

The Parent Participation Service

Parents Supporting Parents:

A Guide to Starting a Peer Support Group



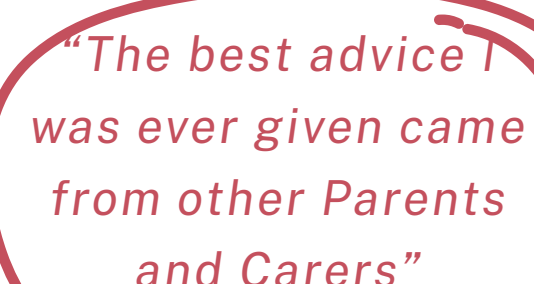
Why set up a parent peer support group?

The Parent Participation Team gathered valuable feedback from The Collaborative School Avoidance Event: Moving on Together hosted in March 2025. Within this feedback, parents and carers confirmed that the support which they receive from other parents and carers is invaluable.

A support group provides an opportunity for parents and carers to share their feelings, issues and ideas with others in a similar situation and to be listened to and heard by individuals on a similar journey.

Peer Support Groups generally offer the following to their members:

- friendship and support
- opportunities to socialise
- information and advice from parents and professionals
- emotional and moral support
- a listening ear



"The best advice I was ever given came from other Parents and Carers"

Creating a parent peer support group – how to make contact with other parents?

If you are starting from scratch, using your local knowledge and talking to other parents will be a good starting point. Every community has its own way to share news and get connected. Contact other established support groups who will be more than happy to assist you in establishing your own parent peer support group in your local area.

Contact The Parent Participation Team (ppinbox@ci-ni.org.uk) who can help you to link with other parents who are interested in joining or setting up a support group or who have already set up an established group.

Think about the purpose of your group...

One of the most important aspects of setting up a new group is to be clear about what you want to achieve. It may help to draw up a brief list of aims and objectives.

Example Group Aim

To support families/parents and carers who are experiencing the issue of school avoidance

"When I'm there, I feel listened to and believed"

Example Objectives

To hold a monthly meeting and evening social events.

To expand knowledge of local and regional services and signpost parents/carers.



Planning your first meeting - what to put on the agenda?

EXAMPLE

Meeting Agenda for [insert date]

1. Welcome

a warm hello and thank you for coming!

2. Introductions

a chance for everyone to say who they are and why they're here.

3. Talking About Starting a Group

- What ideas do people already have?
- Is there interest in setting up a group?
- What would people like the group to do? (Goals and purpose)

4. Time for a Break

enjoy some refreshments and chat informally

5. Planning the Next Meeting

agree on a date and time
pick a topic to talk about next time

6. Any Other Thoughts?

space for anything else people would like to raise.

7. Collect Contact Details

remember to follow GDPR rules and ask for permission

8. Close the Meeting

thank everyone for coming and wrap up

Parents/Carers should be able to choose whether and how they take part in a parent peer support group. This means they can decide:

- when they attend or take part
- how often they come along
- what they feel comfortable sharing
- what support they want to try
- what role (if any) they take in a group or an interaction
- how long they want to be part of the group



Group Agreement

A group agreement is a set of simple rules everyone agrees to follow. It helps everyone feel safe, respected, and listened to. It's especially helpful when people are sharing personal experiences. Go over the agreement at your first meeting and anytime new people join. This doesn't have to be formal but it can provide structure and reassurance to new groups.

