

CHAPTER 24

THE SUPPORT GROUP

Parents, you need to be understood.

You need the friendship of someone who can identify with what you're going through, someone who knows how to care, someone who really does understand.

You need to let your bottled-up emotions flow in the form of talk and tears. Talk and tears are T and T for relieving emotional distress.

You need support for figuring out how to help your child, for implementing your plans, to help you continue wanting to help your child!

You need your confidence regenerated, your courage boosted, and your stamina renewed.

You need to be taught how to survive in this strange, cruel wilderness of family problems, in this eerie jungle of confusion and frustration.

And you need someone to rejoice with you over the victories! To applaud you when you've done well!

We meet these needs in our counseling agency through our parent support group, which is named Parenting Within Reason (PWR). The name emphasizes the balance we diligently seek to maintain, and the initials are the abbreviation for *power*.

We have found the companions we get to be with in this group to be wonderful reinforcements deluxe. The participants say that it is one of the best allies a parent could have.

In this chapter, I'll tell you how a group like ours functions, and I'll briefly outline how one can be started in your community.

Companionship ranks highest in support received.

I asked several abused parents what had helped them more than anything else. I thought the parents in our parent support group would list God as their greatest tower of strength, since ours is a Christian counseling center, but they didn't.

Each person listed the support group. It was unanimous. The understanding people who had moved up beside them and who were standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them near their battlefields had become their greatest stabilizing factor. Here are a few of their comments:

- "You can say what's bothering you, and they understand. I finally feel understood."

- “Because of the group, I was able to maintain my self-control during confrontations.”
- “I relaxed a little and didn’t stay angry all the time.”
- “We were able to regain confidence in ourselves as parents.”
- “If we hadn’t been coming to the group, we would have killed that boy when we caught him in our daughter’s room in bed with her. We’re serious! This group saved his life, and it saved us from a prison term!”

God mostly helps people through people.

The parents’ testimonies about the life-preserving help that they’ve received in our group are in line with my belief that God mostly helps people through people. When we are going through our roughest times, God helps us by putting the right people near our pathway—people He has been preparing for years to be qualified to help us during our crises.

Praying people sometimes don’t recognize God’s answers because they are looking for some miracle to drop out of the sky. They need to begin to also look for a person (or persons) to walk into their lives—someone God has been preparing and wants to provide for them.

Parenting Within Reason has accomplished some incredible feats. I would like to give you a few examples.

One night, a set of parents had another major disagreement with their seventeen-year-old son. He ended up walking out of their home. Their fifteen-year-old son, angered by his perception that they had been mean to his brother, pulled a knife on his dad. A set of PWR parents took the fifteen-year-old into their home and let him cool off a night or two with them. The elder brother called his parents and wanted to come back home. Instead, they had arranged for him to stay a week with still another set of PWR parents. During the separation, they sought family counseling together, and they were reunited at the end of the week.

In another situation, a businessman’s daughter had been leaning toward illegal behavior. He and his wife turned to our group early to learn how to become stronger parents. They established companionship with members of the group, and they learned some of what you’ve been reading in this book.

Then, their daughter fudged too far and ended up in juvenile detention. The traumatized mother couldn’t stand the thought of her daughter spending a night in jail. Her natural reflex was to run and get her, kiss her, and say everything would be all right (as she had done throughout the girl’s childhood). In spite of knowing Tower of Conviction 10 (We will allow our child to experience the pain of his or her own wrong choices), it seemed she would rescue her daughter *prematurely*.

She called one of her newly found friends in the group for support. Our veteran explained that her daughter had also been in juvenile detention (JD). She told her it was a clean facility where both a male guard and a female guard were on duty together at all times. “The horror stories you hear about jails are not true of our particular JD facility,” she assured her.

This woman didn’t sleep a wink that night, and people from our support group gave her companionship during her vigil. With this *encouragement*, the mother was

able to support her husband's decision to allow their daughter to experience the natural consequences of her crime, and they let her serve her one night in jail.

This event happened several years ago, and the daughter has never been back to jail. She is graduating from high school this year as an honor graduate.

(In PWR, we normally assign support people to parents who are in a crisis or who are facing a sizable challenge with their children. It's a standard service provided by our group.)

