



Victorian Adoption Network for
Information and Self Help

Support Group

Facilitators' Handbook[©]

August 2013

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Foreword

This handbook is intended to provide guidance and assistance for those people facilitating support groups on behalf of VANISH for the post-adoption and post-donor conception communities. Other groups and organisations in the adoption community are welcome to draw from this resource.

It provides an outline of what is expected of a group facilitator and describes some lessons VANISH has learned about what makes an effective group and what participants find beneficial. This booklet also provides basic ground rules, guidance notes and helpful hints.

Facilitators are required to sign an agreement with VANISH. This can be found in Appendix 1.

Acknowledgements:

VANISH, on behalf of the community we serve wishes to acknowledge the commitment, expertise and skill of the people who provide group facilitation – without them the support groups would not exist: thank you.

In the writing of this booklet VANISH has appreciated the support of:

VANISH Staff Team: Coleen Clare, Diane Jacobson, Elizabeth Tomlinson, Mary Rawson, Maire Peckett, Andrea Parascandalo, Charlotte Smith and volunteers facilitating VANISH Support Groups: Kate Bourne (VARTA), Lauren Burns, Michele Hutchins, Pauline Ley and Sue Green. Helpful comments were also received from Gary Coles

VANISH Inc. acknowledges the support of the Department of Human Services with ongoing funding for the work of VANISH.

1. What is a Support Group?

In a support group, members provide each other with support for an issue that they have a shared experience of. Support can be through providing relevant information, sharing personal experiences, listening to and accepting others' stories, and providing empathy and understanding.

Groups might be self-organised, facilitated and managed by group members, often volunteers who have personal experience of adoption or donor conception. Alternatively they can be professionally facilitated and managed with a facilitator leading the discussion who may or may not have a relevant personal experience. For VANISH groups, it is strongly recommended that:-

- Groups are facilitated by an individual who has relevant professional qualifications and experience i.e. community welfare, community development, social work, psychology or counselling.
- The lead facilitator has a sound knowledge of adoption and/or donor conception.
- The lead facilitator is supported by a co-facilitator who has an individual experience of adoption and/or donor conception.

While a support group offers a safe space for participants to explore their adoption or donor conception experience, it does not aim to provide counselling or replace formal counselling sessions.

2. Who Comes to a Support Group?

VANISH Support Groups are open to anyone who falls within the category the group seeks to serve, and is willing to accept the ground rules. Groups are designed to be:

- Ongoing, regular, reliable and accessible.
- Inclusive of all members who fall within the category being served.
- Open to regular and irregular attendees.
- Welcoming of new members and returning old members.

This means that group cohesion may not always be strong as participants change. Group facilitation therefore requires flexibility to adapt to fluctuating membership and group size.

Groups work best when there are approximately six to 12 people attending. When groups get too large and not everyone who wants to can share, it is worth considering dividing the group into two for focussed discussions and then regroup at the end for closing comments.

When the group's size is very small participants have the opportunity to talk for longer than usual. The facilitator and participants need to be mindful of not slipping into a counselling role in this situation.

Group numbers fluctuate for a range of reasons. Low attendance does not mean the group is not going well. Very successful groups can be held with small numbers and similarly, groups can swell in numbers for reasons beyond our control.

3. What Makes a Good Support Group?

From the Support Groups VANISH has held over the years the following list encompasses the elements we would expect to see reflected in a high quality support group:

- Confidentiality and privacy.
- Non-judgemental and accepting, with respect for diverse experiences and perspectives.
- Encouraging of honest expression of how people really feel.
- Listening with empathy, compassion and understanding, and validating participants' experiences.
- Offering accurate and up-to-date information regarding post-adoption and/or donor conception matters.
- Offering advice, as necessary, regarding referral options for further help.

Participants particularly value groups where they:

- Feel safe to be honest and frank about how they feel without being judged.
- Feel safe to cry or laugh, be sad or joyous. They can share a joke - or sometimes appropriate 'black' humour amongst people with a shared experience.
- Are listened to in silence with empathy, compassion and understanding.
- Learn or experience knowing 'you are not alone'.
- Find that sharing their story is a way of healing and that when they tell their stories a number of times, each time it is a little bit different.
- Know they are believed and their experience will be validated by facilitators and members.
- Know the group will consistently be held as advertised and run to schedule.