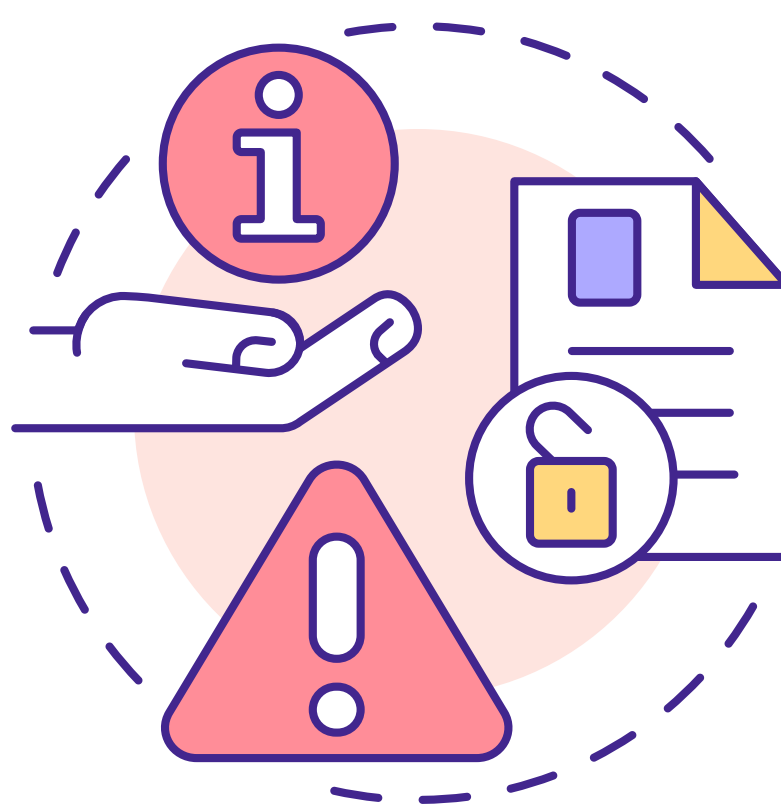
This could include:

- Respect each other's experiences and opinions
- Share only what you're comfortable sharing
- Keep things confidential
- Let everyone have a chance to speak
- No pressure to give advice – listening is enough

Confidentiality

Confidentiality Matters

- To help everyone feel safe and respected, it's important to agree that what's shared in the group stays in the group. Consider gently reminding everyone at each meeting to respect each other's privacy and confidentiality.
- If you're keeping any notes or contact details, make sure these are stored securely and follow GDPR rules.



GDPR

As a parent-led peer support group, you may collect, store, or share personal information (e.g. names, contact details, or health-related information). GDPR ensures that this is done legally and ethically, respecting the privacy and rights of individuals.

Key Principles

- Explain why data is collected and how it will be used.
- Use personal data only for the reasons you collected it.
- Only collect necessary information.
- Keep information up to date and correct.
- Don't keep data longer than needed.
- Keep data secure.
- Be able to show how you comply with GDPR.

What this means for your group

- Get clear, informed consent before collecting personal data.
- Provide a short, clear statement about what data you collect, why, and how it's stored.
- Store personal information securely and avoid unnecessary paper records.
- Don't share data outside the group without consent.
- Decide how long you'll keep data.

**See appendices A & B at the end of this resource for templates to use for GDPR*

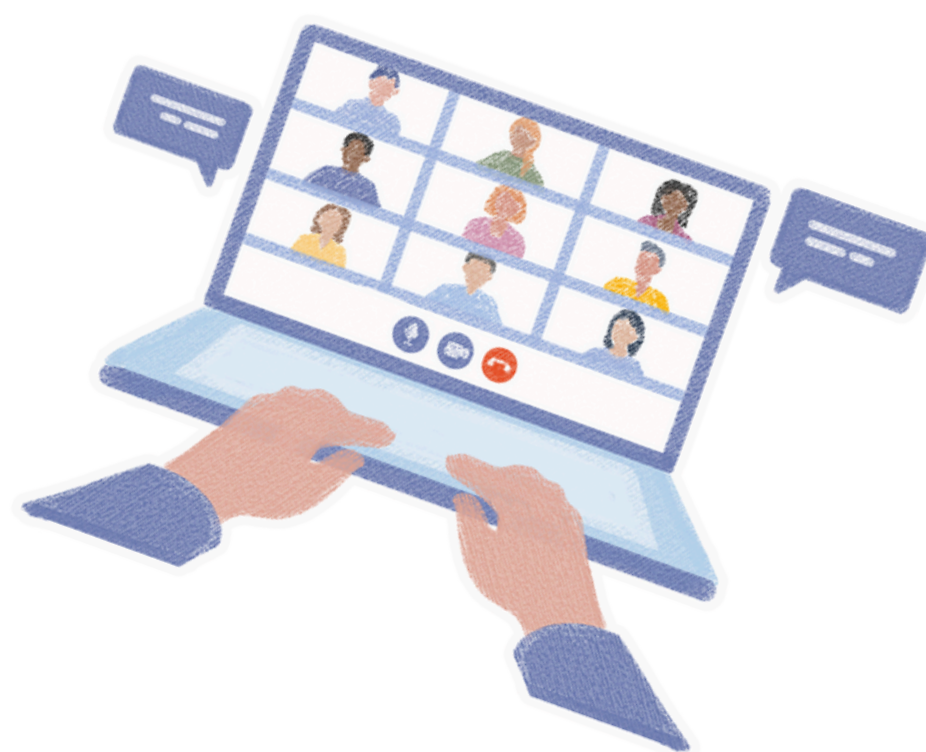
What to do in advance of your first meeting - the practicalities

