



Partners in Parenting

# **PIP Group Leader Manual**

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# Goals of Group Leader Training

- Learn about our expectations for the role of PIP group leader/co-leader
- Increase your understanding of PIP: our history, philosophy, and current programs
- Learn about group process and the unique characteristics of a PIP group.
- Discuss and practice active listening and group facilitation skills
- Prepare and practice leading a group meeting
- Learn about PIP procedures, agency responsibilities, and resources

We hope that you will leave the training feeling competent and confident about your ability to lead a PIP Group, so that you can offer this powerful support experience to your Group of new parents.

# PIP Mission

## Mission

Partners in Parenting eases the transition to parenthood by creating community-based parent groups that strengthen and empower families.

## We Believe

...every new parent deserves support.

...healthy families raise healthy children.

...thriving families are the foundation of strong communities.

# How PIP Helps Build Healthy Families

PIP provides peer support programs for new parents based on the Strengthening Families™ Framework. Our universal programs are open to *all* families, and our focus is on increasing family wellness and on building resilience by preparing parents to cope with life stresses *before* problems arise.

Strengthening Families is a research-informed approach from the Center for the Study of Social Policy to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

We know that parenting is challenging work, and we believe the well-being of a community is enhanced when all parents have access to support. Additionally, we know that supporting parents is foundational to the healthy development of children and that family wellness is two-generational, meaning that support must be given to children *and* parents. Many years of study confirm that outcomes of children are influenced largely by parents who are nurturing and responsive to their emotional and physical needs and that a child's earliest experiences and environment is the foundation for future learning and school readiness.

The Strengthening Families™ Framework that PIP uses is based around the Five Protective Factors of family wellness. Here's how PIP helps enhance these factors:

- **Parental resilience:** Parenting a new baby is one of life's biggest stresses. Parents need to learn to deal with stress and daily challenges and still maintain a safe and nurturing environment in their family. During PIP discussions, parents learn skills from each other for managing their day-to-day lives, reducing stress, taking care of themselves and preparing for and managing crises.
- **Social connections:** Strong families have a network of people who provide concrete assistance, emotional support, and nonjudgmental help and validation. The healthiest relationships are characterized by trust, reciprocity, flexibility, child-friendly values, and a balance of independence and mutual assistance. Our primary focus is bringing together communities of parents for mutual support and shared information. At group meetings, PIP parents also discuss ways that new parents can preserve/ strengthen relationships with their extended family and current circle of friends.
- **Social and emotional competence:** In healthy families, parents have a positive, nurturing relationship with the child that is based on behaviors that promote healthy, secure attachment. PIP leaders teach developmental activities that parents can use to build connections with their child and discussions include topics like how to respond appropriately to children's needs, stimulate healthy brain development, and promote positive play interaction between parents and children.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Parents who understand typical development patterns can better guide and discipline their child and promote healthy development. PIP integrates current research on child development and early learning into our programming and curriculum. The PIP Topic Guide, which

leaders use to facilitate discussion, offers both theoretical concepts to increase parents' understanding and practical tools that can be applied in daily life.

- **Concrete support for families:** A PIP Group provides concrete support directly by bringing parents out of isolation during the early weeks and months of having a new baby. In addition, families benefit when they are made aware of community resources that enhance wellness and protective factors during their group meetings. In PIP Groups, parents share information and connections to help each other get the help and resources they need. PIP also provides ongoing communications and referrals that help parents find appropriate support and resources.

For more information on Strengthening Families™: [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)

# Role of a PIP Leader

**Goal: To increase self-confidence and satisfaction in parenting**

**Focus: Parenting challenges and successes**

## **SUPPORT**

PIP defines support as helping without taking over. Leaders help participants feel heard and supported when sharing challenges. They encourage parents to make their own decisions on issues, and help celebrate successes.

PIP Groups are not therapy groups, which focus on restructuring personalities and addressing family dysfunction. Group facilitators are not expected to detect or assess dysfunction, but rather to provide resources, especially in stressful or worrisome situations. PIP focuses on challenges and successes; the goal is increasing self-confidence and satisfaction.

**Goal: To enable families to meet their own needs**

**Focus: Family strengths**

## **EMPOWERMENT**

PIP empowers families to meet their needs by using their own strengths, and by helping them connect to the resources they need.

New parents often feel overwhelmed, incompetent, and uncertain of what they need to feel successful. A PIP leader can help them to

- Problem-solve challenging situations.
- Identify their needs.
- Connect to information and resources to help with those needs.
- Make their own informed decisions, based on their values and priorities.

**Goal: Encourage parents to share knowledge and seek ideas from other parents**

**Focus: Child development, parenting skills**

## **FACILITATION OF SHARED INFORMATION**

PIP teaches parents that one of the best sources of information and ideas is other parents, both mentors (experienced parents), and peers (parents who are at the same point on the parenting journey). A Leader can aid in information sharing by soliciting ideas from Group members, validating the worth of those ideas, and referring back to them as appropriate.

A PIP Group is not a parenting class. The Leader's role is not to instruct, but rather, to provide resources and encourage information sharing, which values the precept that parents are the best experts on their own children. All Group members (and the Leader) may share information from formal sources, tips & suggestions from experienced parents, and wisdom learned from their own successes and failures.

# PIP's Expectations of Group Leaders

## ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

- Consistently attend group meetings.
- Start and end group meetings promptly.
- Follow the PIP format: sharing, developmental moment, break, and topic discussion.
- Prepare discussion topics in advance.
- Organize and communicate group details: hosting, topic discussions, follow-up emails, etc.
- File attendance and narrative reports online in a timely manner.

## FACILITATION SKILLS

- Help sharing to flow well, ensuring that everyone is heard. Focus on group members during sharing and respond meaningfully.
- Maintain the Group's focus during topic discussion.
- Notice and end side conversations.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Show warmth and empathy to group members. Model a non-judgmental attitude.
- Be judicious about sharing wisdom from your own parenting experience. Avoid using the group as your own support group for current parenting challenges.
- Listen rather than give advice.
- Respond appropriately to difficult moments.
- Monitor response from group members who might give advice too soon.
- Encourage group members to use "I" statements and to share from their own experience.



# Things We Know About New Parents

## The new parent experience includes the following:

1. **Steep Learning Curve.** Parent development mirrors baby's development. Both parents and baby are undergoing rapid change, unprecedented learning and adjustment. Parents scramble to learn new skills, and just as they feel they have mastered something, babies' needs and capabilities shift again. It's a 24/7 learning experience, with no user manual and intense fear of "doing it wrong."
2. **Feelings of vulnerability.** All these challenges can leave parents feeling ill-prepared, inadequate, or ignorant. Especially hard hit are those who previously functioned well in the adult world of linear thinking (planners, organizers, doers).
3. **Chaos and Exhaustion.** With a new baby, all the normal routines are disrupted, and the old ways of managing tasks may no longer work. Sleep deprivation magnifies the challenges. Even simple tasks like eating and showering can seem hard to manage. Getting out the door to PIP is a major accomplishment.
4. **Loss.** We think mainly about the joys of having a baby, but parents also deal with the loss of freedom and spontaneity, loss of income and lifestyle, loss or change in relationships with friends and co-workers, loss of free time.
5. **Role transition and relationship changes** are dramatic. As they lose their old identity, parents try to figure out "Who am I now?" Couples go through transition, grappling with "Who are we as a family?" All relationships shift and reorganize.
6. **Isolation.** The early weeks may include more time alone at home than ever before. Friends and family may be far away, working or otherwise unavailable.

## We know however, that everyone brings assets to the job of parenting:

1. **Parents have strengths.** Everyone brings unique skills and wisdom to the role.
2. **All parents have an experience of "family."** Whether their family experience was a positive one they want to replicate, or one they want to evolve away from, all parents have some experiences that guide them.
3. **Parents are teachers.** Not only are parents their baby's first teacher, parents are each other's best teachers, and have a lot to offer one another. Parents teach one another through shared experiences, information, modeling, observation.
4. **Parents are motivated by love for their children.** They work hard to respond to baby, and rise to the occasion to be the best parent possible. Parents' first learning task is to learn how to "nurture" their infant.

