SUPPORT GROUP
A Guide to Encouraging Appreciative Parenting

This guide was developed in collaboration with:

Ștefan COJOCARU, Luminița COSTACHE,
Daniela COJOCARU, Simona APOPEI, Anda IONESCU, Diana PRICOPE, Alexandra SASU

The document can be accessed at www.qie.ro

https://doi.org/10.33788/qie.24.08

Dear Readers,

In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected yet paradoxically often more emotionally isolated, support groups provide an essential space for encouragement, sharing, and interaction. The volume *The Support Group: A Guide to Encouraging Appreciative Parenting* highlights the value of these groups, emphasizing their role in supporting parents in the process of educating and connecting with their children.
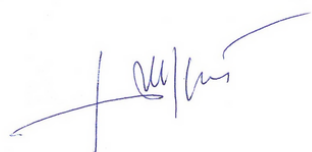
This material is addressed to teachers, school counselors, and professionals who work with families, providing them with practical and theoretical tools for organizing and maintaining support groups in schools and communities. Starting from the goals and objectives of such a group, the guide explores the benefits for both parents and children by offering a safe space where experiences can be shared and solutions can be discovered together.

A unique aspect of the appreciative parenting program is the natural transition of the parent group, after completing the series of meetings, into a support group. This step represents a natural and valuable continuation of the process of connection and learning. The support group becomes an autonomous space where parents can continue to share experiences, learn from each other, and offer mutual support, while also strengthening the relationships built during the initial meetings.

This guide promotes appreciative parenting, an approach that emphasizes recognizing and valuing the strengths of each parent, supporting them in managing daily challenges. Through practical examples, helpful recommendations, and clear strategies, the guide becomes a valuable resource for all those who wish to create more connected and stronger communities. We hope this guide will inspire professionals to promote support groups as a key element in supporting families and help parents feel understood, valued, and supported throughout their journey.

With appreciation and gratitude for all those who support and inspire positive change in the lives of families,

Prof. Dr. Ștefan Marian COJOCARU
President, HoltIS Association

CONTENTS

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?
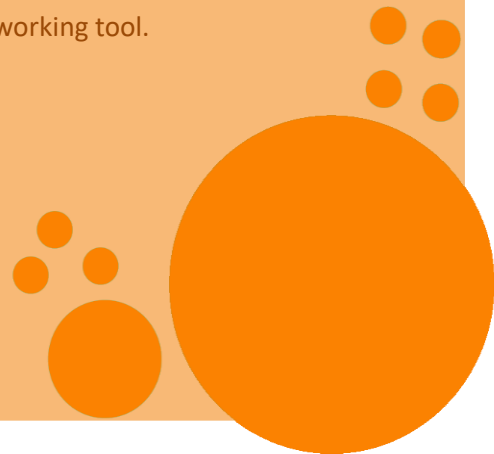
This guide is intended for support group organisers (teachers, social workers, local counsellors, and expert parents).

This guide contains useful information about the support group concept and aims to become a social networking tool.

WHAT IS A SUPPORT GROUP?

A **support group** is a group of people who meet to talk about similar situations and common issues and to offer support to one another. Support groups include people who share similar experiences and are founded on the premise that supportive interactions with people who have faced similar challenges can give participants a sense of empowerment, increase their self-esteem and enhance their coping skills (Pistrang et al., 2008). According to Helgeson and Gottlieb (2000), support groups are rarely driven by theory but are rather guided by the notion that people facing similar problems can offer mutual support and much more understanding than they would normally get from their social relationships. A person who has a support network may be inexperienced, influenced by their own stressors, or feel uncomfortable managing their own problems (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Support group participants can confirm and verbalise the difficult situations they are going through, thus feeling less isolated. Pistrang et al. (2008) describe this principle as "socially supportive interactions", where the empathy derived from support groups can compensate for the other lacks in people's social networks. This is also supported by Bryan (2003), who suggests that people experiencing similar situations have a unique ability to respond empathically due to a shared understanding of the issue.

Support groups show people that other persons are facing similar problems, which is something that helps them deal with their situation more easily (Campbell & Palm, 2004). Support groups seek to create a non-judgmental and confidential environment, respecting everyone's right to be heard. Thus, confidentiality and respect for all participants are mandatory for any support group. Support groups are designed to provide emotional and social support, information, education, and social networking opportunities (Heisler, 2006). Support groups are generally free of charge and available for all the problems listed by the World Health Organisation (Gartner & Riessman, 1977): emotional problems, physical disabilities, unhealthy habits, death, parent education, chronic diseases, etc. Support groups are widely recognised as being viable and effective as well as contributing to individuals' mental health to the point of being considered a growing social movement (Borkman, 1990). Although, the most prominent type of support group is *Alcoholics Anonymous*, there are over 500,000 groups in the U.S. for all people (regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, social and financial circumstances) facing social, medical or other problems (Jacobs & Goodman, 1989).