Considering where to meet - keep in mind the following when choosing a venue:

- a central location, if possible served by public transport and with car parking space physically accessible
- a flexible enough space to use for your various needs - formal and informal meetings, private conversation, a crèche (if needed) etc
- comfortable in terms of seating, heating and sound levels
- available at a time to suit the group's needs
- access to a kitchen if you provide refreshments
- storage space for your equipment or literature if required

Don't forget to check if any cost is involved for the hire of the venue and whether there are any concessions or help with funding.

*Get in touch with The Parent Participation Service
if you require help with finding a venue, we can link
with local services who may have somewhere to
suit your needs*



Online Meetings

Meeting online can be a flexible, low-cost alternative or complement to in-person gatherings. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams allow parents to join from home, which may be more accessible for those with limited time, childcare challenges, or mobility issues. Consider offering a mix of in-person and virtual meetings to meet the needs of a wider group. If hosting online, ensure:

- Everyone knows how to access the platform
- Offer help with basic tech setup if needed
- Keep the group agreement in place

Do you need a committee?

When your group is just getting started, it can be helpful to keep things simple and informal. You don't need to use official titles like Chair, Secretary, or Treasurer right away.

Instead, it's a good idea to think about what tasks need to be done. In the beginning, you might need to:

- Create and share information about the group
- Welcome new parents
- Organise practical things, like booking a place to meet
- Collect helpful information or resources
- Keep track of any money
- Do a bit of fundraising
- Let professionals know about the group
- Reach out to other helpful organisations

These jobs can be shared in a way that feels right for your group — there's no need to be formal unless you want to be. Sharing responsibilities helps everyone feel part of the group and makes sure the work doesn't fall on just one or two people.



What to do if you are worried about someone in the group...

Safeguarding and Child Protection

To help keep children and young people safe, your peer support group should have clear steps in place—these are called ***safeguarding and child protection procedures***. They explain exactly what to do if there are any concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing.

For example, your procedures should explain:

- How group members should respond if they're worried about a child or young person.
- What steps to take if something doesn't feel right—whether it's happening inside your group or somewhere else.
- That these steps are separate from any procedures you may have for adults, including vulnerable adults or those over 18.



Everyone in your group should:

- Read and sign the safeguarding policy and procedures.
- Understand how important it is to talk about, report, and record any concerns they might have—no matter how small.

This helps make sure your group is a safe and supportive space for everyone involved.

**See appendix C at the end of this resource for sample safeguarding policy*

Parentline NI

Parenting can be one of the most rewarding journeys, but it's not always easy. Parentline NI offer a free, confidential phone line where you can talk to someone who understands. Whether you're looking for advice, have concerns about your child, or just need a listening ear, Parentline NI are here for you. No judgement, no pressure – just support when you need it most.



All calls are answered by a dedicated and professional team of Parent Support Officers, who wholeheartedly believe in the importance of parenting. Parent Support Officers are prepared to expect questions on a huge range of issues. There are no silly questions when it comes to parenting!

Parentline NI can be reached by calling 0808 8020 400 or by accessing their webchat on www.ci-ni.org.uk Additionally, parents can email Parentline@ci-ni.org.uk for more information, resources and advice.



