

How to Get the Most Out of Your Support Group Membership

Consider the following tips on how to get the most out of your membership in our group:

If you know any other homeschooling families, ask if they belong to the support group that you are considering joining. If they do, you will already be acquainted with someone in the group. Or you can ask a homeschooling friend of yours if she would be interested in joining the group too, so you and your friend can attend meetings together.

Once you join, seek out other new homeschool group members who, like you, are actively looking for people with whom to connect, and reach out to them. Showing a genuine interest in others will help to spark their interest in you.

Check the member directory to see if there are any other member families living near you who have children of the same age and gender as yours. Introduce yourself and mention that you're a new member. Besides your shared interest of home education, you may be pleasantly surprised to find out that you have even more things in common.

While "older" members often turn out to be the most helpful people in the group, be aware that it may take a little longer getting to know some people who have been in the group for several years. It's not that they purposely want to exclude newcomers, but it's just that they already have an established support network which works for them, and they may not be actively seeking to include new people in their lives as you are.

Do express your appreciation to those members who were most helpful to you in the beginning. Not only will this strengthen your relationship with them, it will encourage them to continue helping others who are new to the group. Hopefully someday you will be one of the "veteran" members. When that time comes and you see new folks coming in, remember to look for ways to make them feel included.

Get involved and participate in the group's activities. Attend meetings. Volunteer your time. Submit information to the newsletter. This will help you to develop solid relationships with other members by showing an interest in what they are doing. Of course, trying to find your place in the group while you're also struggling as a new homeschooler can be a lot to take on at once. That's okay; just do what you can when you are able.

One of the blessings that being part of a support network brings, is being able to call a homeschooling friend who you can count on to empathize and encourage you in some way. You can even post your questions and concerns on the group's e-mail list, in order to get a variety of answers and advice from different members. If after a while you still feel that you are having a difficult time fitting in and getting the support that you so desperately need, talk to a leader or board member and they will see what can be done to better serve your family.

Please bear in mind that the group leaders are busy homeschool parents just like yourself, so try not to be offended if they don't call you back right away and be patient if it takes a while for them to respond to an e-mail. If it's something urgent that needs an immediate response, please say so. Otherwise, don't hesitate to contact them again after a few days just in case they missed the message.

In addition to their own household and family responsibilities, group leaders are constantly trying to think of ways to: 1.) provide the services that members want; 2.) facilitate communication within the group to keep members informed; and 3.) encourage member participation to make the group successful. One or two people can't do everything, however, and support group leaders are only human so they have bad days too. Even the most organized leaders with the best of intentions may find themselves overextended and exhausted at times. Feel free to ask them if they need any help. Trust me, they will really appreciate the offer. No job is too small!

If you are willing to volunteer on a long term basis, see if there are any positions open. Here are some examples of duties that may need to be filled: Field Trip/Special Event Coordinator, Newsletter Editor, Treasurer, Secretary, Resource Coordinator, Library Liaison, Hospitality/Welcome Committee, Area Representative, Mentor Mom, Yahoo Moderator, Webmaster, Special Needs Coordinator, Legislative Liaison, Reporter/Photographer/Publicity Person, Boxtops/Labels for Education Coordinator.

It's always been said that you will get as much out of a support group as you put into it. If the group doesn't offer an activity that you would like, organize it yourself. If it's group field trips that you are looking for, plan some and invite everyone. If you want to have a Park Day or Mom's Night Out, go ahead and schedule one. If you or your children have a special interest or talent, you might offer to start up a related ongoing activity such as a book club, model rocket club, computer class, or art class.

It's a good bet that other members will appreciate and participate in what you set up. However, if attendance isn't what you had expected, don't be discouraged. Many times, people's schedules are already set and they can't squeeze in a new activity at first. But as the word spreads about how much those who did attend the activity enjoyed it, future participation will probably improve.

In a volunteer homeschool organization, it's the contributions of individual members that hold the group together. By volunteering your services, you are not only helping the group but you will also get to know people who you might not have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. This will strengthen your networking abilities within the group's support system.

Even if you aren't currently volunteering, you can show your appreciation to those who are giving of their time to keep the group going. For example, tell the newsletter editor how much you look forward to each issue, and don't forget to thank the person who arranged for the group to go on a special tour. Believe me, they will be grateful to know that someone notices their efforts. Someday you may find yourself on the receiving end of the thanks!

You can also be a great help by taking care of a few simple things for which you are responsible such as renewing your membership dues promptly, sending in your field trip money before the deadline, etc. Besides being considerate of others and respectful of their time by not making them have to keep reminding you, it allows them to spend their energy on more productive projects to benefit the group. Don't forget to save those Campbell's Labels and General Mills Boxtops for us, too.

Finally, remember that no group is perfect, which means there is always room for improvement. Regular member input is needed and valued. Practical suggestions and constructive ideas will be better received, of course, than vague criticism and anonymous complaints. If there are specific things that you think the group could do better, propose a change and offer to help implement it. The members all need to work together and contribute what they can to make the group a success. Whatever you do, don't forget that YOU are an important part of your homeschool support group!