**A PIP Group serves families** by providing a consistent, reliable, predictable community to return to each week as participants progress on their parenting journey. A PIP group connects individuals; provides support, reassurance, and opportunities for problem solving; normalizes the new parenting experience, and provides information and resources to help parents become the best parents they can be.

# Active Listening

Active listening is listening with the purpose of clarifying thoughts and feelings to increase understanding of self, others, and circumstances. When a PIP leader uses active listening, it helps Group members in these ways:

- Promotes understanding
- Relieves tension
- Reveals confusion and uncertainty
- Motivates decision-making and planning
- Clarifies thoughts and feelings
- Alleviates sense of isolation

An active listener shows that they are listening by:

- Paying attention
- Not interrupting
- Maintaining eye contact
- Using appropriate posture and gestures

Techniques that are useful include:

- **Acknowledging:** Using phrases like "I see," "uh-huh," and "oh-really."
- **Encouraging:** Asking questions to draw the speaker out/help them dig deeper.
- **Reflecting:** Repeating a fragment of speaker's story. Speaker: "I can't believe how often I forget things – it must be lack of sleep." Listener: "What's going on with sleep?"
- **Clarifying & Summarizing**  
 "What I think I'm hearing is ..."  
 Find a break in their narrative to summarize what he or she has said.
- **Paraphrasing:** Feeding back what you hear – "It sounds like you are..."
- **Practice neutral observation:** Avoiding the urge to control, suggest, correct, praise or criticize. Simply report what you observe.

Some examples:

Non-neutral	Neutral
"Why would you do that?"	"You sound unsure about your decision."
"Don't worry – things will get better!"	"You seem to be having a rough time."
"Here's what you should do."	"So, you're trying to decide what to do."

## TIPS FOR GOOD ACTIVE LISTENING

- Keep the focus on what the other person is saying.
- Let the other person feel the conversation is his or hers to take in whatever direction he or she wants.
- Don't give advice. It probably won't help. Giving advice more likely meets your own ego's needs than the speaker's needs. Don't let the speaker draw you into giving advice. Deflect any request for advice back to the speaker: "What advice were you hoping I'd give you?"
- Don't replace the speaker's story with yours. While briefly referring to a similar situation you experienced might help the speaker feel less alone, don't change the focus of the conversation from the speaker to you.
- Don't try to talk the speaker into or out of feelings. Don't discount the speaker's experience by saying, "Don't feel bad," "It's not that serious," "Things will get better," or "C'mon, give me a smile." Those interventions are more to help you, the listener, feel better – *not* the speaker.
- Don't sympathize. Support the speaker but don't support an inclination toward "poor me." Sympathy tends to reinforce victimhood and inaction. Sometimes people may need a little mothering. Just don't let the speaker indulge in it for long.
- Try to be aware of your facial expressions and body language. Non-verbal cues make up 80% of communication! Rolling your eyes, raising your eyebrows, crossing your arms, focusing on the babies rather than the speaker – these are all non-verbal cues that can express volumes.

Active listening may be a challenge in PIP groups because there are lots of distractions (babies crying, diaper changing, feeding, etc.). The goal of the leader/co-leader is to model active listening for group members even during more active/noisy periods during the meetings.

# Cross-Culture Listening

## Culture:

- Includes knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, morals, customs, and capabilities or habits acquired by one as a member of a certain group
- Shared by all or almost all members of a group
- Passed on from generation to generation
- Shapes our behavior and structures our perceptions

Attitudes and hidden assumptions held by leaders and group members influence one's comfort in a group and how group members listen and respond to one another. As a leader, you must be aware of not only your own cultural assumptions, but also the cultural assumptions/biases of group members.

When thinking about culture and diversity in the context of a PIP group, it is important to acknowledge "classic" cultural definitions (race, class, age, sex, ethnicity) and to look beyond that to the distinctiveness of each of our cultures, as well as the fact that the culture(s) you and other people were born into may not be how you define yourselves now. Even groups that look homogeneous may be unexpectedly diverse. It is important to recognize the richness that diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences can bring to the group. Group members can learn and grow through becoming aware of each other's differences.

As a leader, you play a vital role in acknowledging and honoring the group's diversity of backgrounds and experiences. You can encourage participants to ask questions, instead of leaping to assumptions. Avoiding a topic because it *might* be uncomfortable is "taking care" of the group in an unhealthy way. It is okay to be uncomfortable. Cultural issues that aren't addressed encourage group members to second-guess others' cultural experiences, and are a missed opportunity to share the richness that lies in the group's diversity.

## Four Keys to Becoming a Good Cross-cultural Listener:

- Show that you value what the other person has to say.
- Keep an open mind and be aware of your biases.
- Be patient as you listen.
- Pay careful attention to the talker's ideas and feelings.

# What Happens at a PIP Meeting

PIP groups are structured to include four components. The suggested order and timeframes is:

	Newborn Groups	Baby/Little Peppers
<b>Sharing Highs &amp; Lows</b>	30 – 60 min	20 – 40 min
<b>Developmental Moment</b>	5 – 10 min	10 min
<b>Break</b>	10 – 15 min	10 – 15 min
<b>Topic Discussion</b>	30 – 60 min	20 – 40 min

This is the *general* structure for your group. The *amount of time* will vary from group to group, and from meeting to meeting, depending on the size and needs of the group. The successful meeting happens when the leader combines creativity and an understanding of the group's needs with a consistent format.

## SHARING

Every week there should be a time for personal sharing from each group member. Sharing satisfies an important need for the parent because there are so many things happening to both parent and baby in the early months of the baby's life. Having the uninterrupted attention of other parents as they share their experiences helps them to process those experiences, celebrate their successes, get support for their challenges, and reflect on the learning the week has brought.

To start sharing, go around the circle and give each person in turn time to talk. (A person can pass, but you should encourage some sort of participation.) The leader models active listening as they listen. You will need to monitor time so that everyone has a fair turn. If they speak only briefly, you may ask questions to encourage them to share more. If they are going on too long, you will gently encourage them to wrap it up.

Most groups use Highs & Lows as the traditional sharing topic each week. Each person shares their best parenting moment or success, and their hardest parenting experience or challenge. Many parents tell us that throughout their week, when they have difficult moments, they can laugh them off, thinking “Now I’ve got a great low to share next week at PIP!”

You may include an icebreaker question in addition to the Highs & Lows.

Some PIP Groups go “deep” in sharing, with parents sharing very personal things, and emotions may run high. Other groups stay more on the surface, sticking to “safer” topics. The depth of sharing depends in part on you as the leader: the expectations you set in the beginning, how you respond, the questions you ask, etc. Be aware of the unspoken messages you send in how you respond to sharing. Be sensitive to the mood of the Group – do you have the right balance where members feel comfortable sharing personal experiences, but it’s not too intense for anyone? If not, what are some gentle ways you can guide it to the point where you think it would be most helpful?

## DEVELOPMENTAL MOMENT

One message we consistently hear from parents is that they want to learn about activities they can do with their baby, both to increase their own bonding with their baby and to contribute to their baby's development. For this reason, at each PIP meeting we take time for a "Developmental Moment." Engagement between parents and their babies helps to foster healthy attachment, which leads to healthy brain development, which is the foundation for all future learning. We ask our facilitators to conduct the Development Moment in PIP meetings by: 1) teaching parents songs to sing with their babies, using the PIP song sheets, and 2) sharing information and activities from the *Zero to Five* book. It's fun for everyone, and shows that the babies are a valued part of the Group. Songs can also be a secret weapon, since they are effective in settling the babies down when a cascade of crying occurs and it's getting hard to hear. Try singing a quick *Twinkle Twinkle* to re-focus the Group and re-set the mood.

The developmental moment may work best as a way to wrap up sharing and to transition into the break. Some groups do it after the break, as a way to get members re-gathered. Make time for at least one song, activity or nugget from *Zero to Five* each week.