Call: 0808 8020 400

Calls are FREE from all UK landlines and mobiles



Thinking about Funding...



Think about whether your group will need any money – for example, to rent a space or cover other costs. Start with a simple budget to help your group do what it plans to do. You might only need a small amount, such as for drinks and snacks at meetings, but you could also plan for things like buying resources or holding special events.

Keeping in touch with everyone

- Keep a list of members with their contact details in one place. This could be a spreadsheet or something similar—it doesn't have to be on a computer system. Just remember to follow GDPR rules and get permission from parents before saving their information.
- Ask parents what kind of information they'd like to receive—this could be a great way to start a newsletter!
- Think about organising local meet-ups where parents can share ideas, support each other, and learn about helpful services and resources.
- Consider the various methods of communication – eg Facebook, Instagram, whatsapp, text, email – and find out what works best for your group.



Advertising Your Peer Support Group

Enlist the help and support of local organisations, schools or other services to help promote the group. Schools will often have a parents' email or newsletter you can include an advert in.

The role of professional workers

The relationship between a parent peer support group and professional workers is often extremely important. If a professional is involved in starting and running a parents' group, it is better for both the professional and group to collaborate and share ideas from the beginning. Both parents and professionals are working together to do the best for our children and young people. Professionals will have a good knowledge of what support and services are already available and appropriate. Collaboration with parents/carers will also help practitioners/professionals in the planning of future services and resources.

The strengths of parent-led groups

A parent support group run by parents themselves can feel very different from one run by professionals. When parents lead the group, they often feel more involved and take more ownership. This can make the group more helpful and meaningful for everyone.

Being part of a parent-led group can also give parents more confidence and a stronger voice. It can help them work together to speak up and influence local services that affect their children and families.



The Parent Participation Service - how we can support...

Our service is here to help parents who want to set up their own parent support group. We can offer guidance on how to get started, share useful resources, and provide tips on running a group that feels welcoming and supportive. Beyond that, we also support the creation of a wider network of peer groups, so that no group feels isolated. We can help connect you with other parent groups in your local area and across the region, creating opportunities to share ideas, swap resources and learn from each others experiences.

By being part of this broader network, your group can access a sense of belonging to a larger community of parents who are all navigating similar challenges and supporting one another. Whether you're just getting started or already running a group, we're here to help you build lasting connections and strengthen the support available to families everywhere.



Contact us by emailing ppinbox@ci-ni.org.uk for further information

Appendix A: Sample GDPR Compliance Checklist for Peer Support Groups

checklist

- ☐ List all personal data you collect (e.g. names, emails, phone numbers)

- ☐ Identify your reason for processing data (e.g. consent).

- ☐ Check you have signed consent from members before collecting personal data

- ☐ Provide members with a privacy notice (see Appendix B)

- ☐ Have a process for deleting data

- ☐ Keep data in a password protected system

- ☐ Collect only what is necessary and relevant

- ☐ Know what to do in the case of a data breach

- ☐ Revisit the checklist regularly

Appendix B: Sample Privacy Notice for a Parent-Led Peer Support Group

Privacy Notice

This peer support group is committed to protecting your personal data in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

What Information We Collect

We may collect your name, contact details, and any relevant personal information you choose to share with us for the purpose of support and communication.

Why We Collect It

We collect this data to:

- Contact you about group activities
- Share information or resources
- Provide tailored peer support

How We Store It

Your data is stored securely in password-protected digital files and will not be shared without your consent.

How Long We Keep It

We retain your data only as long as necessary for group purposes or as required by law. You can ask us to delete your data at any time.

