that shape their own personal change. The act of helping others creates a sense of success and validation and impacts the helper dramatically. The opportunity to help others is one of the most enriching aspects of the Parents Anonymous® Group model. The resulting growth in confidence, individual leadership, self-esteem and

“Conventional parent education, which brings helpful child-rearing information to many... parents, is often quite irrelevant to socially isolated and otherwise seriously disadvantaged parents. The mother who needs the most help with parenting... is unlikely to find the information offered by most parenting classes very useful.”

Within Our Reach,
by Lisbeth Schorr

National research confirms the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® in diminishing the impact of risk factors while dramatically increasing the resiliency of parents and children resulting in the prevention of child abuse and juvenile delinquency. Through Parents Anonymous®, parents develop personal competencies, increase their ability to deal with stress, reduce their social isolation, enhance their self-esteem, and significantly expand their knowledge of child development. In comparison to other intervention strategies, a national study found that Parents Anonymous® had a more significant impact on alleviating child abuse and neglect than parent education classes and individual therapy.

Each parent may have different individual goals, but the basic goal of Parents

Anonymous® is that all children have safe, caring homes and that their parents provide positive family experiences.

feelings of competency helps pave the way for overcoming the challenges parents face as they make lasting, positive changes in their lives.

There are three critical components for effective parent education. These components - the parent, the group and the facilitator - are all key aspects of the Parents Anonymous® Group model of mutual support and shared leadership. Adults have a unique style of learning that relates to emotional and intellectual development and the need for support. The literature on adult learning styles and mutual support provides significant insights into the strategies that most effectively help parents transform attitudes and learn new behaviors. The discussion that follows will set forth a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of the principles of mutual support and adult learning through a presentation of the effective strategies that are the foundation of the Parents Anonymous® Group model. Given that the issue of parenting and protecting children is such a critical one, it is imperative that any resources utilized by parents incorporate effective strategies that lead to long-term, significant attitudinal and behavioral change.



I THE PARENT

Parents are the essential element in this discussion. All parent education endeavors must fully respect and respond to the needs of parents and their families. In the Parents Anonymous® Group model of shared leadership, parents help lead groups, plan new program development, volunteer on telephone hotlines, serve on boards and are full partners in all aspects of planning, implementing and evaluating programs. The parent's role in directing their own learning is evident in the Parents Anonymous® Group as highlighted below:

■ ***Parents determine their own learning goals and participate actively in the learning process.***

Parents attending a Parents Anonymous® Group set their own goals for the changes they need to make in order to have the kind of home they envision for themselves and their children. Each parent may have different individual goals, but the basic goal of Parents Anonymous® is that all children have safe, caring homes and that their parents provide positive family experiences. Participants in Parents Anonymous® Groups set their own goals, time line and benchmarks.

Parents attending Parents Anonymous® Groups are aware of their need to learn

new attitudes and behaviors and to change the way they and their families are functioning. Even parents who begin to attend through a court order or other mandate generally report that within a few weeks they value their involvement in the group and continue to attend beyond the period of time initially required of them. Because a Parents Anonymous® Group responds to the individual interests of each parent at any given group meeting, parents always have an opportunity to focus the attention of the group on the area of greatest need and interest to them at that time. This allows the parents to take advantage of “teachable moments” to access critical information and help when they most need it.

■ ***Parents share the responsibility for planning and operating the group and therefore have a feeling of commitment to it.***

Parents attending a Parents Anonymous® Group commonly set the agenda at the beginning of each meeting, and all participants share in planning. In addition, parents take on multiple roles to maintain the operation of the Parents Anonymous® Group, such as Parent Group Leader, time keeper, record keeper, greeter for new members, as well as multiple tasks that are often shared among the members of the group. Standard phrases within Parents Anonymous® such as “the parents own the group” or “trust the group” create a sense of community and ownership.