Still another family had to go to court over a crime their son had committed. The parents were embarrassed and afraid. A set of parents from our PWR group accompanied them to court and sat beside them, in companionship with them, throughout the proceedings. The parents were greatly comforted by these understanding peers.

Huddle up with helpers.

Huddle up with helpers. Develop some supporters and expand your *united front* to include this grand ally. God will help you through your ministry to one another. Keep building the guard's tower taller and stronger: We are developing a *united front*.

But what if you have no support group in your vicinity?

If that is the case, there are at least three ways you can go. You and your spouse can bind together to form a support group of two. You can chart your course with this book.

Or you can develop an informal support group composed of family members and close friends who will read this book with you and agree to support you in harmony with it. These individuals must be the kind of people who can understand your objectives and work toward those same objectives with you. They can give you companionship and support you emotionally. They can help by providing an alternative place for your teenager to be (in preference to his or her hitting the streets). They can help by steadying the teenager when your presence is not effective in that way (for whatever reason) and by being individuals to whom the teenager can unload problems or share feelings.

Or you can become the key to forming a parent support group in your community. The manual is in your hands. But please don't take the lead unless you have a well-established reputation for being a Christian and being a "together" person. The way this group will be received in your community will largely depend on the first individuals who represent it. If you don't think you qualify to lead in starting a group, then you can be a catalyst for starting the group: Put someone else in front and support him or her diligently.

What is a support group like?

A support group like Parenting Within Reason (PWR) is a group of parents who have formed a companionship of mutual support based on the concepts and principles contained in this book. Teenagers are not allowed to attend the meetings.

The group finds a youth and family counselor who agrees with the concepts and

principles in this book, will attend their meetings, and will provide individual and family counseling. This counselor will not take over the group. This is to be a self-help group. Instead, he or she is to be there as a quiet monitor and as a resource person for the group.

As a monitor, the counselor will see some of the teenagers in private counseling and will be at meetings to be sure teens are being properly and appropriately represented to the group by their parents.

For example, my monitorhood was very important in a case where a woman came to the group to seek support for forcing her sixteen-year-old daughter to be more receptive to her fourth marriage. She accused her daughter of being rebellious and inconsiderate. In talking with her daughter in private counseling, I discovered that the girl wasn't being rebellious at all. She was just saying, "Mother, I can't emotionally handle another of your marriages. Can't you just let me get through two more years of high school before you bring another stepdad into my life?" Had I not been there, the group would have heard only the mother's side of the story and may have supported the mother in putting inappropriate pressure on her desperate and pleading daughter.

As a resource person, the counselor, being trained in both psychology and Christian principles, will be a wonderful source of information and guidance. As the ally with connections, he or she can help parents know where to turn (or not to turn) for additional help.

For example, one of the parents in our group recommended a counselor I knew was not against smoking pot or having sex outside marriage. I cautiously and courteously advised against him and saved this family from a disappointing (and an expensive) wrong route.

Note: The counselor's attendance at the meetings should be without cost. But parents should expect to pay a fee for private counseling.

Another note: Be sure the counselor has been selected in harmony with the guidelines for choosing a counselor provided in this book. Be absolutely sure to check with several families who have received counseling from this counselor. The actual reputation of the counselor is the true test. In checking the reputation, you are not looking for someone who succeeds in all situations (since success is controlled by the clients as well as by the counselor); you are looking for someone who uses reasonable counseling procedures and counsels within the perimeters of traditional Christian moral values.

How about the agenda?

Every meeting contains the following elements:

1. The meetings are two hours in duration. The first hour is for teaching, and the second hour is for applying the teaching to individual situations, sharing with one another, and supporting one another.
2. The meetings are presided over by a parent (or a set of parents) who serves as volunteer coordinator for a period of six months.
3. Before the meeting, participants gather early for coffee and fellowship.
4. The meetings begin promptly at the appointed time with a reading of the towers of conviction. These are read at each meeting *without exception*. This discipline keeps the convictions before the group and helps new participants digest them.

5. A chapter or portion of this book is taught at every meeting—perpetually. Once the group makes it through the book, the process begins again. Immediately before starting through the book again is a good time to advertise for new members.