Support groups have the following characteristics:

– Support groups are made up of people who have the same rights and who have been directly affected by a particular problem or situation.

- The number of support group participants can vary, depending on the issue discussed (8-12 members/group).
- The duration of a support group meeting is 90 minutes, and the frequency of meetings will be agreed with the participants.
- Support groups can be mixed (men and women) or homogeneous, depending on the issues discussed.
- Participants bond with the group and get a sense of belonging.
- Support groups usually have a facilitator who runs the group on a voluntary basis, or they may sometimes be facilitated by a professional.
- Support groups have few members so that everyone has the chance to speak.
- Members attend group meetings on a voluntary basis.

Given the nature of these groups, participants will feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences and will be able to open up more easily. Support groups are helpful to those who face different life challenges, loss, or trauma. Almost anyone can benefit from attending a support group, where they can talk about various issues like:

- Parenting.
- Addiction.
- Emotional problems.
- Bereavement.
- Unhealthy habits.
- Physical disabilities.
- Sexual identity issues.
- Food disorders.
- Mental health problems.
- Illness, chronic diseases etc.

The role of the leader or facilitator

The support group can also be interpreted as providing emotional and informational support with the help of a facilitator. The facilitator should be someone who has personal experience with and is interested in the issues discussed in the group, promoting mutual support (Dennis, 2003; Oades, Deane & Anderson, 2012). The person running the group plays a very important role. The leader opens and closes support group sessions, sets the tone for the discussions, helps group members learn how to support each other and listen to each other, and handles any unexpected issues that may arise during the meetings.

A good group facilitator is a catalyst, not someone who wants to dominate the group. The facilitator moderates the meetings and offers directions in a way that encourages participants to believe in their own strengths. The facilitator must confidently manage the group, making sure that everyone gets enough time to express themselves.

The group facilitator must take into consideration the following aspects:

- Honour their commitment of attending every scheduled meeting.
- Start and end every meeting on time.
- Have a positive attitude.
- Be non-judgemental.
- Show empathy to others.
- Have group facilitation experience.
- Show an interest in and motivation for organising support groups.
- Ask for help from resource persons when they are facing challenging situations.
- Encourage group members to listen to each other and support each other.
- Lead the discussion without dominating it.
- Be a good listener, without giving advice and turning support meetings into counselling sessions.
- Be prepared to get actively involved (facilitating a support group means having to handle conversations, interruptions, questions, and unpredictable reactions from every single member).
- Be honest (if the facilitator does not know the answer, they have to be honest about it and commit to trying to find it).
- Pay attention to similar experiences (if someone shares an important experience, the facilitator should ask the other members if they have experienced something similar) (The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy, 2015).

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF A SUPPORT GROUP

The goal of the support group is to create a support network that promotes respect, trust and kindness and allows participants to make changes and decisions that improve their living conditions (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2001).

Objectives of a support group:

– Provide a safe environment where participants have the chance to get to know each other, to feel valued and listened to.

– Provide opportunities for sharing common ideas and concerns about the challenges of being a parent.

– Build connections between participating parents.

– Choose topics of interest for the whole group.

– Allow participants to identify the resources they have and find solutions to the problems they mention.

– Encourage group members to support each other.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SETTING UP A SUPPORT GROUP?[1]

Parents who have a problem they want to share can get help so that they feel less alone and better understood.

Participants feel empowered and start working on their own problems.

Participants can share information and get up to speed with the things that matter to them.

Group members can act as role models for the other participants; the fact that the group includes people facing similar experiences who have made progress can be inspiring and encouraging to others.

The support group is a safe place for someone who feels the need to talk about their personal situation, delicate matters or thoughts.

---

[1] Adapted from Koch, K. & Aden, M. (2014). *Guidelines for Managing Self-Help Groups. A Manual for National MS Society Self-Help Group Leaders*, National Society.

Support groups encourage participants to socialise and make new contacts. The support group can also offer information about the issue discussed.

Participants can gain more confidence in their own strengths that they can use to face challenges.

