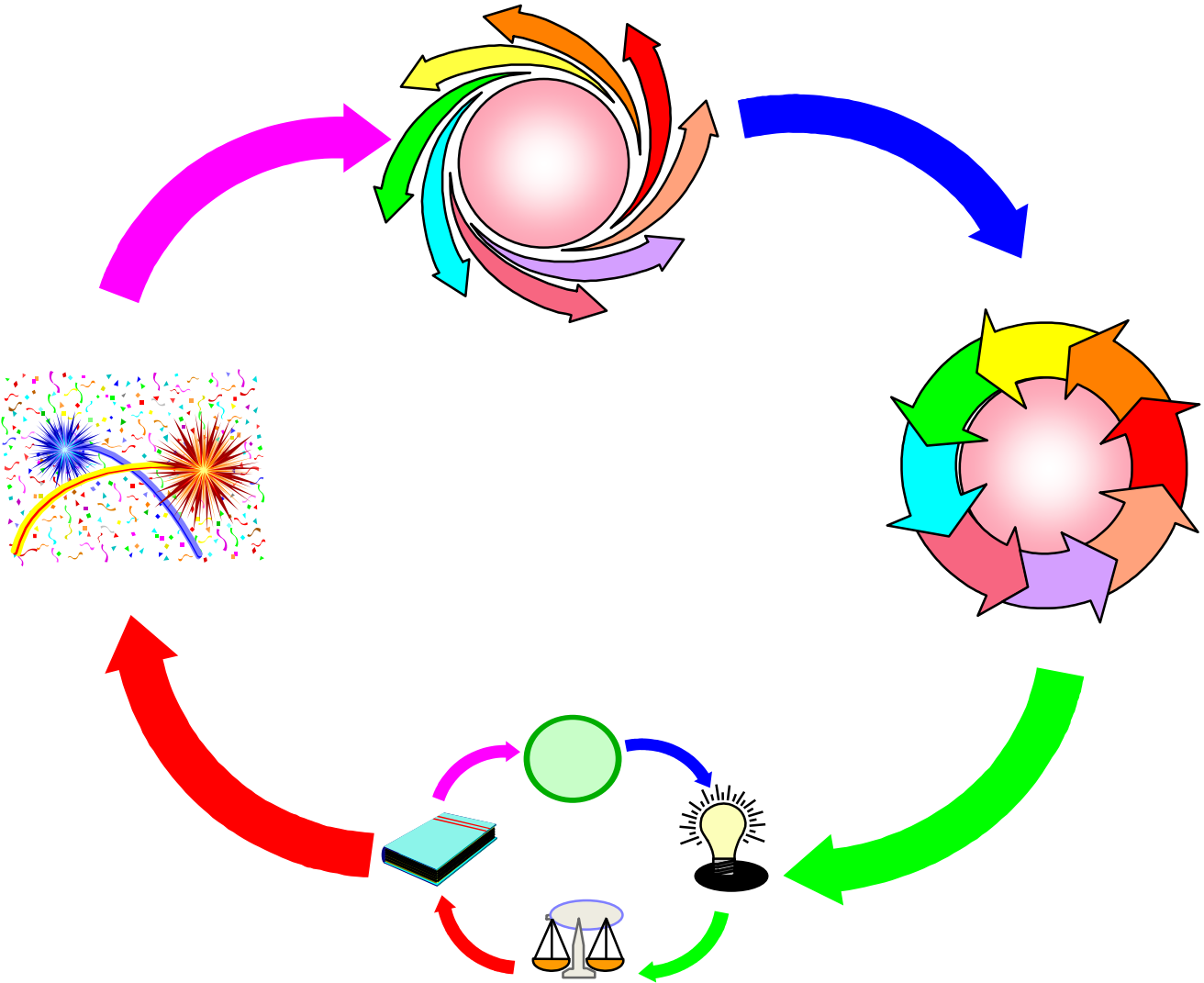


GROUP ACTION PLANNING



**THE ROAD TO
SUCCESS**

Group Action Planning: Families, Friends, and Professionals

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What is Group Action Planning?

Group Action Planning (GAP) occurs when a group of family, friends, community citizens, and professionals form a “reliable alliance” for the purpose of dynamically, energetically, and joyfully creating inclusion within families, neighborhoods, educational programs, and communities.