4. Administrative Aspects

VANISH has some important requirements relating to support groups that need to be well understood and attended to by the facilitator(s). These are:-

- The facilitator should record, in confidence, the name, address and phone number of attendees in case of emergency, for statistics or any follow-up calls. Ensure this information is collected in such a way that it is only available to the facilitator and not left in an open unsupervised place. If people decline to provide personal contact details that is OK. A sample form for collecting personal details can be found at Appendix 2.
- The facilitator should have the name and mobile telephone numbers for the person responsible for the venue; the VANISH Manager, VANISH Support Group Coordinator and VANISH Counsellor. She or he should know which individual to contact under which circumstances.

5. Practical Aspects

All matters related to setting up and then closing up the venue need to be well understood and attended to by the facilitator(s), for example:

- Bookings, insurance and payment for the room.
- Appropriate signage for new members to find the group.
- Security procedures and codes plus any required notification to security monitoring agents.
- Fire and emergency exits – ensuring these are communicated to participants at every meeting.
- The location of toilets and tea/coffee making facilities.
- Temperature of the room; knowledge of air conditioning and heating and being holder of the remote control.
- Organising who will bring flowers, fruit, biscuits, tissues etc.
- Putting out VANISH brochures, VANISH membership forms (Appendix 3) and any other relevant material.
- Ensuring the VANISH Code of Conduct (Appendix 4) and the VANISH Drug and Alcohol Policy (Appendix 5) are prominently displayed.
- Arranging the chairs in a circle, allowing some chairs with space around them.
- If your support group is regional or rural ensure you have local contacts in case of an emergency situation.
- Engage the group in any tidy up: e.g. stacking of chairs, washing up or rubbish removal, etc.

- Adhere to venue requirements for clearing up after the group e.g. closing doors and windows, turning off lights, heaters, air conditioners, the urn and other appliances.
- Ensuring everyone leaves the building then applying any locks, security alarms and removing any signage.

6. Member Contributions

Members are not required to pay to attend a VANISH support group, it is a free service. In order to promote self-help and enhance member ownership, the facilitator might suggest that if members want to contribute they may do so by bringing refreshments for the group such as biscuits, fruit and other consumables or possibly other group requirements such as paper for printing or stamps for mail-outs. It is recommended these offerings be collected in such a way that people who cannot contribute are not embarrassed for example having a box by the door for people to put the items in as they come in.

The facilitator should not accept cash donations on behalf of VANISH or the group. Donations should be done through the website “Give Now” option or by sending a cheque or money order to VANISH by post in order to receive an official tax receipt.

7. Ground Rules

It is important to set some shared ground rules that incorporate any legal or policy requirements and that establish the culture and tone of the group. These should be written or printed out and brought to the attention of everyone, especially new members, at each group.

The ground rules help create a sense of safety and ensure the boundaries for group members are clear. They will vary from group to group but need to include:

- No smoking drugs or alcohol are allowed at support groups. Participants who appear to be under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol will be asked to leave (refer to policy).
- All information shared in the group is confidential. This includes not sharing or discussing other peoples’ stories outside the group, even without using their names.
- Participants agree to be respectful and tolerant of different experiences and opinions, including by not interrupting, criticising or harassing other group members.

Other rules that might be included are:-

- The group is non-confronting and provides for all who wish to participate to do so. Participants may inquire to learn more but should avoid correcting or directing anyone.

- The group is for individuals to share their experiences and hear the experiences of others – rather than to give advice. Participants are therefore asked to avoid providing advice or expecting to receive it.
- Group time is to be shared amongst those who wish to speak. Participants will ensure they are not monopolising time and allow the facilitator to manage the flow of the discussion.
- Participants will respect any expression of sadness or grief and avoid rushing to provide comfort, interrupting or changing the subject.
- Swearing is not acceptable (although there is no need for the facilitator to remark if the occasional swear word is used).
- Everyone will endeavour as far as possible to come on time and stay for the whole time.
- The facilitator has permission to interrupt and move the conversation along and also to ask someone to ‘take a break’ or to leave the support group if necessary.

8. Format of the Group

Facilitators all have their own experience of running groups and their own preferences of how to format the group. VANISH support groups usually last for two hours. You might want to structure it more formally or less formally according to what you feel will work best. Options include:-

- The welcome, then formal sharing as a group and then wind-down and informal sharing and support over tea and coffee.
- The welcome, then group discussion and sharing, with a tea break in the middle.
- Inviting group members to make their tea and coffee before welcome starts.
- In the welcome advising members they should feel free to hop up and make another cup during the group if they want to.