Participants can build a connection with the community and decide to be part of a social group.

All group members are equals! This helps people feel comfortable sharing their own problems.

Sharing one's experiences in the support group reduces anxiety, boosts hope and self-esteem and gives participants a sense of well-being.

The support group reduces the sense of isolation and stigma that some participants may experience.

Participants can find out new ways of coping with challenging situations.

Participants can be encouraged and supported by the other members who share similar life experiences.

Group members have the opportunity to help others.

Participants can learn how to express their feelings better and be more open to other people's feelings.

The costs of running support groups are not very high (invites, refreshments (snacks) for parents and the meeting room).

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES THAT PARENTS CAN ADDRESS IN SUPPORT GROUPS?

Parents can join a support group for the following reasons:

To learn about child development.

To learn how to boost the child's self-esteem through effective communication.

To learn how to support their child's learning.

To learn new child discipline strategies.

To talk about how they can share parenting responsibilities with their partners (spouses).

To find out new information about child-rearing and education.

To learn new ways to relax, relieve stress etc.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS IN SCHOOLS

Parenting programmes are intended mainly for those parents who are not actively involved in child-rearing and child development and for the schools which must deal with low student attendance (Ascher, 1998; Cojocaru, 2011). Parent education programmes start from the premise that parents need to learn how to interact with their children and understand their needs (Powell, 1988; Holt, 2011). Towards the end of a programme, most parents express their desire to continue the group meetings, as these are a source of social support (Fritz, 1985; Cojocaru, Cojocaru & Ciuchi, 2011). However, if the programme is discontinued, parent groups usually do not last that long (Leon et al., 1984; Holt, 2011). In this context, Powell (1988) stresses the importance of parent discussions that help build and maintain *supportive relationships among parents.* Parent discussions can take the form of support groups that are aimed at helping parents connect with each other, *giving them the opportunity to share similar experiences and feelings*. Support groups boost parents' self-esteem and enhance their parenting skills. They are beneficial to *the parents involved in a parent education programme because they strengthen the attitudes, behaviours and skills that parents develop during parenting programmes*. The parents who are part of a support group also have more confidence in their own strengths and can find various solutions to their problems thanks to the similar experiences that are shared within the group (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2003).

HOW TO SET UP A SUPPORT GROUP?

PRE-SESSION PREPARATIONS[2]

Defining the goal and objectives

Before starting the session, it is very important for the group facilitator to cover the basics so as to get a clear picture of how the meeting will go.

- What is the purpose of the session?
- How many members will attend the meeting?
- What topics will be discussed during the session?
- How will the proposed topics be covered?
- What kind of material is needed for the session?

Setting clear objectives for the meeting will help to cover the proposed topics and assess the needs of the participants. Although every support group is different, it should have some structure, which can be adjusted to the needs of the group.

Inviting the participants

Making a verbal invitation or sending an invitation to the person's home is an efficient way of inviting participants to join a support group. Another way is to pass the message on to all the people with whom the facilitator interacts, encouraging them to spread the word. Key community actors (the school principal, teachers, the social worker, the doctor, the mayor, etc.) can also be involved as resource people and help set up the group.

Style and frequency of meetings

Support groups can be conducted over a long period of time or can be limited to a certain period, depending on the needs of the group. Group participants need to decide how often they will meet, and which day is most suitable for all members. Some groups will feel the need to meet weekly, others once a month. After deciding on the frequency of meetings, it is very important to be consistent.

---

[2]HarmonyPlace(n.d)http://www.harmonyplace.org.au/downloads/Manual%20%20How%20to%20Create%20and%20Sustain%20a%20Support%20Group.pdf).

Another very important aspect is keeping the sessions informal, with a tea or coffee break at mid-session. This does not mean that the sessions will lack structure; it is just that informal sessions allow for some flexibility within the group, which helps participants share their own experiences.

The set-up

The set-up is key to creating a pleasant atmosphere:
- The facilitator should arrive a few minutes earlier to set up the space where the support group meetings will take place.
- Chairs *should be placed in a U-shape* and should be adequately spaced out to avoid overcrowding.
- Coffee, tea, water, etc. may be offered to participants upon their arrival to help them socialise.
- When people start to arrive, eye contact and greetings (using their first names) help to build rapport.

PROVIDING PRELIMINARY INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

The support group facilitator has to moderate the meetings without controlling the participants and the group discussions. Before starting the meetings, the facilitator has to communicate the goal and objectives of the support group, inform the participants about how the meetings will be conducted and what topics will be discussed and set the rules of the group with the participants. Also, the facilitator will encourage the participants to ask questions about the support group (The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy, 2015).