**Singing:** Some leaders worry that singing won't be well-received – that the parents will think it's silly or will be uncomfortable. And yet we know that singing face-to-face is one of the few things that babies can engage in as infants, before they can sit up, control their movements, and participate more fully. It's best if you go into it with positive energy and enthusiasm. If you're awkward and apologetic, it won't be a success. Parents are usually grateful to be re-introduced to songs they may remember from their own childhoods (and if parents are new to our culture, they appreciate the crash course). Some useful tips:

- Relate the information that learning songs and activities is important for bonding and their baby's brain development.
- Start with a common song that's likely to be familiar to begin on a confident note. Doing each song more than once over the course of the session will help reinforce it for parents.
- Encourage parents to sing to their babies, not each other. Part of the hesitation among adults is the group setting, and so focusing them on their babies may lower the 'performance' fear factor.
- Remind them that babies love their parents' voices.

In the later weeks of the Group, let members choose songs to sing. The PIP Song Guide is full of great music and rhymes for babies. Songs marked with a musical note can be found on Caspar Babypants' PEPS album, made exclusively for PEPS groups. You can only download the album at [babypantsmusic.com](http://babypantsmusic.com). Look under the MUSIC tab, and use password parenteducation. Or share music from your favorite local kiddie band. You can also get ideas from, and refer parents to this wiki, which has hundreds of videos

of Childrens' Librarians singing songs and playing games:  
[http://wiki.kcls.org/index.php/Category:Rhymes\\_%26\\_Songs](http://wiki.kcls.org/index.php/Category:Rhymes_%26_Songs)

**Information and Activities** from *Zero to Five*: This book distills research-based parenting best practices into easily digested activities that parents can do to enhance their babies' brain development.

Suggestions for Newborn and STA groups:

- "Get in Sync," pg. 38
- "Speak in a singsongy voice," pg. 47
- "Talk to your baby a ton," pg. 48
- "Read together," pg. 54
- "Rock, Jiggle, and Swing," pg. 180

Suggestions for BP, STA, and LP Groups:

- "Include baby" (helping with daily routines), pg. 42
- "Say anything and everything," pg. 51
- "Read together," pg. 54
- "Say, 'You worked so hard!'" (promoting a growth mindset), pg. 58
- "Give baby chances to self-soothe," pg. 76
- "Make bedtime less crazy" (offer a bedtime routine), pg. 82
- "Let baby touch that," pg. 97
- "Save the box," pg. 98
- "No one temperament is better," pg. 133

You can alternate week to week between singing and a *Zero to Five* activity. If you've set up an expectation that you'll be doing something each week to support the babies' development, swinging into these activities should be seamless. It's fine to bring your *Zero to Five* book with you and read from the selection, and it will be very relatable if you call out the same activities when you see parents naturally demonstrating them – mimicking their baby, speaking in a singsong voice, rocking from side to side, explaining the world. Don't worry that you're trying to "teach" an activity that the parents may already be doing – you'll be reinforcing their own instinctive behaviors while going a little deeper into the science behind them.

If you can make the time to read the book, you'll have a mini arsenal of research-based activities that all fall under the umbrella of "Developmental Moments." For any given topic in your binder, there's likely a relatable chapter that you can use to add easily-digestible research to the discussion. Talking about sleep? Check out "Help baby sleep better at night," page 74, and ask parents to demonstrate how they swaddle. Have your parents expressed an interest in sign language? "Teach sign language," page 62, highlights the benefits. Even if the babies are too young to participate, you can assign a sign for each of the parents to come prepared to teach to the others as that week's Developmental Moment. The more you engage the parents in activities with their babies, the happier they will be with their PIP experience.

## **BREAK**

Never underestimate the importance of a break! Breaks are especially important in evening groups, when people are tired after a long day and need extra time to regain their energy. Breaks give parents a chance to tend to their physical needs – grab snacks, go to the bathroom, change a diaper, and so on. (Note: tell people it's OK to do these at any time!)

Breaks give parents a chance for informal one-on-one conversations with each other. This allows time to ask each other specific questions, discuss issues they have in common, and begin to build deeper connections. As a leader, you can use the break to check in with group members who hinted at a problem during sharing time but weren't explicit, or to follow up on a comment or concern. You can also do some housekeeping: take votes on discussion topics, make sure the hosting schedule is set, etc.

Baby Peppers and Little Peppers sometimes do not have snacks at break, but Newborn Groups do. In daytime groups, light snacks suffice. For evening groups, it's best to talk to your Group in Week 1 about handling dinner. Some options are 1) everyone feeds themselves (eating in advance or bringing food to the meeting), 2) they potluck each week, 3) the host provides a hearty snack or dinner for the Group. Some evening groups decide to eat at the beginning of the meeting, as people arrive, taking a shorter break at the midpoint. Many groups end up with option 3, but the group doesn't need to decide en masse – each family should just let everyone know what to expect when it's their turn to host.

## **TOPIC DISCUSSIONS**

The topic discussion differs from sharing (highs and lows) because it focuses on a specific area, and all members are participating in a free-form, facilitated discussion rather than taking turns. For some of your Group members, especially the very concrete thinkers, this may be the most helpful part of the Group, as it allows them to really focus on one thing, look at it from all angles and hear the experiences of other parents, and then draw their own conclusions.

We want to make sure that every group discusses certain basic topics, listed below. While the timing can vary depending on the needs of your group, each group should get the 5 basic topics in the course of the PIP Group.



## Order of Topics

### ***Newborn Groups***

Week 1: First Week – Newborn Groups  
Week 2: Feeding or Sleep  
Week 3: Sleep or Feeding  
Week 4: Development & Early Learning  
Week 5: Emotional Changes  
(Week 6: Topic + Mid-point Evaluations)  
Week 6 - 12: group choice  
Week 11: Topic + Alumni Group  
Week 12: Topic + Celebrate

### ***Baby Peppers***

Week 1: First Week – Peppers  
Week 2: Feeding or Sleep  
Week 3: Sleep or Feeding  
Week 4: Development & Early Learning  
Week 5: Emotional Changes  
(Week 5 or 6: Topic + Mid-point Evals)  
Week 6 -11: group choice  
Week 10: Topic + Alumni Group  
Week 11: Topic + Celebrate

### ***Little Peppers***

Week 1: First Week – Peppers  
Week 2: How Parenting is Different the 2<sup>nd</sup> Time  
Week 3: Sleep  
Week 4: Development & Early Learning  
Week 5: Emotional Changes  
(Week 5 or 6: Topic + Mid-point Evaluations)  
Week 6 - 11: group choice  
Week 10: Topic + Alumni Group  
Week 11: Topic + Celebrate

### ***Second Time Around***

Week 1: First Week – Newborn Groups  
Week 2: How Parenting is Different the 2<sup>nd</sup> Time  
Week 3: Sleep  
Week 4: Development & Early Learning  
Week 5: Emotional Changes  
(Week 5 or 6: Topic + Mid-point Evals)  
Week 6 - 11: group choice  
Week 10: Topic + Alumni Group  
Week 11: Topic + Celebrate

Take cues from the group about topics of interest, or invite them to prioritize what they would most like to discuss. Ways to do this include:

- **Survey Method:** In the early weeks of the Group, provide a list of topics to members and ask them to indicate their interests (Handout in Tab 2). Use that input to plan.
- **Planning One Week at a Time:** Decide each week what next week’s topic will be based on the needs/interests of the group at that time.

Strive for a good balance between informational topics (“nutrition,” “child-proofing”) and emotional topics (“self-care” or “parents’ self-esteem”).

No matter how thoroughly you’ve planned the topics, there will be a day when you have one topic planned, but all the energy seems to be focused on something more immediate in the parents’ minds. You can discuss the other topic first, then do the planned topic at the end, or, start with the planned topic, and give it a good try (10 – 15 minutes?). If the Group just isn’t engaging, say “I know I promised we’d discuss \_\_\_\_\_ today, but it seems like that’s not where we’re at. Is there anything else any of you would like to cover before we wrap it up and move on?” It’s also possible to combine two related topics (suggestions are in the “background info” section of the Guides).