These and other formats are workable. If you are in doubt about what might work best for your group talk this through with the VANISH Support Group Coordinator or Manager.

9. Opening the Group

The welcoming of members and opening comments involve a transition from daily life and the rush of getting to the group to being in the group, often with unknown people. It is important to set the tone and culture of the group, and to set people at ease by making them aware of what is to be expected. The facilitator may start the group with:

- Acknowledging the traditional land owners and elders past and present.

- Welcoming group members and explaining the purpose of the group, who it is for and how long the meeting will last.
- Introducing themselves and asking the co-facilitator to introduce themselves: role, qualifications and experience.
- Introducing VANISH (the Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self-Help) and summarising the services offered by VANISH – pointing to the brochures for members to take if they wish.
- Communicating how the group will proceed, explaining what will happen after the welcome and what the arrangements are for tea and coffee and pointing out emergency and fire exits.
- Explaining the need to record attendance (first name only) for statistics and reporting purposes, and the need to have each members contact details on file for in case of emergencies. Stress this information is kept confidentially.
- Explaining the ground rules – particularly the essential ones – drug and alcohol policy, confidentiality, and respecting each other, and pointing out the VANISH policies (Drug and Alcohol and Code of Conduct).
- Describing any personal preferences or requests the facilitator may have of the group e.g. if they are hard of hearing and require people not to talk at once etc.
- Inviting any initial questions about what you have shared before moving on.

The facilitator might add more points to the opening comments that are specific to the group. For example if the group has in the past involved lots of people talking at once or some disrespectful behaviour, the facilitator might say something like

“I am the group facilitator and I will invite each of you to speak if you wish to. From time to time I may indicate to people that it is time for someone else to take their turn to talk. I will not allow any judgmental or hurtful comments to continue. Very rarely I might need to ask someone to take a break and even more rarely to leave the meeting.”

Similarly if there is some discomfort being displayed by group members there are a few ways the facilitator can put people at ease by:-

- Pointing out that it can feel strange to talk openly in a group about this topic at first, and suggest that participants try attending a few times before deciding the group is not for them.
- Suggesting members share something that has not been successful: we can all be helped and learn from mistakes.
- Sharing an appropriately sensitive anecdotal story.

10. Support Group Process

After the welcome the facilitator may have a comment, story, poem, information or focus to start the group. She or he may ask how everyone has been, particularly if there have been special days since the last group e.g. anniversaries, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Birthdays, Easter, Christmas or events like Apologies and Memorial Days. Below are some suggestions of how to lead the group discussion:-

- Invite group members to share their story or matter of interest indicating whether they just want to be heard of would like to have comments and discussion on their issues.
- Begin the sharing and discussion with someone who is ready and willing. The facilitator may begin with a short contribution modelling the sort of contribution that is common.
- Go around the group making sure participants are clear that if they do not want to share they can just listen. Keep an eye out for new or quiet participants and offer them opportunities to participate in the discussion.
- Ensure each participant's contribution is acknowledged and validated. This can be done by:
 - responding that whatever the member is feeling and talking about is obviously painful, challenging, complex, confusing (as appropriate)
 - normalising their experience by pointing out that other people have talked about feeling the same way
 - commenting on how much courage, tenacity or compassion etc. they have shown they have through their story
 - or simply saying 'thank you for sharing that, it was very powerful, informative, interesting' etc.
- Always provide clarification where misinformation emerges. This can be done diplomatically by waiting to see if other members make a correction and if not, saying something like 'That has been commonly believed to be true, however research (or mental health professionals or other authority) have learned differently...'
- Be knowledgeable and warmly express empathy and understanding about adoption (and donor conception) matters. Maintain a sense of vibrancy in the group – show your passion and your sense of humour.
- Ensure basic search information is provided: recommend the VANISH self-help search guide (on the website) and that participants have a discussion with a member of the VANISH search and support team as search information changes.
- Keep the focus of the discussion on the purpose of the group (reiterate the purpose if necessary) and on the theme of adoption, recognising that adoption can affect many aspects of someone's life. It can help to summarise the discussion so far, then suggest what to discuss next or invite someone else to speak.