Parent volunteers do the teaching. The concepts and principles must be so thoroughly digested that they become reflexively reproduced in thought and conversation and action. If a portion of this book is not taught at every meeting, the group will inadvertently drift away from its concepts. One of the most tempting temptations will be for the group to digress into informal opinion sharing rather than holding fast to these concepts and principles. When participants become familiar with these ideals, everytime someone mentions a concern, the commandment, conviction, strength, or principle that applies will instantly spring from someone's lips. The group must learn to talk the talk.

Our group had fun videotaping the volunteer teachers of this book. This helped in two ways: The videotapes were checked out to new people who needed to digest the material immediately, and the videotapes were used instead of “live” teachers the next time we went through the book. Watching one another on video added the pleasantries of home movies and bound us closer together as a group.

6. Allow each parent or set of parents to give a one- to three-minute summary of the reason for coming to the group (no one should be forced to share, however). That way the parents in attendance can identify others who could be most supportive of them. There will be parents of thirteen-year-olds, parents of seventeen-year-olds, parents of adult children, and so forth; there will be parents of runaways, parents of children with discipline problems in school, parents of children who are making poor grades in school, parents of pot smokers, and so forth. These folks need to find one another.

These three-minute summaries also serve to assure parents that their's is not the only family in trouble. Sharing at this level stimulates and hastens companionship.

An extremely important note: We stress at each and every meeting that everything said in our meetings is to be held in the strictest confidence. Stories are not to be retold, even with names changed. Violation of the confidentiality rule causes automatic and immediate expulsion from the group. Fortunately, we've had to expel only one couple.

7. The coordinator announces how the small groups will be formed. We try to assign people who have similar problems to be in small groups together. This is done before the break so that people can go immediately to the small groups at the end of the break.

8. Break for coffee and fellowship.

9. The small groups convene. (A new support group doesn't break up into small groups because its members are few. When numbers increase and veterans develop, it will be appropriate to break up into the smaller groups.) The small groups are led by veterans of the program, and they meet for forty-five minutes. Their purpose is to...

- let each parent or set of parents share specific problems.
- receive suggestions on how they might handle their problem(s) in harmony with the seven commandments for developing parental posture, the fifteen towers of conviction, and the other concepts and principles within this book.

- make a commitment to the most appropriate suggestion.
- receive a promise of companionship from those who want to stay in contact with them throughout the week as they follow through on their commitments.

Note: Small group coordinators must require strict adherence to time limits so that each parent or set of parents has time to participate.

10. The large group reconvenes, and each parent or set of parents announces a commitment and who the companions are going to be.

11. The group unites in reading the seven commandments for developing the proper posture as parents.

12. The meeting is closed with prayer.

Here is the agenda for the meetings:

- A. Coffee and fellowship before the meeting
- B. The reading of the fifteen towers of conviction (5 minutes)
- C. A teaching from *Relief for Hurting Parents* with discussion (30 minutes)
- D. Each participant reports on why he or she is in attendance (20 minutes)
- E. Break (5 minutes)
- F. Small-group meetings (45 minutes)
- G. Announcements of commitments and companionship (15 minutes)
- H. Reading of the seven commandments for parental posturing
- I. Dismissal in prayer

Guest speakers are to give and receive.

A guest speaker can be used during the first hour. Having a guest speaker will help the group in at least two ways.

First, the speaker can introduce the group to the thinking, procedures, and help of various allies.

Second, the group becomes visible to representatives of the agencies who visit you, and they will learn to respect the group more. And it is hoped that they will talk up the group to their associates in other agencies. They will likely be more helpful to your members when called for help. That is why they should be encouraged to stay for the whole meeting. Otherwise, they may leave during the break after they speak, causing the group to lose half the purpose for having them in.

When guest speakers are present, the teaching time for the book is reduced to fifteen minutes, and other agenda items are compressed as well. Nothing is eliminated because the guest speaker needs to see what happens in the meetings: *He or she must see the dynamics of the group!*

We have found it unwise to have more than one guest per month. The participants need all the time they can conserve for doing their work together. They have important concerns to deal with, and they should not be slighted. Their crisis may not be able to wait another week to be considered.

What's involved in starting a new group?