**To begin a topic discussion,** lead off with a short introduction to set the stage for discussion. Follow with a good open-ended question that gets a conversation started. Let the conversation flow and evolve. Follow up with additional prompting

questions that keep the conversation going when it flags – either questions from the topic guide or questions that occur to you as the discussion unfolds.

If the Group starts to wander off topic, which is normal, wait for a good transition point to ask questions to pull the focus back to the topic. If side conversations occur, try re-engaging those parents. Or, try to cycle back to the original topic before you wrap up, just to make sure that anyone interested in the topic has a chance to weigh in.

Encourage participation without forcing contributions. Unlike in sharing time, you don't go around the circle to ask each person a question, but rely on individual interest and spontaneous contributions. As the group continues to meet, many leaders try and stay out of the discussions more, letting Group members carry it. The focus is on the parents and their experiences (rather than the leader's experiences) as they build trust and become more comfortable with each other.

In general, it's important that whatever approach you take be tailored to the needs of your group. As the weeks progress, you'll get a better sense of the group's interests and what works and doesn't. As the group develops, "what works" can be a moving target, where flexibility is important.

**Wrapping up the discussion** usually happens organically; either when you run out of time or people have nothing more to say. Summarize what's been said (attention spans may be short or parents may have missed bits as they tended to their babies). You should also follow up with an email that recaps the resources discussed during the meeting and include more resources from the curriculum.

# Preparing For Your PIP Group

## PRIOR TO THE FIRST MEETING

### 1. Check in with your Group members.

Please send the group an introductory email. Ideally, it's great if you have time to call each member to say Hi. During the phone call/message, introduce yourself, welcome them to the Group, and ask if they have any questions about what to expect.

- The email should include a general welcome message and information or directions to the first meeting. For Newborn Groups, you can also remind them that meeting hosting will rotate among their homes, and they should bring their calendars to the first meeting to sign up to host, and alert you to any major food/pet allergies.

## GETTING READY FOR THE FIRST MEETING – NAMETAGS

You could make “table tents” like those we use at the training (formatted document is available on the website). Cardstock works well if it will go through your printer. First name(s), baby's name and birth date are fine. Collect table tents at the end of the meeting, so you can bring them the next week. You could also use sticky nametags (some are provided in the folder of “extras” in your gear). However you do it, please use nametags for several weeks.

## GETTING YOUR HOUSE READY (FOR NEWBORN GROUPS)

The first meeting is typically in the leader's home. Getting your home ready for the first meeting will help set the tone for the rest of your meetings and will set an example for the rest of the group. It's important not to set expectations too high for parents so they don't feel overwhelmed when they host the PIP group at their house.

- Tidy up the house but don't make it too clean! (You don't want anyone to feel that their homes need to be spotless).
- Vacuum up all pet hair on the floor and chairs.
- Put a sign on your door that says PIP MEETS HERE, to reassure parents they're in the right place, especially if your house numbers are difficult to see.
- Set up chairs or furniture in the room in an intimate circular formation and put out a big blanket in the middle of the floor for the babies. Move any coffee tables to the side of the room. If you have a small house, this is a good opportunity to show people how they can set up the room so everyone can fit in.
- If you have children of your own, please make plans for your children to be cared for (preferably outside of the house) during the PIP meeting.
- All televisions and radios should be turned off during the PIP meeting as this can be distracting to those who are speaking.

- Please put all pets away — outside or behind a closed door such as in a bedroom. If you know that your dog will bark, please find a place where you can keep your pet so that it does not disturb the group.
- Provide a snack for the group, and let them know what to expect. Something simple such as water, cheese and crackers or fruit is perfect. It's fine to offer beer and wine at evening groups if you're comfortable doing so, and parents will be wondering if it's OK to do so when they host. Please note, PIP can reimburse for a first meeting's snacks, but PIP cannot reimburse for purchases of alcoholic beverages.
- Let people know what to do with their shoes, coats, car seats, strollers and diaper bags. We generally recommend that parents leave gear in the hall or a side room, to avoid a tripping hazard, but OK to bring car seats in if their baby is sleeping.
- Provide a place to change and dispose of diapers, and let everyone know where your bathroom is located.

# The Twelve Weeks of PIP

## FIRST MEETING

See Topic Guide on “First Meeting” for all the details. You will be doing introductions, an orientation to PIP, and giving everyone a chance to share. Newborn Group participants will share the story of their babies’ arrivals.

## AFTER EACH MEETING

Please send a follow-up email after each meeting. In the email, include a reminder of where the next meeting will be held and who’s hosting. You can also list resources that were mentioned at the meeting, or send links to helpful resources related to the day’s discussion topic. (Each topic guide has suggested resources you could reference.) It’s also a great idea to let them know the next Topic for the upcoming meeting.

## SECOND AND THIRD MEETINGS

1. Welcome any new members & make sure to give them a copy of the Intro handout (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> section of the binder) with the PIP guidelines. Have name tags or table tents available again.
2. Begin the traditions of Highs & Lows and the Developmental Moment.
3. Pass around the hosting sign-up sheet for new people or for any gaps.
4. Suggested Discussion topic: Feeding or Sleeping
5. If you have anyone drop or change their status in the group, please contact Rachel Ladov (rachel@pipaustin.org) with this information as soon as possible.
6. In week 2 or 3 of Baby / Little Peppers, and week 3 or 4 of Newborn Groups, plan discussion topics and/or guest speakers for remaining weeks.

## FIFTH MEETING:

Discuss the Emotional Changes and Challenges Topic. Optional: Show the “Healthy Mom, Happy Family” video. Before your meeting, download the “Healthy Mom, Happy Family” video (note, PIP is checking to see if we can access the video using these instructions. Please only download after getting approval from PIP staff):

1. Go to <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/postpartumvideo>
2. You will have a choice of purchasing either an English or Spanish version
3. ‘Buy’ the video for \$60 (you will not have to pay for this)
4. You will need to join Vimeo by entering your email and creating a password

Use the Promo Code **PEPS** to cover the full \$60 charge.

Please watch the video before showing it to your group, so you know what to expect.

### To watch the video:

- You’ll receive an email thanking you for your purchase. The link in the email will take you directly to the video.

- OR, you can log into vimeo.com and find the video in your library: Find the pink happy face near the top right corner. The drop-down has a link to your Library, and your video will be there.

## **SIXTH MEETING: Mid-Point Evaluations**

Find the evaluations (in the envelope in the back of your binder), and fill in your full name at the top of each. Ask the host to assemble some extra pens & pencils. Wrap up the discussion 15 minutes before the end of your scheduled meeting time. Hand out the evaluations, ask everyone to complete them, and ask the host to collect them and put them in the prepared envelope to send to PIP staff. We will share results with you after receiving them.

***Please note that it's important to distribute the evaluations at week 6 (ish).*** Even if some of the families are absent, please administer the mid-point evaluations! There will likely never be a week when everyone is present. We know from experience that distributing the paper version at a meeting and asking parents to complete it in the meeting is the best way to get a sense of how everything is going.

## **WEEKS 5 ONWARD**

Try to “fade” your leadership. Help them begin to take on ownership for the group to prepare for when you move on after the initial 11 or 12-week Program ends.

- Encourage Group members to choose and/or lead songs or activities during the Developmental Moments of the meetings.
- Have Group members plan a moms' / dads' nights out (see Topic Guide).
- Speak less during discussions, letting parents lead the discussion more
- Encourage them to use a social media group to communicate, and to initiate contact outside of the meetings

## **SECOND-TO-LAST WEEK**

In addition to your planned topic, you will also set aside some time to discuss Alumni Groups. (See the topic “Second-to-Last Meeting, pg. 97.)

Also, please pick at least one person in your group who you think would be a good PIP leader, tell them you think they'd be great, and encourage her/him to consider volunteering someday. You're sowing the seeds for future groups!

## **LAST MEETING**

In addition to your main topic, you will want to do something to celebrate / wrap up your role in the group. (See “Last Meeting” in the Topic Guide, pg. 71).