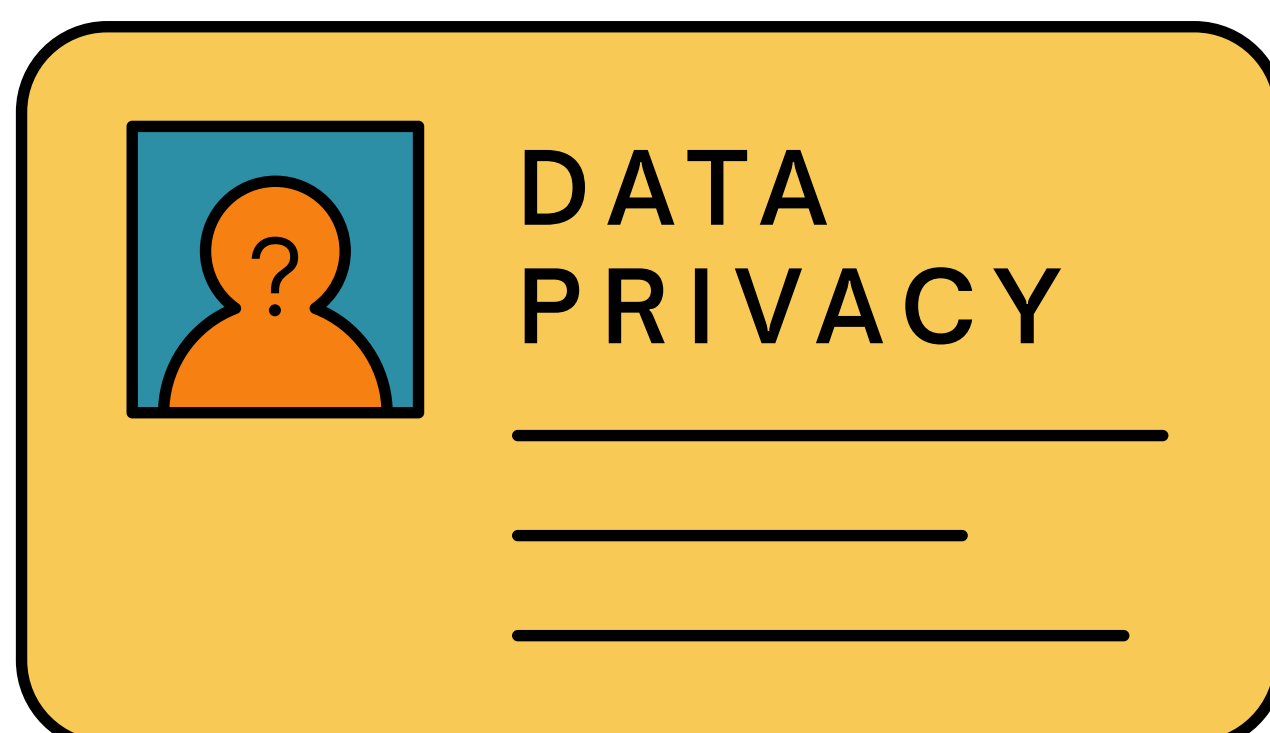
Your Rights

You have the right to:

- Access the data we hold about you
- Request corrections or deletion
- Withdraw your consent at any time

Contact

For any data protection concerns, please contact: (provide contact name, email, phone no.).



Appendix C : Sample Safeguarding Policy Statement

This peer support group is committed to providing a safe and supportive environment for all. We recognise the importance of safeguarding and will take all reasonable steps to prevent abuse, neglect, harm and exploitation.

We will respond to any safeguarding concerns raised by members or others and will work with relevant authorities to ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals involved.

We will prioritise confidentiality but will disclose concerns when required by law or to protect vulnerable individuals, children and young persons.

We are committed to empowering members to make informed decisions about their own safety and well-being.

If you are concerned about a child or young person's wellbeing, you should contact your local Health and Social Care Trust's Gateway Services Team (contact details are below).

You can also contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or email them at help@nspcc.org.uk.

Serious concerns should be reported to the PSNI immediately.

Gateway Team Contact Details

BHSCT • 028 9050 7000 (9am-5pm)	NHSCT • 0300 1234 333 (9am-5pm)	SEHSCT • 0300 1000 300 (9am-5PM)
SHSCT • 028 3756 7100 (9am-5pm)	WHSCT • 028 7131 4090 (9am-5pm)	

**The contact number for the Regional Emergency Social Work Service is
0800 197 9995 (after 5pm, weekends and public holidays)**