11. Hints and Tips

- If the setting permits, facilitating with a light touch ensures the facilitator is not perceived as dominant or lecturing. Make it clear to the group that each participant is both teacher and student, and no single person has the answers.
- The facilitator may engage in reflective sharing of what has worked for a group member and whether it might work for others. When an idea is very unusual or risky the facilitator might comment that it sounds like an idea worth weighing up against the risks involved.
- If you think a participant is embarked on or locked into a negative position you may decide to encourage them to try other things while leaving them in control of their decisions. Avoid negating their contribution.
- Convey that the group provides information and support but does not try to solve or fix problem for participants. The group may suggest possibilities but all decision-making rests with the participants.
- Encourage healthy sharing and support amongst the group but head off any sudden offers of help between members. Each participant is there for their own benefit and each participant can find their own solutions with a bit of support.
- Use opportunities to draw on the accumulated wisdom that people in the group. Note how participants have dealt with, survived, overcome and transcended experiences that are being discussed.
- Support people to talk about their fears and to check out the reality of those fears in the current context.
- It can be helpful to allow a period of silence if it occurs. It may encourage a participant and give them time to get into the conversation. Avoid jumping in too soon.

12. When a Member is in Crisis

It may emerge at any time during the group or after the group that a person is in crisis. They may be overwhelmed emotionally and need time and reassurance in order to recover, or they may be triggered into something more serious and need attending to urgently. Or perhaps they have a practical crisis for example domestic violence or homelessness. These are not issues that VANISH specialises in or gets involved with, but as facilitator you have a duty of care to make sure they are supported appropriately. Depending on what type of crisis a member is facing, the response may involve:

- Asking what they need, or what they normally do when they feel this way or face this situation.
- Asking them if there is anyone they can call to come and collect them or support them.

- Calling emergency services if necessary.
- Offering to speak to them later or the following day to talk the issue through in more detail.
- Ask them if they would like a VANISH support person to call them and provide them with a referral to a counsellor.

13. De-escalating conflict

Every group involves people with differing experiences, views and opinions. Adoption is a very personal and intensely emotional issue. It is easy for people to become passionate, upset, or to take comments the wrong way. It is the role of the facilitator to get the balance right between allowing group members to share honestly, and letting the discussion get heated or disrespectful. It is your responsibility to diffuse situations quickly and effectively. For example:

- If you find someone is being quite forceful or opinionated, you may want to make it clear that each participant is only speaking about their own experience and does not have ‘the wisdom’ to inform or advise the whole group.
- State that you will not allow any intended or unintended put-downs, judgments or harassment. If you see a comment as disrespectful, let the speaker know that some people might find their comments hurtful. If they continue the facilitator will need to firmly ask them to either keep quiet or to take a break.
- If you become aware of a split in the group developing, point out to the group that there seem to be two schools of thought or two common shared experiences and it is helpful for each to listen carefully to the other to learn and understand. If the group is large, the ‘us and them’ scenario might require dividing the group into two separate discussions then come back together for the closing comments.
- Block and divert comparisons of sad/bad experience and focus on hearing them individually and moving to positive strategies as appropriate. You might point out that no-one’s situation is worse, though it sometimes may feel that way and that there are also many feelings that we share in common.
- If someone is dominating the group step in diplomatically at first saying something like ‘we wish there was time for you to share move with us, but I know you understand that others need time to share as well’ or ‘we only have x minutes left and I would love to give others here the chance to speak’.
- Sometimes you will need to refer directly to the ground rules and remind members of their agreement to those rules.
- If you feel there is a need for a direct intervention to stop a conversation, refer to the needs of the group. For example you could say ‘I am concerned that such details may be upsetting for some group members. Let’s share in a way that is less difficult for other people.’

- Recognise signs of mental instability and if behavior is disruptive to the group negotiate non-attendance at the group and provide appropriate referrals for alternative support.

14. Closing the Group

Whether the wind-down of the group is done in the group or over refreshments, it should provide a period for transition from the group back to the ‘outside world’. Start by acknowledging that it is time to draw the discussion to a close and make some final remarks. This is the time to:-

- Thank people for their participation – noting that both discussion and thoughtful reflection are equally valuable.
- Comment on the courage and commitment group members have shown by making the effort to attend.
- Finish on a positive note if possible. You might do this by:
 - pointing out some of the benefits of attending the group e.g. being able to speak freely, the sense of belonging or trust
 - asking participants what they felt they got out of the group
 - summarising some of the key points made earlier about resilience and hope
 - using a poem, inspirational reading or an appropriately sensitive personal anecdote.
- Check that everyone feels o.k. and ready to make their journey home.
- Remind people of the date, venue and time of the next meeting and of any relevant events that will be happening.
- Hand out any information that you have decided to share (make a careful on-the-spot evaluation of whether information brought by a group member to share is relevant and helpful.)