# PIP Guidelines

PIP has established the following four guidelines for our groups. These guidelines allow participants and volunteers to benefit from a supportive and safe group experience.

## **Mutual Respect Shown for All**

There is no “right” way to parent or participate in a group. Others in the group may have very different parenting/participation styles, and that is great! We ask everyone to come to each group experience with respect for all present. We also ask them to trust that everyone is doing the best job they can.

New parents may be operating on little sleep and new group members may be nervous. Both factors may contribute to situations where a member of the group says something judging or inappropriate. As leaders, our own ability to be patient and kind and to suspend judgment will help other group members do the same.

## **You Have the Right to Pass**

While we would love to hear from everyone, we need to respect someone’s right to pass. Some individuals are uncomfortable speaking in front of a group, whether in general or about a sensitive topic. That doesn’t mean they aren’t getting value out of the discussion and experience. We all learn and feel supported in different ways. Our ability to model acceptance when someone doesn’t want to share will help the group do so.

We can break the group up for some discussions to see if consistently non-sharing members are more comfortable sharing in other ways. Dividing into small groups to share their thoughts, or splitting couples into mixed-gender groups or by gender can make discussions easier.

## **Confidentiality**

In order for group members to feel safe enough to share personal thoughts and feelings with a group, the group needs to agree that what is said in the group stays in the group. It’s normal to want to talk to your partner or friends about topics and issues that come up at meetings. However, when talking to others, members must be sure not to include names or any identifying information when discussing their PIP group.

## **No Side Conversations**

While some side talk may occur when a parent is attending to a child, side talking among adults can be disruptive to group discussions and can feel disrespectful to the person speaking. It is important for facilitators to step in and end side conversations.

A few options for dealing with side talk include asking the speaker to pause for a second and saying, “Can everyone hear what Mary is saying?” or, “I am having trouble hearing what Mary is saying.” If the group is pretty comfortable with each other, you can be direct and ask those talking to stop. “Hey guys, could I get you back into the conversation, I want to make sure everyone has a chance to be heard.”

Side talking includes consulting electronic devices during a discussion. Ask group members to put their phones on vibrate and not to use them during meetings, unless there’s an emergency.

Lastly, pay attention to the group. Are they bored with the topic or ready to switch gears? Maybe that is why people have started to talk amongst themselves.

# Pledge of Confidentiality

I recognize that in my position as a volunteer with the Partners in Parenting (PIP), I will be the recipient of confidential information about individuals and families.

I promise that I will hold in confidence all information about any client of PIP. I will not violate the confidential relationships between PIP, its volunteers, related agencies and clients. The exception to this is that, should I suspect the occurrence of child mistreatment or maltreatment in any client family, I will make a report of that suspicion to the appropriate staff person at PIP (while keeping the names in question confidential). I understand that I am immune from liability for making this good faith report to PIP or to any social services.

I will not remove any written records from the PIP office.

I accept full responsibility for maintaining the confidential and private nature of all records and information. I understand that I am personally responsible and liable for any violation of this agreement.

I acknowledge that PIP retains the rights to all intellectual property contained in the training and curriculum materials, and I will refrain from sharing the contents without the permission of PIP.

---

**Signature**

---

**Date**



# Other PIP Policies

It is the leader's responsibility to communicate these guidelines to the group. Even if you've reviewed the information at the first meeting, reminders are helpful.

## Allergies

Ask the group at the first meeting if anyone has allergies. Ask that hosts notify the Group in advance if they have pets, and ensure that pets are not present during the meeting. Group members who provide snacks should indicate if any food brought to a meeting contains (or was prepared in close proximity to) ingredients that members are allergic to. If members have extreme allergy or food issues, they may want to bring their own snacks.

## Contagious Diseases

We require group facilitators to be current with the Tdap vaccine booster. Getting vaccinated at least two weeks before coming into contact with an infant is advised.

Group members should not attend if any of the following symptoms are observed:

- **Vomiting:** Projectile vomiting two or more times within 24 hours
- **Body rash:** Especially with a fever or itching
- **Diarrhea:** Three or more watery stools within 24 hours
- **Eye infection:** Thick mucus or pus draining from the eyes
- **Sore throat:** Accompanied by a fever or swollen glands
- **Fever:** Temperature of 100 degrees or more within the last 24 hours
- **Coughing:** If accompanied by a fever

If group members have questions about attending, their health care providers are the best advisors.

## Sales

No sales of any goods or services can take place during groups.

## Visitors

Due to confidentiality, and due to the intimate level of sharing between Group members, visitors are generally not allowed to attend group meetings.

## Absences and Cancellations

If you, the leader, have a planned absence, please attempt to find a sub or speaker if your group would like one, or provide the group with some talking points if they are comfortable meeting without you. It's great if you can then add one more facilitated meeting to the schedule.

If you have a last-minute absence, contact the group and let them know, but urge them to meet without you, especially if you are several weeks into the session and they've bonded. They are usually happy to handle the highs and lows themselves and then have a social time.

Weather-related Cancellations: The group members are in the best position to know current conditions in their area and if they should be out on the roads— the PIP staff cannot make that call. Please poll the group and make a majority decision.

# Guest Speakers

The PIP Speakers List is available to all PIP Groups, both during their initial facilitated session and when they continue on as Alumni Groups. The list is updated frequently. The most current version available via Google Docs. The list includes professionals from the community who volunteer their time to share their expertise with our Groups. Candidate speakers should be put in touch with the PIP Executive Director if they'd like to volunteer for PIP.

The primary goal of PIP Groups is mutual support, and shared information among the Group members. Speakers are a value added component that can enhance the overall Group experience by sharing information about a key topic of importance to your Group. However, don't overuse speakers, as they can disrupt the group dynamic. PIP doesn't require their use, and recommends using a maximum of two or three speakers during your session.

It's important that you avoid creating an expectation that you can't meet, so our advice is to find speakers that are available before mentioning the possibility to your group.

Here's an effective process for planning guest speakers.

1. Look at the speaker list, in the columns for "area availability" and "time availability." If the speaker does not travel to your area, or is not available at your group's time, cross them off. (Our speakers donate their time and travel, so please honor this by not asking them to do something they said they can't do.)
2. Then, look through the remaining speakers, and pick several that seem interesting to you, and that you think would be interesting to your group.
3. When contacting speakers, try to give at least two weeks' notice, and try to give them several options for dates. The more flexible you are, the more likely they will be available to come to your group.
4. If speakers are available, check with your group to let them know there are possible speakers, and to get their input if you'd like it. Once you've decided, make sure the speaker(s) has the information about when and where your group will be meeting, with directions.
5. After they speak, please share with your PIP contact who spoke and any feedback you can relate.
6. If you know a speaker who is not on the list and who may be interested in speaking to other groups, let us know so we can continue to build our list.

Speakers have agreed to some guidelines. Let us know if you had any problems.

- PIP Speakers agree not to promote, sell products or charge for services. Speakers may talk about their services/products if asked by group members, or in the context of introducing their area of expertise or background.
- PIP speakers may collect contact information from parents as long as they do so in a way where parents do not feel pressured to share it.
- Speakers may leave topic information, biographical information, or business cards at PIP meetings.

# Growing a PIP Group: Stages of Group Development

Once you made the decision to lead a PIP group, a process began which has its own life cycle. From contacting PIP, to attending a training, to beginning and then ending your group, you are on a journey. Did you know that most PIP groups follow a particular cycle as well? It will be helpful to understand the stages your group will likely go through and what you can do to assist your group during each stage.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Your role as a PIP leader is to help your group move from dependence on you to dependence on each other for support. When we think about leading, we often think of our role in a fixed way: This is how we lead, and we should keep leading the same way from the beginning to the end. However, our hope is that our group members shift from looking to you for answers to looking to each other for answers. Being mindful that the goal is for you to have less influence by the end of the group meetings can help your group make this shift as well.

## FIRST WEEKS

If you participated in a PIP group, take a moment and reflect on what you were thinking and feeling as you walked in to that first meeting. Or, what you were thinking and feeling as you walked into your leader training.