How Can Families Create An Action Group?

Inviting Support

1. Identify someone to facilitate your group. The role of the facilitator is a key one because the facilitator makes sure all other tasks are carried out. The facilitator needs to be a person whom you can trust, is willing to make a commitment to being a part of a reliable alliance, has strong communication skills, and is able to connect verbally and emotionally with all group members.
2. Identify the family members, friends, and professionals who are already involved in your life. Think through how each has contributed to supporting your family. Identify your family’s definition of helpful support.
3. Who are the two or three people who seem to have the most emotionally-connected relationship with your son or daughter? Are they available to join the group?
4. What are your son or daughter’s preferences? Who are the people who can create opportunities to those preferences?
5. What your great expectations for your family and your son or daughter’s future? What are the great expectations of other family members? Consider a couple of the highest priority great expectations and think of the people who you already know and even those who you do not know who could help make those great expectations happen.
6. Think through the interests, strengths, and needs that might link your son or daughter and your other family members with a wider circle of supporters. (What are your son’s or daughter’s preferences? In what activities does your family participates in the community?)

Develop an awareness of friends, extended family, community citizens, and professionals who may be able to support your son or daughter and your family to pursue your interests and strengths.

7. Issue invitations to join the group. Do this after you have considered a whole range of people. Invitations can come from your son or daughter, you, other family members, or the facilitator. One way to extend the invitation is to invite people to come to the first meeting to find out more about what is involved. By giving them a chance to participate in a meeting and meet others prior to making a definite commitment, you give them more information about what is involved. You also should tell them from the outset that, if action group participation does not work out for them for any reason, they can always withdraw from participation.
8. Let everyone know that people can join at any time. You may discover new people to add, as new issues and great expectations emerge.

Creating Connections

9. Let each individual know how valuable his or her support is. Affirm the positive contributions and strengths of everyone. If some people tend to “be on the fringe” of the group, seek ways to get them more involved and to help them be connected.
10. Create a sense of connectedness. Help people enjoy themselves, feel comfortable, and develop a sense that they, too, can derive support from this reliable alliance.
11. Listen for and celebrate the special events and occasions in the lives of group members. For example, when someone in the group experiences personal or professional success, acknowledge and celebrate it. When sadness occurs in the lives of group members, provide consolation and support. Create a sense of caring for everyone in the group.
12. Create an informal atmosphere for socialization throughout the meetings. Have food available for snacking and refreshment. Arrange seating so that it is comfortable, e.g., people sitting in a circle in a living room or family room, as contrasted to sitting around a table.
13. Infuse laughter and joy into each gathering. Avoid somberness.
14. Turn a crisis into an opportunity. Experiencing a crisis can help create a sense of reliable alliance when people have an opportunity to share disappointment, hurt, and frustration. Often families have been conditioned to keep their major worries to themselves and to conceal their biggest problems: When a crisis does happen, the more you share with the group and are open about your feelings, the more the group has an opportunity to respond and to create a sense of truly being a reliable alliance. Remember that every crisis is an opportunity for stronger connections and for more creative problem-solving.

Sharing Great Expectations

15. Encourage your son or daughter to share his or her own great expectations for the future. Share your own great expectations. From the first meeting, give other members of the group an opportunity to affirm and even embellish these great expectations by beginning to develop “what if” and “why not” attitudes. Avoid allowing disability to push you into less than full citizenship.
16. Listen for the expression of others’ great expectations and acknowledge and underscore those when they are shared.
17. Recognize that great expectations evolve over time. The great expectations that you and others have at the beginning may seem like only moderate expectations at a later time. Thus, the unfolding of expectations should be viewed as an exciting and dynamic process.
18. Seek to stay open to ideas that truly push the limits of possibilities. Encourage seemingly outlandish thinking. Hold back from dismissing options simply because you’ve never heard of a person with a disability who has had success with the option. Embrace the opportunity to be a pioneer.