You have a responsibility to close the group at the agreed time so do not allow it to run over time. People have to travel home and may have babysitting commitments or work and family commitments the next day. Participants might not feel comfortable to disturb proceedings by leaving if the group has run over time.

Make sure you allow a bit of time for clearing up and for follow up conversations with anyone who needs a bit more reassurance before leaving or who you intend to make referrals for.

15. Follow- up Support

Facilitators should be clear from the outset how much follow-up support they will provide, if any, and under what circumstances. This will depend upon their qualifications and skills, their role in the community, and the extent to which they are willing and able to provide

follow-up support outside group times. Whatever support is offered (if any) should be made available to all. Some of the types of follow-up support group members often seek are:

- They may ring you for further information about how to go about a search or how to access support with their contact/reunion, in which case they should be referred to VANISH.
- An individual might like to provide feedback or suggestions about how the group is run
- They might want counselling or mediation services, in which case they should be referred to VANISH.
- An individual might like advice regarding reading material or other resources.
- They might want advice on how to respond to a situation with their family or relationship, in which case you might want to refer them to VANISH.
- A follow-up phone call or email may be appreciated from a new group member after their first group to see how they felt afterwards.
- If the group has experienced any embarrassment or conflict you may wish to contact relevant participants to help re-engage them.
- Group members might just want someone to chat to who gets it.

If you do undertake to provide follow-up support, ensure confidentiality and privacy of names, phone numbers and other personal details.

You might like to provide information, articles and resource lists that have been approved by VANISH. You may want to refer someone to VANISH to help identify an appropriate counsellor, or to local health and community information and resources.

The group may have experienced community ‘elders’ who are able and wish to give support. In this case it needs to be very clear what level of support they can give outside the group and this should be available to all.

Sometimes group members express interest in arranging social gatherings. If they are adoption related coffee mornings or events like a movie screening related to the theme of adoption, these events should be offered to all participants and also it should be made clear that participants are not obliged to attend. In cases where friendships develop, ask participants to make their arrangements discretely to ensure no-one feels rejected.

If you become aware of group members using the group for dating purposes you should remind them of the Code of Conduct.

16. After the Group

There are a few administrative aspects that need to be taken care of when the group is over, which are:-

- Provide written statistical information to VANISH
- Complete any evaluation forms for VANISH
- File securely any confidential contact details for group members.
- Store brochures, reading material and consumables for the next group.

17. Conflict of Interest

As a Support Group Facilitator you need to ensure that you always operate in a manner inclusive of race, culture, gender and sexual preference:

- You have left any ‘self-interest’ aside: e.g. Do not use the group for business opportunities; dating or social opportunities, or undermine VANISH or any other professional service.
- Speak to the manager at VANISH immediately when you perceive a conflict of interest has arisen or your co-facilitator or anyone in the group suggests that a conflict of interest has arisen.
- Ensure each participant understands that they may make a complaint or give feedback directly to VANISH and provide them with a copy of the Feedback and Complaints Policy in 6.
- If you have a relevant business, e.g. you are a counsellor and a support group participant wishes to see you it would not be appropriate for you to advertise at the support group, however, if directly asked you could provide information on your own service, together with other counselling services in your area. It is recommended that you discuss this matter with the VANISH Manager.

18. Debriefing

Facilitators should have a confidential personal debriefing on a regular basis to encourage reflective practice, help avoid burn-out and build resilience. With regular debriefings in place, if and when a challenging issue arises there is an existing and familiar procedure to discuss it. Debriefing can happen at the regional level or you may have an arrangement with the VANISH Support Group Co-ordinator or other VANISH staff. A debriefing session is the opportunity for the facilitator to talk through what they experienced with the purpose of clarifying their thoughts and feelings. It should involve:

- The listening role being carried out by someone who is familiar with the kinds of experiences being described.

- A set amount of time set aside for you to discuss thoughts, emotions, and experiences associated with the group and to achieve understanding and validation of your reactions and responses.
- Being supported to identify possible positive outcomes and/or strategies for the future.
- Bringing "closure" to any aspects of the group that you found challenging whether it be in the form of acceptance of what happened and how you responded, or developing strategies for the future.