Walking into a new environment and group of people can bring a few common emotions – excitement, fear, and vulnerability. Just like when you signed up to lead, you might have wondered what would be expected of you, wondered if you would know anyone at the training, or worried that your group would not go well. These are the exact same things going through the heads of your PIP group members when they walk in to their first meeting!

What helped those concerns and worries? Likely, connecting with another leader at the training, getting information, and getting started with your group all helped to ease the normal anxiety we all have when starting something new.

### Common Characteristics of Groups in the First Weeks:

- Members look to the group leader for guidance and direction.
- Members have a desire for acceptance by the group & want to know that the group setting is a safe place.
- Members scan the group to see who is similar /different in an attempt to find their place.
- Members want to get to know each other and settle into their role in the group.
- Serious topics and deep feelings are often avoided.

### *Tips for the First Weeks:*

#### Set Expectations

Everyone comes to a PIP group with different expectations about your role as leader and their own role. Some participants may have heard a lot about PIP groups, others may have little idea of what happens at a meeting. Some members may know you are a volunteer and some may not. Reviewing the ground rules and getting those expectations out in the open helps

participants know what to expect and gets everyone on the same page. The purpose of PIP is to connect parents for mutual support and shared information and the goal is to support participants through their transition to parenthood. You are there to facilitate a conversation so they can support one another.

As for *their* role, this is their group. The more they give, the more they get out of it! Asking your group members what they are hoping to gain from the experience is a great way to get all those questions they've come in with out in the open. Going over the PIP ground rules is also an essential part of setting expectations.

### **Provide Consistency and Structure**

At the beginning of the session, most parents appreciate leaders who provide a structured and consistent format, who handle most decision-making, and who lead by example (sharing stories, tips, ideas and experiences). Then as time goes by and they know each other better, participants are happy to take on more responsibility, make group decisions, and talk and share more.

### **Acknowledge Differences while Highlighting Unity**

We know that it's human nature to look around and see what we have in common with other group members and what may be different. Throughout the weekly discussions, parents will continue to pay close attention to commonalities and differences.

As you orient the group, it is helpful to acknowledge from the start that each person is coming to the group with different life experiences, values, family structures, parenting styles, and cultural backgrounds. As a group, they can help each other feel included and supported by keeping in mind how these differences may impact the group.

You can assume that everyone joining a group will be wondering what to expect and how well they'll fit in. It's very common for the differences among group members to cause tension, especially at the beginning of a session, before everyone gets to know one another. If you can address differences as they emerge, it will help normalize what most people in the group will feel at some point – that they are different, in some way, than everyone else. It can be very helpful to have an open conversation within the first week or two that acknowledges any obvious, or not-so-obvious, differences.

A useful dialog with the group might sound something like:

"PIP groups focus on the *commonalities* of parenting – the issues and experiences that you're facing. But at the same time, your group was created by assembling families from general geographic areas and according to babies' due dates, and not the way that people typically connect, which is through shared interests and common backgrounds. One huge step in getting to know one another will be to acknowledge your differences as well. It's very easy to think that you are the *only* parent that's different – what we have seen again and again is all the ways that a parent may feel they don't fit with the rest of the group – the top dozen are:

- I am a single parent
- I am an LGBT parent
- I am much younger/ much older than the other parents
- I am the only one going back to work/not going back
- I am the only one breast feeding/not breastfeeding
- I have a fussy/ "crier" baby and the others seem perfect
- I have an apartment and everyone else has a house
- I have a different parenting style than I think the other parents have

- I have twins
- I'm an adoptive parent
- I had an easy birth and I think everyone hates me
- My baby sleeps/eats well and I think everyone hates me

Are any of you on this list, or can you add to this list?

It can be hard on you to think that you don't fit as well in this group as everyone else seems to, for whatever reason. And what we haven't yet figured out as a group, but will over the course of the next several weeks, is all the ways we **are** connected, and **do** fit, with each other. So what will be important is that, firstly, you hang in there and attend the meetings, and secondly, that you trust that you can talk about your experiences as a new parent without assuming that anyone is being judgmental – you need make this group *your* group, and we are here to be supportive in whatever ways we can.”

Let your group know that, over the course of meetings, you will discuss a variety of topics. Each group member brings his or her own life experience and skill set, as well as their own opinions on parenting. We are all quick to pay attention to differences, but by keeping in mind what unifies the group, we can support each other more fully.

## **MIDDLE WEEKS**

The middle weeks are often filled with a deeper level of sharing. As parents become more comfortable with each other, trust continues to build and parents feel a greater level of safety with one another. Group members may begin to spend time with each other outside of meetings. Moms'/dads' nights out may take place during these weeks.

### **Common Characteristics of Groups in the Middle Weeks:**

- Early in the middle weeks, trust is still fragile. Members may be quick to judge or unwilling to accept differing views as they find their place in the group.
- As trust further develops in the middle weeks, members are often more willing to hear and be open to different ideas and opinions.
- Groups become more cohesive and members experience a sense of belonging.

### ***Tips for the Middle Weeks:***

#### **Share Power**

To encourage the group to take more ownership, encourage group members to take on jobs – sending a welcoming email when it's their turn to host, choosing the song or developmental activity, planning a social event, organizing a book & gear swap, etc. The more responsibility group members have, the more ownership and commitment they will have to the group.

#### **Remind Group of Ground Rules**

Stronger opinions may emerge as members become more comfortable speaking their mind. Side talk may increase as relationships become stronger. This is a great time to remind the group of PIP ground rules!

#### **Temperature Check**

At the midway point, you'll administer evaluations and get feedback from the group. Take this opportunity to check in with your group and discuss any tweaks going forward. Checking in at this time allows you and the group to make any adjustments for the remaining weeks.

## **LAST WEEKS**

The last weeks can be both rewarding and challenging! You have watched your group grow into an entity that can exist without you. The group may seem to have taken on a life of its own as members feel connected and supported. This can be a challenging time for leaders as you often see side talk, less commitment to the meeting format, and frequent drifting from the planned topic. Listen to what the group needs and wants and see how you can adapt. If the whole group is done with the planned topic and wants to move on, it is our job as leaders to be flexible. If there are varying opinions, make sure everyone gets a turn to share on the topic before moving on. Trust your gut, and trust the group.

### **Common Characteristics of Groups in the Last Weeks:**

- True “Team Spirit”
- Respectful problem solving
- Ability to hear and support different opinions
- Small cliques may form
- Little dependence on leader
- Less interest in formal topics
- A desire for more free-flowing, organic conversations

### ***Tips for the Last Weeks:***

#### **Stick to Ground Rules**

During the final weeks, it’s important to be flexible and let the group have more control in the direction of the meeting. It is really important to uphold the PIP ground rules though, as they are there to ensure meetings stay respectful and judgment free.

#### **Mixed Feelings: Yours and Theirs**

As the official PIP session comes to an end, it is normal for you and the group to have mixed feelings. It may be both exciting to see the group take off on its own and sad to let go at the same time. Allowing yourself to acknowledge your own feelings will help bring you closure. It may be hard to feel like your group doesn’t need you as much, but this means you have helped them build the connections needed to continue supporting each other into the future.

Your group members may also have mixed feelings, wondering if they’ll keep going without you and, at the same time, feeling excited to create their own structure and style. Taking some time at your next to last meeting to talk about the session end will give them some closure too.

Keep in mind that all groups evolve differently and have their own personalities. Some groups may meet for 20+ years and some never meet again after the session ends. This is not about your success or failure as a leader, but about the unique group and its members. Leaders who have led multiple groups can tell you that sometimes groups gel and keep going and sometimes they don’t, regardless of what they did or didn’t do as a facilitator!

#### **Celebrate**

Congratulate yourself on the dedication and commitment you made to support parents! You have given these parents an incredible gift. You may have stepped out of your comfort zone to lead a group, you have given time and energy to PIP, and you deserve to celebrate!

# Challenging Situations

Difficult moments occur, but not too often and you will be able to cope! You are not responsible for issues that arise, only for helping to steer the Group through them.

