

You may choose to combine the two approaches: briefly present new information using the more academic approach and then use the participatory model to expand and apply it. Watch yourself to make sure you don't slip into old habits, especially if you have experience teaching in another setting or if you are unsure of your facilitation techniques.'



Facilitation Skills*

Being a facilitator is much like being a juggler: you have to keep lots of balls in the air and try not to let them fall too often! Here are some of the things you need to be aware of and attend to, all at the same time, when you facilitate a group.

① Attending to the needs of the group

- **Group focus** - Presumably, people come to your program because of its stated goal. Though some detours will always arise, participants expect you to keep the group on track and moving towards that goal.
- **Clear Structure** - Participants also expect you to maintain a clear structure, for example, to begin and end on time and to follow a group discussion format. In addition, being the facilitator means that participants look to you to uphold group standards that allow the group to function in an effective manner by promoting respect, diversity, and trust. When group members feel safe and know what to expect, they are then free to learn.
- **Group member roles²** - By creating a climate that allows everyone to explore different roles in the group, you will foster participants' interpersonal flexibility. Participants can play **roles that support the task** of learning in the group — they can define a problem or issue; keep the group on track; ask for or share information; ask for or share opinions; and test the feasibility of various proposals or solutions. They can also **play roles that help build relationships** within the group — they can make links between two members' comments; support and encourage others; invite others to participate; suggest compromises; follow other people's suggestions; and express the feelings of the group.
- **Group dynamics and energy levels** - By monitoring the group's dynamics and energy levels, you will be able to foster the group's development and increase the benefits for individual group members. When groups get stuck in unhealthy patterns, participants do not learn as well. Knowledge of group development theory will help you to intervene more effectively to keep the group moving toward its goals. In addition, you can increase your capacity to adapt to the dynamics and energy of the group

*The following section is adapted from "Stretching our facilitation skills" an unpublished paper presented by Dr. Rosemary Reilly, Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, in October 2002 at the Family Service Canada National Conference, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

by honing your observational skills, your ability to diagnose a group and your various intervention skills.

- **Balanced interaction** - Participants learn by engaging in discussion and reflecting on the contributions of all. It is essential to maintain a safe climate for participation and risk-taking so that there is a balance of interaction among all participants. In this way, you encourage group members to explore the topic and their unique family situation from many points of view.
- **Flexible leadership style** - Since groups grow, develop and change over time, you need to adjust your leadership style too. Hersey and Blanchard³ propose a "situational leadership" model which suggests that facilitators change their style over the life of a group. When you follow this model, you take a **directing style** the first time you meet with a group. You make expectations clear and provide explicit directions about the task and the group's format. Later, you adopt a **coaching style**. While you continue to provide direction, you also explain the rationale behind the activities, ask for input from members and promote the building of relationships within the group. You do this by paying attention to, supporting, praising and encouraging members. In these ways, you encourage participants to accept more responsibility for the task and help the group to "buy in" or "own" the task. As participants begin to take more responsibility for carrying out the goals of the group, you can then move to a **participating style**. You give participants lots of support for letting go of their dependency on an external authority for direction and advice. You promote their ability to empower themselves, to take responsibility for the group and to take charge of their own change process. More and more, you share the responsibility of directing the task with group members. Finally, when a group can function productively on its own, you can use a **delegating style**. At this stage, groups require minimum supervision, since participants tend to take the ball themselves and "run with it."

② Attending to the needs of the individuals

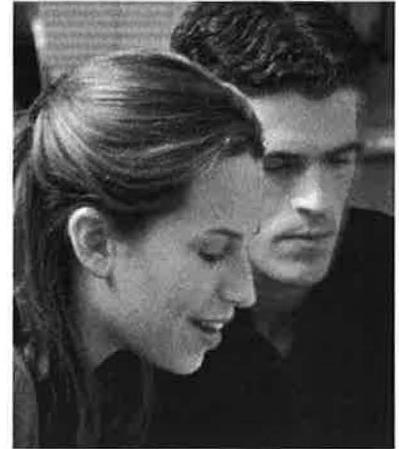
- **Goals** - Every participant comes to the group to accomplish certain goals, some of which may be clear and others unstated. Your challenge as a facilitator is to incorporate these goals into your overall plans in ways that will enhance each participant's learning and make the group experience more meaningful for everyone.
- **Learning styles**⁴ - People learn in different ways, depending on their preferences and strengths. Some learn best by listening and sharing their experiences and feelings, while others learn better by understanding concepts and theories. Some participants learn more effectively by being concrete and understanding things

in a step-by-step manner, while others like to just spontaneously jump feet first into an experience or exercise. People tend to enter a new subject through their preferred style, but they can also benefit from experiencing activities that appeal to other styles. Someone who takes in new ideas through concrete activities will deepen their understanding further by sharing their feelings with others. Someone who is attracted by theories and concepts will be better able to apply new knowledge after doing a practical exercise. You will maximize *everyone's* learning when you create session plans that address all of the learning styles.

- **Stage of individual and family development** - Individuals have unique needs linked to their stage of human development and the phase they are at in the family life cycle. You will be more effective if you design your program to reflect these differences in development.
- **Felt needs** - Educational research shows that we learn more when we are interested in the subject and when it relates to our lives. Your program will be more effective if you build on the needs that your participants really feel, not just on what you assume they want. Be careful not to base your program on what you think they *should* want, according to some standard that they do not necessarily agree with.
- **Safety** - You can assume that everyone who comes to your group needs to feel safe in order to explore new learning and create personal change. When participants feel safe and supported, they can stretch themselves into areas in which they are less competent and can therefore grow and develop. In creating a climate of safety, you need to be sensitive to the unique safety needs of each individual.
- **Recognition and responsibility** - In addition to safety needs, your facilitation should take into account the inherent need of each individual to feel honoured and affirmed as a human being. Each person also has a need to exercise freedom, choice, autonomy and responsibility in the group. For real change to happen, group members must be in charge of their own change process. When people are internally committed to their choices and feel personally responsible for them, change is more likely.
- **Holistic approach** - Human beings are not just heads sitting in chairs. Your program and your facilitation need to address all aspects of the person: mind, body, relationships, heart and spirit (or if you prefer, cognitive, physical, social, emotional and values aspects).