Debriefing is not a critique but a systematic way of reviewing events so as to build your capacity to process and integrate your experiences. It is therefore important that the person listening put aside any critical or judgemental thoughts and avoid interrupting, talking about their own experiences or giving advice. They are there to provide a supportive environment for you to work through your thoughts and feelings, much like the role you perform in the group.

Facilitation of adoption groups can be confronting, emotionally difficult, and disturbing as well as revealing and rewarding. Without an opportunity to talk through how the group went, facilitators can become tired, lose enthusiasm or get 'burnt out' and unknowingly respond within the group. For example they might unconsciously steer discussion away from issues they felt overwhelmed by, or show through their body language their discomfort with an individual.

19. Self-Care

Your role as a Facilitator is commonly very much appreciated by the members of the group. Some individuals may express this, others might not engage with you all that much, but without your support and enthusiasm the group would not happen and the benefits of the group would not be felt by participants and the people in their lives. You are serving a need and community that may have gone unrecognised for many years if not decades.

This does not mean, however, that you are indispensable or that you should run yourself into the ground for the sake of the group. Self-care is part of your responsibility, in order to keep you in good shape mentally and emotionally to be able to do your role to the best of your ability. It is best to develop strategies with your co-facilitator and/or VANISH for covering holidays and other times you might not be able to facilitate, or for sharing the load of leading the group if you need to take a back seat temporarily. Self-care is important - a refreshed facilitator brings vibrancy to the group.

References

For up-to-date information about the work of VANISH please refer to www.vanish.org.au.

Aplomb Consulting, Facilitating Meetings: A Guide for Community Planning Groups, Academy for educational Development Centre for Community-Based Health Strategies, July 2001. PDF www.cds.gov/.../guidelines/facilitating%20meetings%20version_200...

Doyle, M., and Straus, D. *How to Make Meetings Work*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1993. Considered by many trainers to be a classic. The authors advocate clear agendas, explicit objectives, and the rotation of meeting responsibilities.

Hunter, D., Bailey, A., and Taylor, B. *The Art of Facilitation: How to Create Group Synergy*. Tucson: Fisher Books, 1995. Gives specifics on facilitating/leading meetings in the same format as *Zen of Groups* (see below). Contains a toolkit that includes facilitative designs for workshops, meetings, projects, and evaluations; facilitative group process; working with others; role playing.

Hunter, D., Bailey, A., and Taylor, B. *Zen of Groups: A Handbook for People Meeting With a Purpose*. Tucson: Fisher Books, 1995. Explores the essence of group dynamics and applying the principles of Zen to improve group dynamics. Contains a toolkit of techniques and exercises for generating ideas, defining priorities, thinking creatively, expressing feelings, energising a group, building a team, using conflict resolution, etc. Focuses more on group participation than facilitation.

Newstrom, J., and Scannell, E. *The Big Book of Business Games*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. Suggests resources for entertaining and group-building activities used in meetings, including ice breakers and discussion generators.

Rees, F. *How to Lead Work Teams: Facilitation Skills*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer, 1991. Discusses the key principles of facilitation and the roles of managers and facilitators. Recommends specific steps to build consensus, gain commitment, help others solve problems, and make decisions.

Rogers, Jenny, *"Facilitating Groups"*, Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia, 2010. Provides insights into how to facilitate groups without using coercion, teaching or chairing and how to read a group, how to challenge group members appropriately and how to name the apparently un-namable.

Timm, P. *How to Hold Successful Meetings: 30 Action Tips for Managing Effective Meetings*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press (30-Minute Solutions Series), 1997. Presents action-oriented tips for holding effective meetings by inviting the right people, developing an agenda, and tactfully preserving balanced group dynamics. Contains sample evaluations of meeting processes.

Appendix 1: Support Group Facilitator's Agreement

I agree to endeavour to work within the following ethical principles and guidelines:

- I acknowledge that the support group is held for the benefit of group participants.
- I will use my skills and talents on behalf of group participants.
- I will strive to engender an environment of respect and safety where all participants trust that they can speak freely and where individual boundaries are honoured.
- I will work hard to ensure I have the knowledge skills and talents necessary for effective support group facilitation.
- I will competently lead the group and not leave it to its own devices.
- I will commit myself to work collaboratively with any co-facilitator.
- I will consistently move the group towards a positive, helpful approach.
- I will openly acknowledge any personal bias or potential conflict of interest.
- I will not engage in any inappropriate social, sexual or business relationships with group participants.
- I will cease group facilitation when I feel I am in any personal or professional position that detracts from the successful functioning of the group.
- I will maintain confidentiality of information.
- I will respect the diversity, culture, rights and autonomy of the group.
- I will engage the group collaboratively as appropriate.
- I will avoid using any processes, methods or tools which are poorly matched to the needs of the group, or are experimental, and will never risk the welfare, dignity and safety of group participants.
- I agree to be guided by the VANISH Support Group Facilitators' Handbook.
- I agree to abide by the VANISH Code of Conduct, Drug and Alcohol policy and Complaints Policy.
- I will ensure as far as practicable all information and resources I (or any group member) provide to the support group are appropriate and if necessary have been checked with VANISH and as appropriate with local contacts.

- I will only make referrals to counsellors who have been approved by VANISH or reputable local sources. After discussion with VANISH I may list myself as a counsellor or other health practitioner.
- I will immediately discuss with the VANISH Manager, VANISH Counsellor or VANISH Chairperson any perceived conflict of interest seen by me or mentioned by any other relevant person.

SIGNED:

SIGNED

Support Group Facilitator
Or
Support Group Co-facilitator
(Cross out what does not apply)

Manager, VANISH

This document is to be signed by each VANISH support group facilitator or support group co-facilitator at the beginning of each calendar year whether or not that person is a VANISH staff member or a volunteer.

Appendix 2: Form for Contact Details

CONTACT DETAILS SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPANT

For safety and security reasons VANISH would like to have your personal details on file. This is not a requirement of attendance and you are entitled to decline.

Personal information is always locked away securely and kept in confidence.

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Email _____

MEMBERSHIP

It is free to become a member of VANISH and receive newsletters and updates by email or by post. Membership is not required to attend support groups.

Please tick as appropriate

I am already a member

I would like to become a member

I am not interested in membership

Please add any comments or questions here:

Appendix 3: VANISH Individual Membership

WHO CAN APPLY?

Any person who:

- 1 Falls within a membership category **Offspring** (including adopted person, former wards of the state, children born of technologically assisted reproduction, children in permanent care, under custodial or guardianship orders or informal family arrangements), **Natural Families**, **Alternative Families**;
- 2 Supports the aims, objectives and statements of philosophy of VANISH; and
- 3 Is accepted for membership by the committee of management (individual members)

HOW TO APPLY

1. Complete an application form.
2. Submit the application form to the Public Officer.
3. The Committee of Management will consider the application at their first meeting after the application is submitted.
4. The Committee of Management shall reserve the right to approve or reject any membership application, and shall not be required to give reasons for so doing.

VANISH PHILOSOPHY

VANISH endorses a self-help model as the way of empowering individuals affected by adoption, state wardship. We aim to assist those individuals to have control of their futures by enabling them to make their own decisions and to take independent action.

VANISH stands for both individual growth and collective strength. By empowering people, we promote personal, social and community development.

VANISH is committed to bringing together members of the adoption community - natural families, adoptees, adoptive families, and state wards. We believe that only by working alongside each other can we promote better understanding of all these groups.

VANISH recognises and respects the diverse experiences and beliefs of all people involved in adoption, and state wardship. We are committed to understanding the uniqueness of each individual's life experience - recognising the similarities that forge common bonds while acknowledging the factors that create different perspectives.

VANISH endorses the right to open information, knowledge and search access. We are committed to providing an accessible service (offering resources, referral, information, and professional expertise) to all individuals and organisations associated with the adoption, and state wardship network.

VANISH promotes progressive legislation and practice in accordance with its basic principles.

VANISH PURPOSE

The purpose of VANISH is to relieve the suffering and distress of people who have experienced adoption, state wardship or separation from family, by providing a formal structure through which to deliver efficiently and effectively advice, search, counseling and support.

VANISH AIMS

1. To empower individuals, through self-help, to address any matters which are issues in their lives, related to their adoption and state wardship experience or separation from family.
2. To facilitate any party in their search and contact with another party.
3. When working to achieve either of the two above goals, to assist people in their negotiations with agencies, organisations or government departments.
4. To increase community awareness and promote change in community attitudes to adoption, state wardship or separation from family through community education.
5. To develop an active, statewide adoption, state wardship and separation from family self-help network.

