

# Finding the Balance: Sharing and Discussion in Parenting Groups

by Leslie Finlay

How much do you want parents to share and participate during group? When does talking about feelings bleed over into unproductive griping about a controlling mother-in-law? Do you find yourself talking more than you would like in order to fill awkward silences? Many factors can influence how and to what extent parents participate and share. Listed below are factors that may influence participation in your groups.

**Personality** plays a big role. Some parents are internal processors—people who may be more inclined to listen in a large group—and need time to think about what they have heard. They may also share after the week between groups has passed or share their thoughts privately with one trusted individual. Other parents are external processors, those who verbalize their thoughts and feelings in order to better understand them and gain clarity.

## Parent Educator Tips:

- Internal processors are seldom the first to respond to questions or prompts, so be sure to ask for additional thoughts toward the end of a discussion topic.
- Start your sessions with a review of the previous topic, which allows internal processors to share ideas about the previous session.

**Life Experiences** also have an impact. Families who have received social services previously, and have had a positive experience, may be more willing to share than those who had a negative experience or have never received social services.

## Parent Educator Tips:

- Spend more time on icebreakers and warm-ups.
- Try breaking into smaller groups for some discussions.
- If you have a sharing time or check in, ask several specific questions rather than a more general open-ended question. Specific questions, rather than asking how the week has been, may be easier to answer and will help curtail those who tend to talk a lot. For example, as a warm up, ask parents to share childhood memories of reading or being read to and what books their child currently enjoys.

**Personal Boundaries** will impact parents' participation and thus the strategies you use when facilitating. Highly stressed parents with less healthy boundaries present the challenge of helping them limit the amount of personal information they share. For parents with more developed boundaries, you are faced with helping parents go deep enough so that the discussion moves beyond the superficial. In one case you may need to work at keeping families focused on their children and parenting, redirecting digressions. In the other case, your role is to help parents feel safe and gently encourage parent sharing.

## Parent Educator Tips:

- Ask each parent to share about a given topic for 2-3 minutes without interruption or discussion from others. Then keep time. Encourage those who are challenged to talk the entire time to see if they can. For those who have no problem filling the time, be sure to limit the time to 2 minutes. In debriefing this exercise, ask parents to notice what they chose to say, what they chose not to say, and how it felt to talk without interruption or discussion.

- When more subtle cues are ineffective at redirecting a parent who is “over-sharing,” gently interrupt the parent by saying, “I’m so sorry. I’m going to need to interrupt you so we can...”

**Parents’ Expectations** play a role as well. Often, when parents enroll in a parent support and education group, they imagine a class. If so, they may see you as the “teacher” and the families as the “pupils.” If this is their expectation, parents may feel guilty taking time away from “class” by sharing or asking questions. Previous negative experiences with school may cause parents to be resistant, argumentative, or lacking the confidence to participate. Helping parents understand that sharing is part of how the group will learn can help them understand the value in parent sharing and discussion.

**Parent Educator Tips:**

- At the start of the group, be sure to talk about the importance of sharing and discussion and how central they are to their group experience. Emphasize that parents will learn from each other as well as from you.
- Refer to the group as a *group*, rather than a *class*.
- Start each group with an interactive activity, warm up, or discussion so that an interactive tone is set from the start.

As parent educators, our challenge is to find a balance between sharing and education, talking and listening, structure and spontaneity. At the end of a group, when the balance was off, we leave feeling uncomfortable. When we’ve struck the right balance, the group seems to flow. Thinking about the factors that influence how and to what extent parents participate and share in our groups can strengthen our ability to strike the balance we hope to achieve.

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