SETTING THE RULES

In this stage, it is very important for support group members to set the rules on their own, without any pressure from the facilitator. These rules will help to conduct the meetings and guide the discussions. Here are some points that may be discussed when setting the rules:
– Confidentiality (inside and outside the support group).
– Group participation (members' attendance).
– Listening to each other.
– Positive communication.
– Accepting different opinions.
– Any feelings that are expressed are fine; there are no good or bad feelings.
– Appreciating others.

– Determining the type of the support group: closed group (people cannot join the group during the meetings) or open group (other people willing to attend will be accepted during the meetings).

After setting the rules, they can be written down on a flipchart sheet which may be taped or displayed on a wall so that it is easy to see during each meeting.

ENCOURAGING MEMBERS TO LISTEN TO EACH OTHER

Listening means that group members listen and understand what is being said. Paying attention to body language, making eye contact, approving what is being said with a simple 'yes' or by nodding can show the speaker that they are listened to and understood by the other members.

ENCOURAGING MEMBERS TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

Encouraging participants to share their own experiences means that the facilitator has less control over the group and encourages group members to connect, which is actually one of the aims of the support group.

The facilitator has to accept the topics (issues) that the group wants to discuss and not force anyone to share if they are not willing to do that yet (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2003).

Recommendations for encouraging participants to engage in the discussions:

– Start the meeting with an icebreaker or team games: Games can work as icebreakers and can help people feel more comfortable in the group. For example, when they introduce themselves, group members can say their names and a quality that starts with the first letter of their name. The last person should repeat all the names and qualities mentioned in the group.

– The facilitator can talk about a personal or known experience (keeping the data confidential) as an invitation for discussion and reflection. This can encourage participants to give examples from their own lives or talk about any issues that concern them in relation to the topic proposed for the meeting.

– Home assignments: Based on the group members' needs and the topics discussed, the facilitator can give some home assignments to keep group members anchored and motivated to attend the following meetings. Home assignments can be very diverse, from offering a small gift to a loved one to doing something new or working on a long-standing goal, etc.

– Ask open questions: Open questions invite people to join the conversation and share sensitive experiences from their own lives. For example: What do you think about ...? How did you feel then? What solutions do you see...? What are the reasons why...? How did you react then? What do you appreciate most about...? What do you enjoy doing most?

HELPING GROUP MEMBERS SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS

Although support groups are not set up to solve problems, some participants may expect that. In that case, the facilitator can use certain steps to assist that person, involving of course all the group members:

– Clarify the issue – ensure that all participants understand the issue. If it is not clear, further questions may be asked.

– Discuss alternatives – mention possible solutions but be careful how you phrase them (so that they are perceived as advice): instead of "you should do this" you can say "maybe you could try that". Telling people what to do is not the responsibility of the support group. The facilitator can invite the participants to share how they dealt with that situation and what worked when they had to face similar problems. Also, the person raising the issue should be asked what solutions they see to solve the problem.

– Pros and cons – every suggestion can be questioned so that the person can feel that the group cares and wants to know how things will go.

INTEGRATING NEW MEMBERS INTO THE GROUP

If it is decided to go for an open group, new members can be integrated into the group by inviting the other members to sit next to them. Also, to increase their sense of belonging to the group, they can be quickly briefed on what has been done so far. If relevant, the facilitator may discuss certain details with the new members for a few minutes.

CLOSING THE SESSION

The end of the session is the right time to thank all the participants. This is a sign of gratitude and appreciation for participants' involvement. Also, at the end of each session, the facilitator should explain how the next meeting will be conducted and, if appropriate, they may

assign different roles to the participants. For example: Who would like to help me set up the room next time? Who could come in earlier to make the coffee? etc. Assigning roles will empower participants and will help build closer relationships, especially with the "difficult" people in the group.

The end of the session can also be a time to reflect on how the meeting went. To encourage the participants, the facilitator can go first and say a few words about what the meeting has meant to them, what they have liked about it or if they have learned anything new. The facilitator can use a pencil or any other object. After expressing their emotions/feelings, the facilitator gives that object to another participant who wants to express themselves. This is voluntary. For participants who do not wish to express themselves verbally, worksheets can also be used to get feedback from them.

Example:

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions (which can vary depending on the group). Your feedback will help us plan the next meetings.