VANISH OBJECTIVES

1. To offer practical and emotional support in an individual and / or group environment.
2. To link individuals with other persons in the adoption and state wardship community and with those who have experienced separation from family.
3. To encourage and develop self-search skills.
4. To assist people in their search by offering direction, assistance, advice and support in a group, or individually.
5. To advocate on behalf of individuals, to agencies, government departments and organisations
6. To advocate the development of policy options that facilitates change or responsiveness in these groups.
7. To participate in and contribute to government and agency policy development,
8. To develop and maintain an effective database in order to monitor, evaluate and maintain the effective and efficient operation of the service and to provide a basis for changes to the service which may be required to maintain the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.
9. To develop and offer seminars throughout regions in Victoria concerning changes in adoption, state wardship or separation from family philosophy legislation and practice.
10. To develop a comprehensive library of literature, videos, films and research material on all adoption, state wardship or separation from family issues.
11. To promote media coverage and attention to issues of importance in this field and the services of VANISH.
12. To develop information sharing networks.

1. Application for FULL MEMBERSHIP of VANISH with voting rights

I am eligible for membership in the following category(s)



Offspring:

- I am an adopted person I am a donor conceived person
- I am a careleaver or state ward

Biological or Natural Family:

- I am a natural parent of an adopted person
- I am a natural parent of a donor conceived person I am a donor of gametes
- I am a natural parent of a careleaver or state ward

Non-biological or Alternative Family:

- I am an adoptive parent I am a step-parent of an adopted person
- I am a foster parent or carer of a careleaver or state ward
- I am a non-biological parent of a child born of donor assisted reproduction

- OR -

2. Application for FRIEND of VANISH eligible to receive VOICE and other notices

(Please tick)

- An Individual who is not eligible for Membership under the above categories**
- A Professional** **An Organisation**

Surname: _____

Given names: _____

Postal Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email Address: _____ *(please print)*

Home Telephone No: _____ Mobile No. _____

I prefer to receive VOICE or notices via email: Yes / No *(please circle)*

Please note: some constitutional documents are required to be sent by post

I support the purpose, aims and objectives of VANISH and agree to conform with them.

Signed: _____ Date: __/__/__

Please return your completed form to: VANISH, P O Box 112, Carlton South. Vic. 3053
or email info@vanish.org.au

How did you hear about VANISH Inc ? _____

Appendix 4: VANISH Code of Conduct

***Each person who attends events at VANISH including support groups
MUST abide by this Code of Conduct.***

We agree that:

- We will be respectful of others by being tolerant and supportive.
- We will be aware of and respect others' differences, feelings and opinions.
- We will not be harassing or violent towards other people in speech or behaviour.
- We will listen while others are speaking, and not interrupt or disrupt group discussion and share time fairly.
- If someone is feeling upset during group discussion, they will have a break in another room or outside. The person may wish to be accompanied by another group member.
- We will not engage in any inappropriate relationships with other group participants.

VANISH Committee of Management 2012.

Appendix 5: VANISH Drug and Alcohol Policy

***Each person who attends events at VANISH including support groups
MUST abide by the Drug and Alcohol Policy.***

NO SMOKING, DRUGS OR ALCOHOL ARE ALLOWED AT SUPPORT GROUPS

Service users who appear under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol will be asked by the group facilitator to immediately leave support groups.

Any persons under the influence who are uncontrollable and having a negative impact on other service users and staff or endangering property and do not leave will be reported to the Police.

VANISH Committee of Management 2012

Appendix 6: VANISH Feedback and Complaints Policy

Positive or constructive feedback:

Positive or constructive feedback is welcome anytime by phone, email or letter to:

1. Support Group Coordinator at VANISH
2. Manager VANISH
3. Counsellor at VANISH
4. Committee of Management at VANISH

Complaints

Complaints may be made at any time to the person of your choice by phone, email or letter. They will be responded to within one working week.

We suggest contact is made in this order but that is not required:

1. Support Group Coordinator at VANISH
2. Manager VANISH
3. Counsellor at VANISH
4. Committee of Management at VANISH

If a complaint is of significance and cannot be amicably settled amongst the above people it can, on request of the complainant, be referred to the full VANISH Committee of Management (CoM) for resolution. If required the CoM may utilise a mediator. Any requirements the complainant has for privacy should be stated.

Any complaints should be responded to within a week and dealt with within a month or in the rare cases of ongoing dispute regular updates should be given.

Policy agreed by VANISH Committee of Management February 2013.