If, after reflecting on a difficult moment, you feel like you didn't handle it well in the moment, or you have new insights on dealing with it, don't be afraid to go back to the Group and try again.

Leading a PIP group is an extremely rewarding experience. You are giving an amazing gift by choosing to actively support parents, and for the most part, the gratitude group members express will fill your heart. However, even in the most cohesive of groups, challenging situations and moments can occur. Whether it is a difference of parenting opinion or a difference in participant backgrounds, knowing how to handle these moments can ease the situation for you and the group members.

## WHY CHALLENGES MAY OCCUR

### Stage of Life

PIP groups are filled with people who have just gone through a huge life transition. New parents, often running on little sleep, are facing many new challenges and difficult decisions. This adjustment to parenthood can raise anxiety levels. Even the calmest of people may get rattled at one time or another as PIP groups discuss different topics throughout the meetings.

### Unique Individuals

Each group is also made up of individuals, with their own childhood experience, their own culture, family structure, and way of life. At times, navigating the varied life experiences of group members can feel challenging. While we often want to avoid these moments, they actually can be opportunities to bond and develop group cohesion.

### Different Needs

Individuals sign up for PIP groups for a variety of reasons. Some are looking to make new friends, some are hoping to get parenting advice, some were signed up by partners, and some just signed up because a friend told them they should. Sometimes, as leaders, we feel it is our job to make sure each person's needs are met. Sometimes we have group members who feel that need as well. Remind yourself that you are there to facilitate, not to be the baby expert or therapist. Remind the group that this is their group, and the more they put in, the more they get out of it.

## GENERAL TIPS FOR NAVIGATING DIFFERENCES

### Be Aware of Bias

Bias refers to attitudes and assumptions, both overt and hidden, which impact the way we interact with others. We all have biases based on our own unique life experience and need to frequently check in with ourselves to see what assumptions we may be making about group members. For example, we may assume that moms in a daytime group all have a partner working outside the home. This assumption may lead a single mom, or a mom who does work outside of the home and has found a way to attend a daytime group, to feel judged or left out. Another example is when discussions come up around purchasing baby gear and we have assumed that everyone in the group can afford these items. Sometimes we assume that

because of someone's background, they define themselves a certain way. An example of this would be assuming that a same sex couple does not want to participate in moms' or dads' nights out.

As a leader, you must be aware of not only your own biases, but those of the group members as well. You can address bias by encouraging group members to ask questions instead of making assumptions, keeping an open mind and letting group members speak for themselves.

### **Don't Ignore the Elephant in the Room**

So often, we deal with awkward or uncomfortable situations by ignoring them. When we avoid these moments, we actually make the situation more uncomfortable for the group. When a tense moment occurs it is our job as leaders to call it out! Simply saying, "I can see there's a great deal of tension around this issue," or, "This issue often brings up very strong feelings and conflicts can occur," can drastically reduce the discomfort in the room.

### **Ask For Help**

If we leave a tricky situation unaddressed, group members may feel uncomfortable or hurt. If you are ever unsure of how to navigate differences in the group or challenging moments, talk to the staff at PIP! Their job is to help you feel supported in leading the group. We all need help at times, so take advantage of the support available to you as a leader. Even if you feel you haven't handled an issue well in the moment, it's fine to go back after a challenge has come up and address it the next week.

## **TIPS FOR NAVIGATING COMMON CHALLENGES**

### **Leader Absence**

It is common for group facilitators to miss a meeting or two over the course of the session, whether for a planned or unplanned situation. How to handle an absence depends on the amount of lead time you have and the stage of your group.

If your group has met for several weeks and has gelled socially, and you feel confident that they can be deputized to handle the Highs & Lows and a topic or open discussion, then by all means keep the scheduled meeting in place. You could provide the group with the introduction language to a topic and several prompts, and suggest they have a discussion (choosing a fairly "lightweight" topic may make things easier on the group). If it's a planned absence and you have had time to line up a guest speaker in place of a Topic Discussion, all the better. The parents will benefit from sticking to the schedule and connecting with each other socially, even in your absence.

If you need to miss a meeting with very short or no notice (less than a day), and the absence is not weather-related, it's usually best to stick to the schedule as well, since the host(s) have likely spent time and energy getting ready and it can be hard to communicate with everyone in the group to try and cancel. The exception to this would be if it's your first or second week and the group has been on the quiet side thus far, or if you know several other members will also be missing the meeting, in which case cancelling may be the better choice.

However you handle missing a meeting, it's always nice to offer to extend the schedule by an extra week to make up for that session – the goal is to offer the number of facilitated meetings parents are expecting (12 for Newborn groups, 11 for site-based), however that can best be achieved.



## **Awkward Silence**

We often fear those moments when we ask a question and no one responds. Keep in mind that silence is not necessarily a sign that your question has bombed. Silence can be a sign of deeper processing. While we may have thought about the topic all week as we prepared, group members may need some extra time to think about their answers, even if they've known what that week's topic will be.

Here are some tips to help you through those quiet moments:

- Give it time. It may seem like hours when the room is quiet. Try counting to 20 before jumping in. Often someone will jump in and the response will be worth the wait. You can look at your notes or pretend to write something to occupy yourself.
- Call out the silence. You might say, "Wow, it got really quiet in here" or, "This is a toughie, huh?" Then count to 20 before jumping in.
- This can be a good time to share from your experience. Share about a personal situation that relates and what you learned from it. Then ask if anyone has had a similar experience.

## **Breastfeeding**

The decision whether or not to breastfeed is a deeply personal one, with many factors involved. Our local culture places a great deal of value on breastfeeding. Often parents feel ashamed or judged if they do not or cannot breastfeed (and if they cannot, then even the word 'decision' may be sensitive for them). While supporting breastfeeding is important, supporting parents who choose not to breastfeed or cannot successfully breastfeed is just as important.

Tips for supporting feeding choices:

- Remind your group that each parent is the very best person to make decisions on what is best for their family.
- Acknowledge that breastfeeding does not work for everyone. Some people are not able to or choose not to and we need to suspend judgment.
- Help the group by using the term feeding, which can refer to both breast and bottle feeding.

If you do have breastfeeders in your group, make sure they know it's fine to nurse with or without "hooter hiders." Sometimes if one person uses them, it sets a 'norm,' and we want to make sure to reassure everyone that they can nurse however they are most comfortable.

## **Conflict**

Parenting comes with as many different opinions as there are parents. We each had different childhoods, different values, and parenting styles. This means that there may be times when group members have strong differences of opinions during discussions.

Tips for navigating conflict and tense discussions:

- Take a deep breath. If you stay relaxed, it will be easier for the group to do so.
- Don't take sides. While you may agree with one person more than another, stay neutral.
- Remind the group that we are all doing the best we can. Some topics are more sensitive for some people than others.
- Acknowledge the conflict. Rather than dealing with uncomfortable situations with avoidance, which usually makes the situation more uncomfortable for the group, you can say, "I can see there's tension around this issue."

- Help the group separate the “problem” from the person by reminding them that many parenting topics elicit strong opinions. However, these feelings are about the topic, not about each other as individuals.
- Remind the group to share from experience. Help them focus on what worked for them, instead of “right” way to do something.

### **Dads/Non-Primary caregivers**

Dads and non-birth-parents are equal players in parenting, but may not have the same status when it comes to caring for baby. Non-primary caregivers may have gotten the message they are not “doing it right,” which generally is code for not how the primary caregiver does something. When we continually send the message that one parent can’t do it “right,” we may push them away from wanting to try.

Tips for supporting non-birth-parents in meetings:

- Make sure they have a voice. Don’t let partners speak for them! One way to do this is to have dads go around the circle and share first, and then repeat with moms. Notice how challenging it can be for parents to listen quietly and not add on or correct their partners.
- Avoid making assumptions around gender roles. Many dads are now the primary care givers, and both parents are involved in caring for baby at a much greater level than ever before.
- Shift groups away when discussions turn to criticizing one gender’s parenting role. While everyone needs a chance to vent, helping couples focus on what they appreciate about each other and how to express needs respectfully will help more.

