

How to Start, Organize and Facilitate an Adoptive Parents Support Group

“Parts Pals” Inspired by Holly van Gulden

Goal: Small peer-led support groups for parents whose children joined their families through adoption; to support each other through the journey so we can do our best for our children.

Hello Fellow Adoptive Parents,
Here are some ideas based on what I have learned over the last 10 years. Take what works, modify what needs to be changed and let go of the rest. Feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or feedback. Let me know what works and what doesn't work for your group so that we can learn from you.

I'm also happy to help you start your own “Parts Pals” support group.

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Initiating the Group

I started getting coaching from Holly van Gulden in 2011. At the 2011 Pact Holly van Gulden spring training, I sought out 7 other parents I knew were also inspired by Holly's work to meet over Skype so we could support each other in practicing what we learned. In January 2012 I asked Holly to come out to the SF Bay Area to do a 3-day advanced training for our group and any other interested parents.

After the training, the larger group of 20 participants became “Parts Pals”*:
• a yahoo groups email list and
• an in person peer support group

Over the years, I created two email lists: “Parts Pals” continues to serve the core group that meets regularly and shares frequently on the email list; and “Resources for Parts Pals” that includes all members, including those that are not able to meet or post often, to share resources.

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Currently our “Parts Pals” group has 7 local members (Berkeley-Oakland), and 1 out of town member (San Jose). We are white parents with children of color (both Foster-Adopt, and international adoption). We meet once a month. Pre-Covid we had 5-8 folks per gathering with one or two people zooming or calling in (even the local ones when they can’t get child care, someone is sick, or there is a crisis). Sometimes we had one person on zoom and another person on the phone while the rest of us were in my cottage. These days we are on zoom. When we began, our kids ranged in age between 6-17 years old. They are now 16-27.

*thanks to Jane Swanson for the great name “Parts Pals”

Organizing the Gatherings—Date/Time:

For years I used doodle.com to create a poll for 3 or 4 dates. During the first year of Covid, we met weekly for extra support. Now we meet once a month, second Sunday 3:30-5 p.m.

A week before we meet, I send an *email reminder* with:

- date/time
- group process reminder
- parking info and “snacks appreciated” (for in-person)
- zoom link (for zoom)
- and a parts reminder: “Doors (zoom room) open at 3:15, please use your arrive-on-time parts, so we can get settled and start on time as this time is so valuable for all of us.” (Before when I posted just the start time at 3:30, folks trickled in late. Of course with kids, sometimes folks are late and that is OK. This note though helped all of us start on time—including me).

Important: If you host, you commit to host even if only one other person can meet (this is what keeps it going).

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Room, Computer, Phone Set-up:

- chairs in a circle, table for snacks and drinks, water and glasses
- 1 pen and 1 index card on each chair (so they can jot down notes)
- everyone brings snacks to share
- 3:15 doors open, zoom room open, audio/video check
- 3:25 call folks who are joining by phone
- I use my phone as a timer, someone else uses their phone for folks calling in
- **PRIVACY:** When meeting in person, people who are not in the group can not be within hearing range—especially children. Parents can not bring children to meetings. When on zoom or on phone, no others can be within hearing range.

Group Process

I created the group process by combining some of the "best practices" I experienced at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health during my yoga teacher training, and in my doctoral program at the Fielding Institute. This may give you ideas to develop a process for your particular group based on what works for you. This group process helps Parts Pals to be a "safe, valuing, validating, non-judgmental, non-shaming" space (the key principles of Holly van Gulden's approach as stated in the book *And You Are Still You* written by Holly van Gulden and Ann Sutton).

Centering:

1 minute of silence to arrive/center in the group (eyes open or closed)

Notes for Check-In:

1 minute to jot down a few notes on the notecards so you can cover the key points you want to share in the personal check-in (for example: “what parts are up for you right now, what’s working, what’s not working and where would you appreciate ideas, resources”)

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Check-In:

Each person gets equal time. In our group, each person gets 5-10 minutes each depending on group size. Turn taking order is based on who is ready to check-in.