Solving Problems

19. The facilitator has a key role in guiding the group through the steps of systematic problem solving. The beginning of the process requires focusing on a particular great expectation and specifying what needs to happen for that expectation to be realized.
20. Do dynamic brainstorming. Encourage everyone to freely brainstorm without the feeling that their ideas will be censored or immediately evaluated. One of the key contributions of having diverse membership in the action group is to broaden the range possible options that are identified and considered. Thus, brainstorming should be a highly open and creative process.
21. Consider the specific options that are most likely to be successful in addressing needs and barriers and in building on strengths. Do a careful analysis of the pros and cons of different options.
22. Select the most appropriate options and delineate a specific action plan. This action plan should identify the people who are going to take next steps, the specific actions that they will take, the timeline for accomplishing the steps, how the group can be supportive, and when a progress report should be made to the group. The responsibilities for follow through need to be spread across different group members and involve people who are not in the group, as long as group members can help with coordination and communication with those people. One of the key components of action groups is the action steps that happen between meetings in getting tasks accomplished in order to help great expectations be realized. Thus, people need to leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what they need to do and a commitment to get it done on the timeline that has been specified.
23. Promote systematic problem solving in a way that is participatory, creative, dynamic, and organized. A facilitator will be far more successful in the role if she or he has experienced

success in individual and group problem solving in the past. Facilitators need to have a balance between structure and rational problem-solving, on the one hand; and warmth, openness, and flexibility, on the other hand. They need to create synergy within the group with the belief that practically anything is possible by working together collaboratively – a sense that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

24. Set a comfortable pace and seek to make progress at every meeting and in implementing the action plans between meetings. Point out the good things happening in the child’s life because of group efforts. Progress is essential to keep motivation high.
25. Get everyone involved. Direct specific questions to the individuals who are not having a chance to participate and either directly or indirectly communicate to the people who are dominating the process that others need to have a greater turn.
26. Limit your efforts. Systematic problem solving can only be accomplished on one or two issues during a meeting. One mistake that some people make is to try to work on too many things simultaneously. By focusing on one or two issues and developing a systematic specific plan, great progress will be made over time. Thus, the facilitator needs to keep the group directed on what is manageable to accomplish during a given meeting.
27. Summarize. Every meeting should end with a clear summary of the action steps that need to occur before the next meeting.

Celebrating

28. Celebrate progress. Every meeting needs to have opportunities to celebrate progress. The facilitator needs to model and other group members will quickly join in affirming progress, strengths, and positive contributions.
29. Allow and encourage gratitude. It is very important for your son or daughter and you to let people know how much their support is appreciated and how good you feel about the progress that is being made.
30. Eat and drink. Special snacks can be added to the meetings as an element of celebration. This might include a birthday cake for some group member, a special menu that consists of people’s favorite foods, or some seasonal remembrance such as Valentine candy for everyone.
31. Develop the “joy quotient.” Set aside time to “party” rather than to “problem solve.” Create opportunities characterized totally by frivolity and enjoyment. All different kinds of diverse ideas can be considered from having a chance for people to attend together a community recreational event, sing along with a group member who plays a guitar, have different group members put on an impromptu talent show, or have a cook-out in the backyard. The key is that people are having fun together, feeling positive about the great expectations that are getting put into place, and deriving a sense of connection and nurture from each other.
32. Participants should leave meetings feeling renewed rather than depleted.

GETTING TO GAP: SUGGESTIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS RELATED TO CREATING AN ACTION PLANNING GROUP

1. Inviting Support

- A. Asking for Help – It is often difficult for families and professionals to ask others for their time and support. Reflect on your own feelings about asking others for help. Is it difficult for you to share with others that you need help or that you don't have all the answers?
- B. Visions for the Future – What are _____'s and his/her family's hopes and visions for the future (including community, school, job, home, neighborhood, friends)? What are the critical issues facing _____ and his/her family which create barriers to achieving the vision for the future in each of these areas? Who can be helpful in addressing the critical issues (hint: think about "risk takers" you know in each area)?
- C. Current IEP Team Members – Who currently attends _____'s IEP meetings? What type of information does each team member bring to the group? Who really makes contributions to achieving _____'s visions for the future? Who are the "naysayers" on the team and who are the "risk takers"?
- D. Reliable Alliance – Currently, who are the people that the family considers to be a part of their reliable alliance – people who are supportive and committed to _____ and the family and who share common visions for the future for _____ (this might include other family members, friends, neighbors, community members, professionals, etc.)?