■ ***The learning process is related to and makes use of the experience of each parent.***

Because the life experience of the participants is most often the topic under discussion in a Parents Anonymous® Group, the learning and change process is not only related to but is based on the experience of the learners. Therefore, group members receive validation and encouragement as they share with and learn from each other. Parents give each other supportive feedback and gain insights from each other’s experiences.

“I realized I had a problem and, at Parents Anonymous®, I was able to gain the strength I needed to grow and change.”

Elizabeth

Parents Anonymous® Parent,
Texas

Parents join Parents Anonymous® Groups for multiple reasons...

They are seeking help because they want to change their behavior toward their children. This can range from parents who are feeling too much stress to parents who have harmed or fear they might harm their children.

They are mandated by a court order or a Child Protective Services agreement to attend.

A family member or a friend encouraged them to attend.

A social worker, teacher, health care provider, religious leader, child care provider or other individual encouraged them to attend.

They want help, information and support in managing specific behavioral, health or other issues facing their family.

The Parents Anonymous® Group provides a safe opportunity in a nonjudgmental setting for parents to experiment with new parenting strategies and behaviors, receive feedback about their communication and interactions with others, and discuss the outcomes of their behavioral changes.

■ ***Parents have a sense of progress toward their goals.***

Members of a Parents Anonymous® Group share their goals with one another – as well as their hopes and dreams – and grow to genuinely care about the progress made by others. When parents feel discouraged, other members of the group remind them of the positive steps they have taken. Parents celebrate each other’s progress and encourage continued success.

■ ***The environment is characterized by mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, physical comfort and acceptance of differences.***

Mutual trust and respect, mutual support, freedom of expression and acceptance of differences are integral to the Parents Anonymous® Group model. These concepts are modeled each week as parents have opportunities to discuss issues and concerns with each other and with the Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitator and learn that they can express their fears, rage and other feelings without shame or a fear of blame. Parents know they are always accepted and supported, even when their behaviors are not acceptable. Trust is an important aspect of all Parents Anonymous® Groups and confidentiality is carefully guarded by the members, the Parent Group Leader and the Group Facilitator. Parents Anonymous® Groups meet in settings

that are private and comfortable, and parents have the freedom to create as much physical comfort as possible within the group.

II THE PARENTS ANONYMOUS® GROUP

Parents Anonymous® Groups are highly effective instruments for helping parents change and grow. The adult education literature is very clear regarding the significant value of a group and gives insight into the tremendous success of Parents Anonymous® Groups in supporting parents as they create significant positive changes that lead to safe and caring families for children and youth. The following elements of a Parents Anonymous® Group are critical components for successfully helping parents grow and change.

■ ***The group provides an opportunity for parents to practice changed behavior without threat or punishment.***

When individuals change behavior, they often face resistance in many arenas because new behavior forces a restructuring of personal interactions. New behaviors around communication, interpersonal relationships, use of self and use of power in interactions may

require many attempts before the right fit is achieved for each individual. The Parents Anonymous® Group provides a safe opportunity in a nonjudgmental setting for parents to experiment with new parenting strategies and behaviors, receive feedback about their communication and interactions with others, and debrief the outcomes of their behavioral changes. Thus, parents are able to have mirrored back for them their own words and behaviors, and to self-evaluate their approach and the results they are achieving. The role modeling and the opportunities to practice positive and clear communication techniques in the group help parents develop and use those skills in their daily lives. In addition, parents learn healthy methods for managing conflict as the dynamics in the group provide insights into successful strategies as well as demonstrating that conflict can be a positive force for change.

■ ***Parents have a means for measuring progress toward their goals.***

In a Parents Anonymous® Group, parents identify behaviors they want to develop, practice them both in and outside of the group, and use the group for feedback and help. Parents Anonymous® Group members help each other acknowledge the times they were able to follow their plan, when their strategies were successful, and when they were able to develop new plans and strategies to respond positively to emerging issues.