1. What has this meeting meant to you?

a. Friendship.

b. Getting a better understanding of parents' and children's roles.

c. Information.

d. Learning about community resources.

e. More confidence in parenting skills.

f. Advice from the other parents.

h. Other (please specify).

_____

2. Are there any topics you would like to discuss?

_____

3. What other suggestions would you have for these meetings?

_____

Thank you!

TIPS FOR MAINTAINING A SUPPORT GROUP

Maintaining a support group is just as strenuous as starting a support group. The concept of sharing is central to creating a successful support group. Sharing experiences makes the group more cohesive and develops a sense of belonging. The facilitator's role is to distribute responsibilities within the group and communicate that each member's involvement is welcome and needed. That way, group members will feel responsible to the group and encouraged to express themselves. Another way of maintaining the support group is to evaluate the meetings on a regular basis (e.g., whether the topics covered meet the needs of the participants). The steps needed to maintain a support group are presented below:
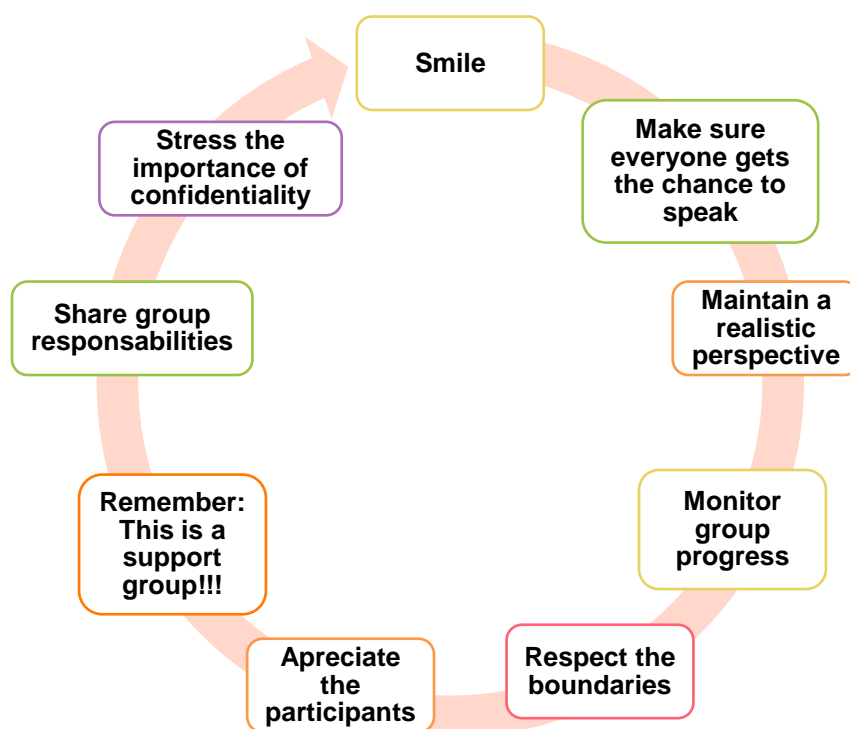

Fig. 1. Maintaining a support group! (Adapted from Koch, K. & Aden, M. (2014). *Guidelines for Managing Self-Help Groups. A Manual for National MS Society Self-Help Group Leaders* and The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy. (2015). *Support Group Manua*

CHALLENGES IN MANAGING A SUPPORT GROUP

When the support group includes difficult people, the group facilitator has the challenging task of knowing how to strike a balance between control and courtesy. In this case, they can use assertive communication, a type of communication that addresses the issues that arise in the group without excluding participants from the group. Assertive communication refers to the ability to communicate emotions, needs, opinions and beliefs in a way that does not infringe on the rights of others (Lange & Jacubowski, 1976). For example, Lazarus (1973) defines assertiveness as the ability to influence others. Assertiveness can also be perceived as a communication catalyst which allows for a more elaborate expression of feelings related to certain situations and events without blaming or criticising the others.

The support group facilitator can use this type of communication to get the discussion back on track or they can talk to that person in private after the meeting. When the facilitator uses assertive communication, they manage to say 'no' even when it seems difficult to do so; they express their positive and negative feelings in a way that does not cause discomfort to others; they are persuasive because they know how to talk to others; they take responsibility for what they have said or done no matter how serious the consequences (Lazarus, 1973). Assertive communication should include statements like "I think that...; It bothers you that...; I really appreciate what you did...; I would like to do this...".

When to use assertive communication?

