



Guidelines for establishing a social group for adults with Asperger's/High-functioning Autism

About these guidelines

This document is designed to assist those wishing to establish a social group for adults with Asperger's or high-functioning Autism in their community. The recommendations in this document are based on experience in establishing and maintaining successful social groups for adults, and also on learning from the feedback and collaboration of social group participants.

It is important to remember that each social group will reflect the needs and wants of its participants, and therefore be unique. While these guidelines provide a strong structure for a successful social group, as the facilitator you should leave room for some flexibility around the particular needs of your group.

1. Are you ready to be a facilitator?

A social group facilitator is someone that has a keen interest in bringing people from their community together. A fundamental part of this role would therefore be a willingness to assist with regular meetings. The extent of your involvement will depend on both your own background and interests and the needs and wants of the group participants. For example, you may be:

- an active group participant who takes on a leadership role
- a facilitator who attends activities and is on hand to help out when needed
- a facilitator who coordinates everyone for regular meetings, however does not stay for the duration of the activity

There are certain skills involved in facilitating a social group. Aspect has developed an online training module which covers some of these skills, including leadership, group coordination and communication. This is freely available, and is especially designed for those who are going to take on a peer-facilitation role (that is, individuals with Asperger's / HFA who want to be both a participant and facilitator). This module is available at: <http://www.aspect.org.au/learning/peerfacilitator/>

2. Finding participants

Please contact the Social Groups Coordinator (adultsocialgroup@autismspectrum.org.au) for the details of individuals in your area who've registered their interest in a social group. It is strongly recommended to wait until there are at *least* 5 or 6 people interested in participating in the group. Most groups experience some attrition (before eventual growth), and so it is important to start with enough participants that the group will still be viable after some drop out.

Once you have the contact details of the participants, you will need to contact them via e-mail or phone (they usually will have indicated which is most convenient). Explain who you are and what you're hoping to do, and ask if they're still interested in being involved. Remember that some people may have registered their interest many months (or even over one year!) ago and may not initially know what you're contacting them about.

3. The first meeting

Once you have enough participants who have confirmed that they are still interested in being involved in a social group, you will want to consider your first meeting. Contact the

participants with a few options for days, times and locations for the initial meeting and explain that you will make a decision based on what suits the most people. Usually the first meeting will take around an hour, and participants may want to be advised of this in advance.

Very often participants (and the facilitator!) are nervous about attending the first meeting. It can help to invite each participant to bring along a support person for this first meeting.

Ensure you are well organised before the first meeting:

- make sure you know who you are expecting and have their phone numbers with you should you need to contact them
- make sure everyone has your phone number in case they get lost/ are running late
- have a list of what needs to be organised in that first meeting

Once everyone has arrived and had a chance to get a coffee/food (if you are meeting at a café), there are many ways you may want to conduct the first meeting. Suggested activities include:

- introductions around the group: who you are, where you are from, what you are hoping to get out of the group
- explanation of how the meeting will run and the objectives of the meeting (For example "Today is about discussing what we'd like out of a social group - it is our group so it needs to reflect what we actually want. After today we'll have an idea of when, where, and how frequently we want to meet. I'll be able to contact everyone and we can set up a routine based on the outcomes of today.")
- What sort of things would the social group like to do when they meet? For example;
 - o Meet at a regular location (e.g. café, room in a community centre/library, park)
 - o Meet for different activities, planned in advance (e.g. bowling, dinner, movies)
 - o Meet for structured discussions around issues relevant to the group (please note that this will usually require very strong facilitation skills or a person with appropriate training to lead the discussions)
 - o Engage with an educational course (e.g. photography, art, music, writing)
 - o Sports/activities
 - o A combination of the above!
- How frequently would the group like to meet? Consider that a large gap between activities can mean that participants lose interest, whereas very frequent meetings may be too taxing on everyone's time. Fortnightly meetings seem to work well, however we have also seen that groups which meet monthly also work (typically these take on a more support group format).
- What times and days suit people? For example, weeknights? Saturday day or night? Sunday day or night? Usually a time which works for most people can be found.
- Privacy considerations: would participants like all e-mails to be bcc'd or would they like their e-mail addresses to be shown? Reassure participants that you will not give out either their e-mail address or phone number without explicit permission.
- Would the group like to be reminded about upcoming activities?
- Any rules the group would like to establish. Typically these are around :
 - o Respect for the opinions of others in the group
 - o Polite and considerate behaviour

- Is the group exclusive for people with an ASD or are friends/family members welcome?
- What should participants do if they have any concerns?
- You may like to use the current [Aspect Social Group rules](#) as a guideline
- A chance for participants to ask any questions or make any other comments
- A clear explanation of what will happen now and a timeframe - for example "I'll put this information together and send an e-mail early next week with our next meeting date."