③ Attending to factors in the program design

- **Goals and objectives of the program** - Although you take into account the needs and goals of participants when you plan your program, your program design will also reflect the goals and objectives that you, or your organization, have decided to work towards.
- **Stage of group development** - Consider the stages of group development when planning how your program will unfold. At first, participants tend to be unsure about the group experience. They need to be reassured by activities that promote connections among them and that demonstrate that the group is a safe place. As they gain confidence, they become open to more challenging activities that encourage them to stretch into unknown areas of growth and learning. (Read more about this on pages 43–46.)
- **Balance between the spontaneous and the planned** - Learning works best when the learners are ready. Sometimes issues will emerge in the group that will achieve the session goal far more effectively than the ones you had planned. Keep an eye out for that "golden learning moment." At the same time, in the interests of staying on track, make sure that those emerging issues don't lead you to detour too far from your stated focus.
- **Two-way learning** - Current theories point to the importance of learning within the context of social relationships. We build our knowledge based on our own experiences, by listening to the experiences of others and by pooling our knowledge together. The most powerful model of learning is two-way: participants learn from other participants and the facilitator, and the facilitator learns from the participants.
- **Group process and participant resources** - Facilitators are not superbeings and cannot provide all things to all people. Fortunately, a group will always contain vastly more resources than any one single individual. By trusting the group process and the resources within each individual group member, you will draw on the potential of all to the fullest.



④ Attending to boundaries

- **Prevention or therapy?** - As a facilitator of parent education, you have a responsibility to stay within the boundaries of your field. Parent education focuses on prevention, not therapy. (Read more about this question on pages 26–27.)
- **Professional or personal?** - Effective facilitators are warm, friendly, and personable. However, you need to be able to maintain a balance between your professional role and being authentic. While telling stories about your personal experience may be helpful, you also need to limit how much you reveal. Tell only

what you need to in order to build links with participants and help them understand concepts.

"The assumptions you hold about parents influence your success or failure. Seek to understand the beliefs and functions underlying these differences rather than making assumptions about parenting in families with backgrounds and characteristics different from your own. Purposely observe and listen and respectfully ask questions, developing cultural competence through increased understanding. When encountering perceptions of parenting roles and responsibilities and guidance different than your own, be flexible and open."

A. L. Jacobson, "Parent Education and Guidance" in Bredehoff and Walchinski, (2003) (Eds.) *Family Life Education: Integrating Theory and Practice*. Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations. p. 113.

⑤ Attending to ethics and values

- **Professional codes and standards** - Even if you are not a member of a professional association, you have a responsibility to be aware of and to follow the professional ethical codes and standards of practice in the field of parent education. This responsibility includes a commitment to ongoing professional development so that you can provide current, valid information to participants. Participants are thus protected from unethical behaviour and you from offering substandard programs. (Read more about this aspect on pages 28–29.)
- **Modelling core values** - Participants will learn a great deal from watching you in action, facilitating their group. It is important that they see you modelling the core values that you are promoting.
- **Evaluation** - Part of ethical practice involves a ceaseless process of evaluation of both self and the program. In this way, you will continue on a path of improvement. (Read more about this aspect in Appendix D.)
- **Informed choice** - We live in a free society; we value informed choice. Therefore, ethical facilitators build this norm into their groups. Make it clear that the group provides a place where participants can learn new information and techniques, but that everyone is then free to make their own decisions. It's okay to disagree.
- **Inclusion** - In a diverse society, your facilitation has to take into consideration a wide variety of cultures and family experiences. Acceptance and inclusiveness need to be hallmarks of your facilitation and program design.

⑥ Attending to yourself

- **Personal qualities** - When all is said and done, the facilitator is still the most powerful instrument of service delivery. A poor facilitator can mangle the most stellar of programs, whereas a master facilitator can raise the level of the most ordinary program. Much of your influence comes from your personal qualities. Like a careful gardener, you can nurture within yourself the following qualities: **empathy, warmth, caring, openness, positive regard, respect** and **compassion**. In addition, a sense of **humour** can defuse tensions and feelings of threat or discomfort. It can connect people as much as tears can.
- **Self-awareness** - It's important for you to be aware of your own internal dynamics, and particularly your emotional triggers, so that you can avoid pitfalls. Group members are not helped when the group becomes more about the facilitator's issues than the participants' concerns.

- **Communication skills** - Some of the basic tools of facilitation are related to communication skills. Here are some of the skills you can learn and practise: paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, asking open and closed questions, summarizing, perception-checking, drawing out members, gathering ideas, encouraging and supporting, balancing, listening for common ground and waiting in silence on purpose to create space for participation.
- **Mindfulness** - Effective facilitators are fully present to each moment of the group. They attend to what is going on in the "here-and-now."

Each of the six juggling balls described above has multiple facets. It is only human that sometimes you may pay less attention to an aspect than you could or should. However, by reminding yourself of these different points from time to time over the entire life span of the group, you can make facilitation a class act.

In the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers, unconditional **positive regard** is an essential aspect of therapy. It refers to an attitude of complete acceptance of another person, as demonstrated through behaviour.