Parents Anonymous® Groups:

- ▲ Have at least one Group Facilitator who is professionally trained in the Parents Anonymous® Principles and Standards
- ▲ Have at least one parent group member in the acknowledged leadership role of Parent Group Leader, and all other parent group members are encouraged to take on leadership roles
- ▲ Meet weekly at a designated time, in a location that is safe and accessible

In a Parents Anonymous® Group:

- ▲ Parents provide nonjudgmental support to each other
- ▲ Information shared by and among group members remains confidential within the group unless abuse and/or neglect of children is suspected and necessitates a report in accordance with state laws
- ▲ Parents determine what information they share with the group
- ▲ No fee is charged for parents or children to attend a group meeting
- ▲ Parents determine the content of each meeting and shape the agenda to fit their specific needs on any given week
- ▲ Between weekly meetings, the Parent Group Leader and the Group Facilitator are available for support to all group members as are members to each other
- ▲ Parents participate in Parents Anonymous® Groups for any length of time they determine to be most useful to them
- ▲ All parent members receive an *I Am A Parents Anonymous® Parent* handbook, available in Spanish, English and Bosnian, which defines the expectations of the group, discusses parenting issues and provides an ongoing resource.
- ▲ All parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles and all Parent Group Leaders receive *The Parent Group Leader Manual*.
- ▲ All Parent Group Leaders and Group Facilitators receive the *Best Practices for Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitators*.

“CASA volunteers and staff throughout the country recognize Parents Anonymous® as a valuable resource for strengthening families and protecting children.”

– Michael Piraino,
CEO, National
Court Appointed
Special Advocate
Association (CASA)

■ ***The attraction of the group is greater than the discomfort of the change.***

Parents participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups often take personal risks by sharing information with the group, and by taking a stand on issues that are important to them. Parents who have experienced a loss of control with their children while participating in a Parents Anonymous® Group will often call the Group Facilitator to report their loss of control or will share this information at a group meeting, depending upon the seriousness of the event. Sometimes such disclosures necessitate a report to child protective services. Parents find that the acceptance, closeness and mutuality they experience in the Parents Anonymous® Group allow them to reveal behaviors they would otherwise try to hide. Group interaction is focused on positive change, and the support of the group in this area helps parents cope with the difficulties they may experience as they make important changes in their lives.

■ ***Those who want to change and those who are supporting their changes, have a strong sense of belonging to the same group.***

Even though the Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitator, the Parent Group Leader and the other parent participants have different roles within the Parents Anonymous® Group, there is a clear sense of belonging to the same group and sharing a broad commitment

to the well-being of the group and to each individual member. The Parents Anonymous® Group model of mutual support and shared leadership promotes an egalitarian atmosphere where the wisdom and expertise of each member is valued.

III THE PARENTS ANONYMOUS® GROUP FACILITATOR

One unique aspect of the Parents Anonymous® Group model – and a critical factor in the success of the group – is the practice of shared leadership. Each Parents Anonymous® Group is co- led by a professionally trained Group Facilitator and a Parent Group Leader, who is a member of the Parents Anonymous® Group. The Group Facilitator is usually a member of one of the helping professions (e.g. counseling, social work, education, health, etc.) who is trained to work closely with the Parent Group Leader to facilitate the group. The characteristics of the Group Facilitator significantly impact the success of the Parents Anonymous® Group. The adult education literature discusses the personal characteristics of a successful group leader in a learning environment, and this profile is descriptive of the Group Facilitator as defined in the Parents Anonymous® Group model.

■ *Has the capacity for empathetic understanding*

Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitators role model for the group unbiased acceptance and understanding of the sometimes very complex issues facing parents who attend the group. The Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitator is not expected to be either overly sympathetic or harsh in demanding that a parent make immediate changes. Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitators express understanding of the parents' concerns and the belief that they can make positive changes. The empathetic understanding modeled by the Group Facilitator becomes a standard by which all group members interact with one another. It is a key component of the acceptance and respect on which the Parents Anonymous® Group is based.

■ *Is willing to become immersed in the activities of the group as a fully functioning member and take interpersonal risks.*

In a Parents Anonymous® Group, all participants – including the Group Facilitator – are usually on a first name basis and share appropriate information about their personal lives. The Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitator does not seek the support of the group for his or her own parenting issues.

The Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitator uses his or her “whole self” in working with the group. The openness, honesty and clarity of the Group Facilitator’s communication

serve as a model for all group participants. The Group Facilitator is willing to risk the discomfort of anger and conflict and the difficulty of hearing painful information and stories and sometimes uses personal examples as learning opportunities for the group members.

■ *Is flexible, able to tolerate emotional stress and emotional ambiguity, to model shared leadership and to promote leadership in individual parents.*

Significant personal change seldom occurs on a linear path, taking many curves and detours as it moves forward. This means that some weeks the Parents Anonymous® Group members may be progressing well, and other weeks individual members may be facing significant difficulty. Some parents will seem to have lost gains previously made in managing their behavior and their lives. At times it is painful to hear some of the events occurring in parents' lives. The Group Facilitator provides support when painful and stressful situations arise in the group, and he or she is willing to respect the emotional challenges that members experience in their journey.

Parents Anonymous® Group Facilitators know that in order to grow and change, parents must learn to identify and use their own wisdom and strengths. Group Facilitators help create a mutual support environment where parents share their expertise with each other. The role of the Parents Anonymous®

To locate the Parents Anonymous® Programs in your community or for information on starting a Parents Anonymous® Group in your area, check your local telephone directory for Parents Anonymous® or contact Parents Anonymous® Inc. by telephone at (909) 621-6184 or through the World Wide Web at

www.parentsanonymous.org.



*For additional
information about
Parents Anonymous® Inc.,
visit our Web site at:
www.parentsanonymous.org*

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Group Facilitator is to encourage discussion among parents and to add critical information to the discussion when it is needed, but with the caveat that it is always best this information comes from a parent. Thus, the Group Facilitator's role might involve active participation during one portion of the meeting and little participation during other portions. It is this ability of the Group Facilitator to "fill in the gaps," rather than take the lead, that encourages parents to develop their own abilities and strengths. Above all, the Group Facilitator is a partner to parents, not a teacher.

Parents Anonymous® : Vital Strategy for Successful Outcomes

In summary, the Parents Anonymous® Group is and always has been a highly effective model for parent education for hundreds of thousands of parents throughout the country. With parents already experiencing high levels of stress – and possibly crisis – it becomes critical to select the best strategy for helping them gain the support and information they need – Parents Anonymous®.

Parents Anonymous® Inc.

Parents Anonymous® Inc. was founded in 1969 through the extraordinary efforts of a courageous mother seeking help to create a safe and caring home for her family. Working in partnership with her social worker, they launched a national movement to bring help, support, strength, and hope to millions of families all across America. Their vision inspired thousands of parents, professionals and community volunteers to establish Parents Anonymous® Programs throughout the United States. Parents Anonymous® Inc. remains the nation's oldest child abuse prevention organization dedicated to strengthening families through innovative strategies that promote mutual support and shared leadership. Today, Parents Anonymous® Inc. leads a diverse and dynamic international Network of accredited organizations that implement community-based Parents Anonymous® Groups and Children's Programs.

Parents Anonymous® Groups meet weekly, are co-led by Parent Group Leaders and professionally trained Group Facilitators and are free of charge to participants. While the parents are meeting, their children participate in Parents Anonymous® Children's Programs. Annually, tens of thousands of parents and their children come together in Parents Anonymous® Groups to learn new skills, transform their attitudes and behaviors, and create long-term positive changes in their lives.

As a leading expert on family strengthening, Parents Anonymous® Inc. creates innovative strategies to achieve meaningful parent leadership; conducts training and customized technical assistance for public and private agencies and communities regarding effective systems reform strategies; and shapes the direction of public policies through strategic advocacy and media efforts. Through partnerships with parents, professionals, agencies, courts, schools and other entities, Parents Anonymous® Inc. builds and supports caring communities for parents and children to ensure safe and nurturing homes for all families.