4. After the first meeting

It is important to hold the next meeting at the earliest convenient time after your initial get together. As mentioned, a large gap can mean that participants lose interest and the initial momentum is damaged.

Establish a clear routine so that participants know when meetings will be and can plan around them. Typically, participants should know when to expect the meetings to be held for the next few months. It is a good idea to have a list of scheduled meetings which can be sent to the participants with the dates and locations (if relevant) for all upcoming activities. Social groups which hold activities haphazardly typically only work where there are *very* large numbers of participants to draw from, and even then sometimes don't work out.

If your group has decided that they would like to meet for a variety of events, you will need to create a calendar of the upcoming events. This may take a few hours of planning as you will need to match the opening hours / best time to visit each of the activities with when your group is available. You will also need to consider accessibility of the sites (especially if most participants are reliant on public transport). On the calendar you may also want to include details such as the address of the activities, website details and also cost. Please click here to see an example of the current social group calendar for the [Inner West Social Group](#).

Some other considerations when arranging activities are:

- cost: money is often a concern for many participants. It is good to try to schedule semi-regular activities which have minimal cost to participants. For example a games night at a central location where participants share in the cost of pizza, or picnics where everyone brings a share plate (it's sometimes a good idea to specify savoury food if that's what you'd like to eat)
- holidays: be mindful that people may be away during the main holiday periods and also long weekends. Holidays can also be a good opportunity to have a themed meeting!
- Safety: as much as possible, ensure that each planned activity will be safe for participants to get to, attend, and get home from.
- Locations: it is recommended that activities remain in public places, rather than asking participants to host meetings at their house.

Finally, **plan to plan!** In your list of upcoming meetings, designate a date toward the end where the group will get together to discuss what works well, what needs to change, and what they'd like to do over the next several months. From this meeting you will then be able to produce the next list of meetings/calendar of events.



5. Subsequent meetings

If pre-arranged, send out a reminder 2-3 days before each activity. While the group is fairly small, you may also want to ask for RSVPs. You may want to consider cancelling any activity which will be attended by less than 3 people (however the group may decide that they are happy to meet with only 2).

Make any arrangements necessary with the venue you're attending, including booking in and asking whether a group discount is available. Discounts may sometimes also be available when you explain it is for a group of people with Asperger's / HFA who are on low incomes (and some people in the group may have pension cards).

At the activity the group facilitator must be on hand to provide support to anyone who needs it, particularly around payments and routines at an unfamiliar venue. While the group members are still getting to know one another, you may find that you need to facilitate the conversations.

6. New members

Potential new participants may contact you and ask to join the group. You might like to chat to them about the types of people in the group, the activities you do, and the ages. It is important that the group is a good fit for the participant and also that the participant is a good fit for the group (for example, are there any considerations which might prevent them from participating in a way which is safe for themselves and others).

New participants may be nervous, and might like to bring a support person to their first activity. Sometimes it can help to ask a certain group member to show them the ropes, however this will depend on personalities in the group.

Make sure you get contact details (e-mail address and phone number) for all new participants and explain any group rules to them. You may want to have a physical list of group rules which can be provided to new participants.

7. Inevitable hiccups

All groups experience difficult periods.

Attendance may be low at one activity or for several activities in a row. If this is the case consider possible explanations. For example, groups usually experience lower attendance during holiday periods while many people are away. Sometimes more expensive activities or ones which are difficult to get to may not be well attended, and these issues can be addressed by changing future activities. It is also a good idea to check that there are no interpersonal issues (such as bullying, peer pressure, harassment) in the group - including what might be occurring on social media. Sometimes there is no apparent reason why there is low attendance, and you will simply have to see if you can ride it out!

If you are concerned about anything occurring in your group, or would simply like some advice or a friendly chat, please don't hesitate to contact Aspect on 1800 ASPECT (1800 277 328).