### **Gay & Lesbian Parents**

While LGBTQ family structure may be different, they still experience the same challenges as heterosexual parents. In addition, same-sex couples may be navigating a new world that seems to revolve around stereotypical gender roles, and that may be challenging.

Here are some tips to help you support same-sex couples in groups:

- Keep in mind the biases associated with gender roles. Avoid, and help the group avoid, assuming that any couple divides duties along traditional gender roles.
- Instead of making assumptions, ask couples what works for them.
- Be aware of language. Shift to using the term “partner” and “parents” instead of husbands and wives or moms and dads.
- When dividing into smaller groups for discussions, try dividing by “primary care giver” and “parent working outside the home.” Another option might be “birth parent.” This gives people the opportunity to decide for themselves where they are comfortable.
- Give choices. When in doubt, ask the couple what would work for them, and how they want to identify.
- Moms’/Dads’ Nights Out. Many leaders wonder how to handle these nights with same-sex couples. Sometimes couples may want to divide among primary care giver/parent working outside the home, and sometimes both parents may feel comfortable going with their gender group (and if they are comfortable, they can leave baby with the parents that are having a regular meeting that night, or plan a baby-friendly venue). Bottom line – leave the choice to the couple, but consult with them before you discuss the planning with the larger group so they aren’t put on the spot.

## **Single Parents**

Single parents may come to either an evening or day group, and need to be supported and validated for their experience as well.

Tips for including single parents in group discussions:

- You can help them feel included in discussions around parenting with a partner by helping them identify where else they might get support in raising their child and what issues come up for them around being a single parent.
- While their experience is different, we can help them feel included and supported by really listening and valuing their ideas and feelings.
- When Moms/Dads nights out occur, the group could offer to watch the baby or plan a baby-friendly venue so that parent can attend the night out as well.

## **Different Child Rearing Philosophies**

A group member may make a statement that's contrary to your own values, but not dangerous. Here is where personal growth can occur, as you attempt to respond in a non-judgmental way. This is difficult to do when you feel strongly, but you want to keep communication open. You can offer your own opinions, but it's better to open the subject up to the group for other ideas. One leader felt uncomfortable about a group member who let her baby "cry it out" at night. The leader realized that her own child rearing philosophy was different, so she tried to be non-judgmental and offered her own opinion on the subject in a non-threatening way. Praise the group when they present divergent examples of parenting styles – it makes for more interesting discussions.

## **Wandering from a Topic**

A certain amount of wandering and digression is good, but the discussion can also disintegrate. It is hard for the group leader/co-leader to know if she/he should get back to the topic. As one leader said, "It's my group, but it's not my group." If the digression is of interest to everyone in the group, you could let it go on for a while and then suggest it as a topic for next week's discussion. If only two people are talking and the others seem bored, try saying "Well, we need to get back to our main topic now...Has anyone else had qualms about baby-sitters?" It is helpful to try and track who hasn't had a chance to engage in the original topic before the discussion veers away, or to make a point of looping back toward the end to make sure anyone with thoughts about the original topic has a chance to weigh in.

## **Side-talking**

This happens when two people, usually sitting next to each other, talk to each other while other people have the floor. It is bound to happen as people start to make friends in the group, or as couples interact. However, try to discourage this because it is disruptive to the group and may discourage the speaker from continuing. In fact, this is an area that participants consistently look to the leader for help. If you have the floor, don't continue with what you're doing until side conversations stop. If someone else is talking, break in, saying, "I'm sorry, but I can't hear Allison talk." It could be that your group is extremely social and could use a longer snack break for socializing. Whatever the reason, side-talking can become the norm unless managed effectively.

## **One Person Dominates**

After the dominating person says something useful or interesting, say "Thank you, great point!" and turn away, asking, "What do some of the rest of you think?" Or, you can use a

person's name to directly shift attention to someone else: "Roxanne, what do you do to make yourself feel better on a stressful day?" It will shift the focus of attention and hopefully convey that the group needs to hear from more people. If those techniques aren't working, it may be necessary to connect one-on-one to encourage them to modulate their contributions better, with the goal of giving everyone a more equal chance to share and connect. Splitting the group into a smaller discussion group a time or two will also give quieter folks a better chance to contribute.

### **Serious Family Problems**

Even if a PIP participant seems to be having a serious issue (a post-partum mood disorder, domestic or financial problems, or the potential of child mis- or maltreatment), your role is not to detect or assess dysfunction within a family. While it's always OK for leaders to connect one-on-one with a parent you're worried about with an offer of sympathetic support, don't take on the problem yourself.

- If the participant has expressed a concern or described a worrisome situation themselves, within the group setting, the appropriate response is to let the participant share however they need to, using active listening techniques to acknowledge what you're hearing. It may be useful to ask the participant if they want to open the issue up to the group or how best the group can be supportive.
- If the concern arises outside the group setting (a participant expresses distress to you directly, or you are worried about a parent or child, or another group member is worried about a particular parent or child), the appropriate response is to contact PIP staff before deciding on next steps.

While PIP does not provide clinical or social services, we can aid you and/or your group in accessing appropriate and helpful resources. Contact PIP if something worrisome has arisen in your group, you're concerned about a participant, or a family has experienced a crisis. We will supply you with situation-specific resources and may ask that you support the participant or family by dispersing information to the *entire* group, so that no single person is singled out. Within the parameters of the group facilitator role, is it not appropriate for leaders to intervene in worrisome situations directly, other than to provide parents with information and resources.

### **Leader/Co-leader is Insecure about Abilities as Facilitator**

It's common to worry that you may not be meeting the needs of all parents in your group, all the time. One leader says she feels insecure when she takes something too personally. As she put it, "You need to take your ego out of the group." Each volunteer comes to the role with a unique set of skills, and their interest in helping new parents connect is the main qualification for the role.

## **Not Being Able to Resolve Problems**

Sometimes participants have persistent issues that are not “solvable,” and this can be hard on the leader and the group. The group leader needs to accept that worrisome situations may arise that are not resolved within the context of the group. It may be helpful to acknowledge your own feelings of frustration and helplessness and then try let go of them. It may not be possible to ‘solve’ all issues in the context of the PIP experience, nor is it the leader’s role to solve problems for parents or to “save” a parent. What is of value is the normalizing and support that comes with a peer experience.

## **FACING CHALLENGES WITH CONFIDENCE**

Facilitators should not be discouraged by challenges. Without them, we would miss the opportunity to learn and grow. Difficulties in groups can be rewarding and enlightening for participants too – they are part of the ‘diversity’ in PIP groups that families hope to find. The group may bond over moving through a difficult experience together. Give them “extra credit” when they have approached differences in a successful way. With your help, they may develop a deeper understanding of another member’s perspective or life experience, or validate their own deep emotions about an issue.

Your positive attitude about conflict or challenging situations makes a difference! When you deal with the challenge head on instead of avoiding it, you can help the group ride out the difficulties. This will lead your group to greater closeness, deeper sharing, and growth.

# Tracking Attendance and Reporting

PIP asks that leaders communicate with their group members, track their volunteer hours, and cc: PIP staff on weekly follow up emails to their Group members.

## INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

Please send an introductory email to your Group at least one week before the first meeting.

Use this email to introduce yourself, give them the address and any special directions for the first meeting location and confirm that they are planning to attend.

### Sample introductory email

Hi Mamas,

I will be facilitating your PIPsqueaks group and I look forward to meeting all of you and your little ones soon!

Here's some basic information for our meeting this Wednesday at 10am.

- ✓ My address is 10 Main Street, Austin, 78701 There's lots of street parking. My cell is (512) 555-5555 in case you need to reach me that morning.
- ✓ I plan to have some light snacks and water on hand. Please let me know if you have any food or pet allergies (I have a dog who will be put away for the meeting).
- ✓ Feeding, changing, and caring for your baby in any way is welcomed :)
- ✓ We will rotate meeting hosts and locations among your homes, and we will be creating a hosting schedule at our first meeting.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to send me an email or text. And otherwise, I look forward to meeting you all soon!

Warmly,  
Rachel