- **Speaker:** what parts are up for you right now, what's working, what's not working and where would you appreciate ideas, resources
- **Listeners:** no comments or questions (questions for clarity only). Listeners can jot down questions, comments and resources on the index cards for the free exchange that follows
Note: as the facilitator, this is the biggest challenge at first; group members will want to jump in. Gently remind them to jot things down. This is the heart  of the process: allowing a parent to speak without interruption, pausing if they like, so they are truly heard. Often they will discover what they really want to say as they speak at their own pace, in their own way, knowing they are held by the group without getting sidetracked.
On Zoom, ask people to hold off sending comments in the chat until free exchange. Zoom chat can distract the speaker.

Free Exchange:

Free exchange of feelings, thoughts, ideas, resources; no turn taking, cross-talk OK. For example, members may:

- ask someone to say more about a situation
- appreciate positive parenting parts
- validate feelings and parenting dilemmas
- offer ideas, tools, support for addressing challenging behaviors

Check-Out:

1 minute each around the circle, facilitator starts and shows direction of turn taking

- speaker: what parts are up for you right now, any last thoughts, feelings
- listeners: no comments or questions

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Group Process Summary and Example

90 Minutes
8 Participants

- **Centering** (3 mins)
- **Notes for Check-In** (3 mins)
- **Check-In** (up to 7 mins each, total 56 mins)
 - **Speaker:** *What parts are up for you?, What’s working?, What’s not working and where you would like resources, ideas?*
 - **Listener:** *no comments or questions; questions for clarity only*
- **Free Exchange** (18 mins)
- **Check-Out** (10 mins)

Note buffer time added for transitioning

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Facilitator role

This group process sounds simple. It is AND it is profound. All of us love the chance to really be listened to, to be with others who really get it. It's best to go over the group process above the first few times before you start centering. The group process helps everyone participate. As a talker, I really appreciate the process so I don't dominate. It helps to create safety in the group—and safety is key!! Like other groups I've worked with, the parents initially resisted the process—they wanted to jump in during check-in, said it's not “natural”, etc. This is where you as the facilitator stay calm, centered and then kindly, firmly restate the process. When someone starts interrupting, you remind them, “this is check-in, you can jot notes down on your index cards for free exchange.” During free exchange, if someone starts to dominate, I will sometimes ask questions to folks who haven't been talking. At first it was challenging for the group. Then, after a few months, members began to experience the value of the process. We've been going for almost 10 years and now it's easy as a facilitator. You can rotate the facilitator role if it works for your group.

Time Keeper role

It is also key to keep time. The facilitator can do both, or another person can keep time. I use my phone. It's great to have the sound let members know their time is done. If they are in the middle of a point, especially if emotional, of course they can finish. Some people will say “I don't have that much to say so I'll give my extra minutes to someone”. Remind them this is their time, be OK with a little silence, and most will have more to say. If they don't that's fine too, just stay with the process vs. giving extra time to someone else. I have an index card with estimates including some buffer time for each part of the process based on the number of participants. For example our, meetings are 90 minutes:

# of Parts Pals	Center	Notes for Check-In	Check-In	Free Exchange*	Check Out
8	3 mins	3 mins	7 min/per person (56 minutes)	18 mins	10 mins

*Note: *Free Exchange* time will vary. It's important to end the *Free Exchange* so you have enough time for each person to *Check Out*.

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It is very important to start and especially to end on time

Everyone in a parent support group has responsibilities at home and often can't be late. If the group tends to run over, members are tense through the gathering. When they know the facilitator will end on time, that limit provides peace of mind for the participants. You can feel the ease in the space. I learned this as a yoga teacher from one of my teachers, Judith Lasater. Limits create safety—so key for us as facilitators and as parents.

This group process is for a support group, not a practice group for skills training

If you want to do some kind of teaching or skill training, it is a different kind of process.

After the get together, we usually send emails to our list to exchange resources, offer appreciation, encouragement, etc. anything we didn't have time for during the get together.

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OK fellow adoptive parents, sending you warm wishes in starting your support group. I don't know what I would have done without Parts Pals all these years. I'm so grateful for the support. Parts Pals has helped me to do the best that I can for my daughter whom I so deeply love  .

Peace,
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