E. Facilitator – Who would be a natural facilitator for _____’s Action Group? Is this person supportive and committed to _____ and his/her family and their vision for the future? Is he/she a “risk taker?” Is he/she willing to make a commitment to being a part of a reliable alliance? Does he/she have strong communication skills – able to connect verbally and emotionally with all group members? If this person is a professional, think critically about the possibility of a conflict of interest existing between his/her job responsibilities and _____’s visions for the future.

F. Next Steps – Based on _____’s and his/her family’s preferences and visions for the future, identify three or four immediate steps that could be taken to invite support and the appropriate person to take each step.

2. **Creating Connections**

A. Close Friends/Reliable Alliance – Think of one close friend. How do you distinguish them from casual friends? Is this person a “reliable ally” – someone you can go to at any time for any reason and know that you will be supported in the way that best meets your needs?

B. Initiating Contact – Remember back to an instance when you intentionally initiated an attempt to connect with someone. What drew you to that person? How comfortable did you feel in initiating that contact? Were there obstacles? How did you feel in initiating the contact? How did it work out?

- C. Facilitating Connections – How comfortable do you feel in facilitating connections for others? What techniques do you use?
- D. Creating Connections – In what ways are _____ and his/her family most comfortable creating connections? In what types of settings would they prefer to meet? How large a group is comfortable for them? What issues are they comfortable discussing with others?
- E. _____'s Contributions – It is important that _____ not only receive benefit from an Action Group but also is a contributing member of the group. Think about the positive contributions that _____ has made to you and other family members. How could _____ make these same contributions to members of an Action Group? Are there other ways he/she can contribute?
- F. Next Steps – Based on the values and preferences of _____, his/her family, and other potential members, what are the two or three most important ways that creating connections can be successful in existing meetings and in other environments? What are the next steps to change the atmosphere of existing planning methods so that members of the planning team can create personal connections?

3. Sharing Great Expectations

- A. Comfort with Sharing – How comfortable are _____ and his/her family sharing their great expectations for the future with others? How comfortable are they with other people sharing their visions for _____?
- B. Quality of Life and Great Expectations – What are the most important things in your life – the things that put “quality” into the term “quality of life?” Think about _____’s life. What are the most important things in his/her life? How would you define an excellent quality of life for _____? What more needs to happen to increase his/her quality of life?
- C. Visions for the Future – What are _____’s and his/her family’s hopes and visions for the future (including community, school, job, home, neighborhood, friends)? What are the critical issues facing _____ and his/her family which create barriers to achieving the vision for the future in each of these areas? Who can be helpful in addressing the critical issues (hint: think about “risk takers” you know in each area)?
- D. How are outcomes for _____ currently decided? Is the planning process currently used based on _____’s and the family’s vision and great expectations?

- E. Next Steps – Describe two or three immediate steps that might be taken to make these great expectations an essential part of your planning process?

4. Solving Problems

- A. Evaluating the Current Planning Process – What barriers exist to systematic, active problem-solving in the current planning process? What are possible solutions to these barriers?

- B. Priority Issues – What are the priority issues that create barriers to achieving _____’s visions for the future? What difference might creative problem-solving make in successfully resolving these issues?

- C. Next Steps – Identify two or three immediate steps that can be taken to improve problem-solving in your current planning process. What steps can you take to ensure that high quality problem-solving occurs in GAP meetings?

SUMMARY OF NEXT STEPS TO CREATE A PLANNING PROCESS THAT INCLUDES THE CRITICAL ELEMENT OF GROUP ACTION PLANNING:

Inviting Support:

- 1.
- 2.

Creating Connections:

- 1.
- 2.

Sharing Great Expectations:

- 1.
- 2.

Solving Problems:

- 1.
- 2.

Celebrating Success:

- 1.
- 2.

THE GOOSE STORY

Next fall when you see geese heading south for the winter flying along in a “V” formation, you might be interested in knowing what science has discovered about why they fly that way. It has been learned that as each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a “V” formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 % greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. *People who share common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.*

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone, and quickly gets into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front. *If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed in the same way we are going.*

When the lead goose gets tired, he rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point. *It pays to take turns doing hard jobs.*

The geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. *An encouraging word goes a long way.*

Finally, when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by a gun shot and falls out, two geese fall out of formation and follow him down to help and protect him. They stay with him until he is either able to fly or is dead, and then they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with the group. *If we have the sense of a goose, we will stand by each other like that.*

(Author Unknown)