Do not put an announcement in the local newspaper inviting people to help you start a new parent support group. The only way to have a good group is to start with a

core of Christian people who are aspiring to be fair and reasonable parents because the core you start with will chart your course.

So, you should start small and grow slowly. Invite a select group of parents to your meeting place and begin with them. As you start the group, you and your new companions will hear about others who are having misbehavior problems with their children. Ask them to join you. But try your best to invite only people who have *the capacity to be consistent* and who will not use the group as a tool for oppressing their children or who will not conflict with your group's moral standard.

For example, I went to observe another parent support group in Houston while doing research for developing our own. A set of parents there were trying to decide the stand they would take with their two teenage daughters. The mother told the group, "We've decided that our girls can spend the night with their boyfriends on weekends but not on school nights, and this seems to be working out pretty well."

The father objected mildly, "I don't think that I'm all that in favor of them having sex with their boyfriends all weekend like that."

The mother laughingly said, "You weren't against it when we were doing it!" The whole group laughed with her.

If you want to grow faster than you are growing, go to your school counselors, principals, and ministers and explain that you are looking for new participants for your group; ask them for referrals. Be open and tell them that you are looking for members who have the capacity to be consistent and who have the ability to receive new information without distorting it.

Once you get your core established, you have charted your course. If someone joins who doesn't agree with the values of your group, he or she will usually leave, and your group will be self-cleansing. If not, you must sharpen your diplomacy skills without compromising your values or purpose.

If you decide to start a new group without carefully selecting its charter members, you will likely have to be prepared for the trauma of requiring people to leave your group. Be prepared to see the group's quality degenerate before your very eyes and be prepared for your group to get a bad reputation with your allies due to the outlandish things being said and done by those erratic ones among you who distort your output.

Here's another story that illustrates the problems this can cause. A juvenile probation officer called me from the courthouse and asked, "Do you tell people to quit feeding their children if they're misbehaving? We have a teenage girl here who hasn't had anything to eat for twenty-four hours. The parents say that they are taking your advice by not feeding their daughter."

I assured the officer that I've never advised starvation. I say that between-meal snacks and desserts are family privileges and that if kids don't do their part in the family, they shouldn't expect to get all family privileges. But I've never advised parents to withhold adequate nourishment.

The point is this: The group is hurt in one way or another by people who can't seem to get their own acts together or who can't reproduce something without distorting it. Be careful. Work with people who can be worked with. Let the others get their help somewhere else. They need intensive individual counseling so that they can be encouraged at their own pace and monitored more intricately. This outcome cannot be achieved in a group like Parenting Within Reason.

Once your core group establishes the kind of organization you are, a desirable phenomenon happens: People will hear about your reputation, and people who hold to your standard will want to associate with you. Those who don't will usually want to avoid you. Numbers are not important. A group of around ten members is a nice size. Quality help is what's important, and that's why you should start your group with quality control as your top priority.

Parenting Within Reason groups may be duplicated.

A Parenting Within Reason support group for parents can be a part of your community. Caring individuals may feel free to use the name if you wish. I only request that you be true to the concepts and principles of *Relief for Hurting Parents*. I am claiming no ownership to the name, but I will not and cannot be responsible for what happens in the groups or as a result of the groups since I will have no supervision privileges.

Last evening, I attended a reunion of the parents who helped form our parent support group several years ago. They organized the dinner on their own and invited me to enjoy the evening with them. They told stories about how much the group had meant to them during their times of crisis. We felt a warmth and depth of friendship that is rare in these busy times. Support. We've learned the rich meaning of the word.

This chapter is from the self-help book for parents, *Relief for Hurting Parents: How to fight for the lives of teenagers*, by R. A. "Buddy" Scott © 1989, 1992, Allon Publishing. Other chapters, articles, and books by R. A. "Buddy" Scott can be purchased at buddyscott.com. *Teens Fight Adult Corruption*, a novel for teenagers who are showing signs of at-risk behavior, is a companion book to *Relief for Hurting Parents*. Sample pages of his material are on display at buddyscott.com. *A Leader's Guide and Teacher's Resource Volume* for teaching *Relief for Hurting Parents* is also available at the site for teachers of parenting classes and facilitators of parent support groups.