–   When a group member always comes to meetings late.

–   When a group member talks too much and monopolises the discussion.

–   When a group member rejects every suggestion that the others make (for example: "Yes, but...").

–   When a group member seems to deal with more problems than the other group members.

–   When a group member interrupts other participants or raises inappropriate or irrelevant issues.

GROUP SUPPORT LIMITATIONS (UNOPA, 2006).

- The support group cannot solve all the problems of the members.

- The support group is different from a professionally led therapeutic group, as support comes from group members, not from the therapist.

- Even if support groups also work with professionals, their role is more complementary than central to the group. This means that outside help is available when needed.

- Group members can offer support, but each person is responsible for their own decisions.

- Support groups cannot help or be helpful to everyone; some people cannot share (express) their feelings to others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ascher, C. (1988). Improving the school-home connection for poor and minority urban students. *The Urban Review, 20,* 109-123.

Borkman, T. (1990). Self-help groups at the turning point: Emerging egalitarian alliances with the formal health care system. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 18,* 321-332.

Bryan, A. E. B. (2013). *Peer-administered interventions for depression: A meta-analytic review.* The University of Arizona.

Campbell, D. & Palm, G. F. (2004). *Group Parent Education, Promoting Parent Learning and Support*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.

Canadian Mental Health Association. (2001). *Valuing Mental Health.* Newfoundland and Labrador Division (CMHA-NL).

Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2003). *School-Based Mutual Support Groups (For Parents, Staff, Older Students)*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

Cojocaru, D. (2011). Attending parenting education programmes in Romania. The case of the Holt Romania Iasi programme. *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, *32*, 140-154.

Cojocaru, D., Cojocaru, S. & Ciuchi, O. M. (2011). Conditions for Developing the National Program for Parent Education in Romania. *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, *34*, 144-158.

Dennis, C. L. (2003). Peer support within a health care context: a concept analysis, *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 40*(3), 321-332.

Fritz, A. S. (1985). Parent group education: A preventive intervention approach. *Social Work with Groups, 8,* 23-31.

Gartner, A. & Riessman, F. (1977). *Self-help in the human services*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harmony Place. (n.d). *Manual for Support Groups*, http://www.harmonyplace.org.au/downloads/Manual%20-%20How%20to%20Create%20and%20Sustain%20a%20Support%20Group.pdf (accesat februarie, 2017).

Heisler, M. (2006). *Building Peer Support Programs to Manage Chronic Disease: Seven Models for Success*. California Health Care Foundation.

Helgeson, V. S., & Gottlieb, B. H. (2000). Support groups. In: Cohen S, Underwood LG, Gottlieb BH, editors. Social support measurement and intervention: A guide for health and social scientists. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, pp. 221–245.

Holt România (2011). *Cum să devenim părinţi mai buni-Manualul educatorului parental* [How to Become Better Parents – The Parent Educator's Handbook], vol. 3, Iaşi: Expert Projects.

Jacobs, M. K., & Goodman, G. (1989). Psychology and self-help groups: Predictions on a partnership. *American Psychologist*, *44*(3), 536-545.

Koch, K. & Aden, M. (2014). *Guidelines for Managing Self-Help Groups. A Manual for National MS Society Self-Help Group Leaders*, National Society.

Lazarus, A. A. (1973). On assertive behavior: A brief note. *Behavior Therapy, 4*(5), 697-699. doi:10.1016/S0005-7894(73)80161-3.

Leon, A. M., Mazur, R., Montalvo, E., & Rodrieguez, M. (1984). Self-help support groups for Hispanic mothers. *Child Welfare, 63,* 261-268.

Oades, L. G., Deane, F. P., & Anderson, J. (2012). Peer support in a mental health service context. *Manual of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 185-193.

Pistrang, N., Barker, C., & Humphreys, K. (2008). Mutual help groups for mental health problems: a review of effectiveness studies. *American journal of community psychology, 42*(1-2), 110-121. doi: 10.1007/s10464-008-9181-0.

Powell, D. R. (1988). Support groups for low-income mothers: Design considerations and patterns of participation. In B. H. Gottlieb (Ed.), *Marshaling social support: Formats, processes, and effects (pp.* II I- 1 34). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy. (2015). *Support Group Manual*, Buffalo Grove.

UNOPA (National Union of Organisations of People Living with HIV/AIDS). (2006). *Grupul de Suport Reciproc* [Mutual Support Group], Bucharest. http://unopa.ro/ (Retrieved in January 2017)