



Thriving Together: Co Creating Well-Being Support for Parent of Autistic Children

Parent Wellbeing Support Model

Supported by Fay Fullers Foundation

1. Purpose of the Model

This framework has been developed to support parents, community groups, organisations, local services, and stakeholders who are interested in creating or strengthening wellbeing and connection opportunities for parents of autistic children. The framework is based on extensive community engagement undertaken through the *Thriving Together: Co-Creating Well-being Supports for Parents of Autistic Children* Fay Fullers Spark Program.

Throughout the project, parents consistently shared that they were not simply looking for another support group or information session. Instead, they wanted:

- connection with people who genuinely understand
- practical support that reduces stress and burden
- opportunities to focus on their own wellbeing
- flexible and low-pressure ways to engage
- support that feels welcoming, useful, and realistic within everyday family life

This framework shares the key learnings from the project and provides practical guidance for anyone considering developing a parent wellbeing or peer support group within their own community.

The framework is not intended to be a strict program model. Instead, it is designed to:

- provide ideas and considerations
- support flexible community-led approaches



- help groups think about what parents may find most meaningful and accessible
- encourage models that are practical, relational, and neuro-affirming

Every community is different. The most important principle is listening to parents and adapting approaches to suit local needs, strengths, and capacities.

2. Understanding the Context

Parents of autistic children often navigate:

- ongoing advocacy
- emotional and cognitive overload
- school and service systems
- burnout and fatigue
- financial pressure
- social isolation
- limited time for themselves

Many parents described feeling:

- overwhelmed
- exhausted
- disconnected
- unsupported
- misunderstood

A strong finding throughout the project was that many parents are already aware of what would support their wellbeing, but often do not have:

- the time
- energy
- practical support
- childcare



- emotional capacity
- accessible opportunities

to engage in traditional support models.

When developing a parent wellbeing group or support opportunity, it is important to recognise that parents are often balancing significant competing demands.

A successful model should aim to:

- reduce burden, not add to it
- feel welcoming and low pressure
- provide genuine value for the time and energy required to attend
- create opportunities for connection, practical support, and belonging

3. Key Principles to Consider

Community-Led Approaches

Parents consistently valued opportunities where their experiences, ideas, and feedback shaped the direction of support.

When developing a group, consider:

- involving parents early in planning
- asking what they want and need
- adapting based on feedback
- allowing the group to evolve over time
- recognising lived experience as valuable expertise

Co-creation does not need to be highly formal. Simple conversations and engagement in nontraditional ways can support parents that are often time poor and underrepresented in co-design processes, where more robust involvement is needed.



Neuro-Affirming Practice

Many parents involved in the project identified as autistic, ADHD, or neurodivergent themselves.

When planning groups, consider:

- sensory environments
- communication styles
- social anxiety
- cognitive fatigue
- overwhelm in busy or noisy environments

Helpful considerations may include:

- low lighting
- quieter spaces
- clear communication
- visual schedules or agendas
- predictable session structure
- opportunities for movement or breaks
- permission to engage in different ways
- craft or parallel activities during discussion

It is important to recognise that people may participate differently depending on:

- energy levels
- confidence
- sensory needs
- emotional capacity
- familiarity with the group

Flexibility Matters

One of the strongest findings from the project was that flexibility is essential.



Parents frequently described:

- changing family circumstances
- school calls and appointments
- exhaustion
- illness
- unpredictable caregiving demands

When planning a group, consider:

- allowing parents to arrive late or leave early
- reducing pressure around attendance
- offering drop-in participation
- avoiding rigid expectations
- providing multiple ways to engage

Parents consistently valued groups that felt:

- manageable
- understanding
- low demand
- realistic within family life

Practical Support is Highly Valued

Parents consistently described wanting support that was:

- practical
- useful
- action-oriented

Practical support may include:

- help navigating NDIS
- support understanding school systems



- assistance with forms and paperwork
- preparing for meetings
- referral information
- practical strategies and shared resources

Parents repeatedly described feeling overwhelmed by systems and administration. Even small amounts of practical support may significantly reduce stress.

When planning sessions, consider:

- whether there are opportunities to include practical support
- whether local services or professionals could contribute
- how information can be simplified and made easier to navigate

Connection and Belonging are Important

Parents consistently described wanting opportunities to:

- connect with others who “get it”
- feel less alone
- talk openly without judgement
- laugh and relax
- build relationships over time

The most meaningful aspects of groups are often:

- informal conversations
- shared experiences
- peer connection
- feeling understood

When planning groups, consider:

- leaving time for informal conversation



- avoiding over-scheduling
- creating welcoming and comfortable environments
- supporting ongoing connection between sessions

Parents repeatedly emphasised that connection should feel:

- genuine
 - relaxed
 - supportive
 - non-judgemental
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4. Thinking About Group Structure

There is no single “right” way to structure a parent wellbeing group. Different communities may prefer different approaches.

However, the project identified several considerations that parents consistently valued.

Frequency

This project identified that parents often preferred:

- monthly sessions
- occasional flexible gatherings
- sustainable rather than intensive schedules

When planning frequency, consider:

- what is manageable for families
- what is realistic for facilitators or organisations
- how consistency can be maintained over time

Consistency was identified as very important.

Parents repeatedly shared that it helped to know:



- the group would still exist next month
- support would continue over time
- relationships could develop gradually

Timing

Many parents preferred:

- school-hour sessions
- morning sessions
- flexible attendance options

However, some communities may benefit from:

- evening sessions
- weekend gatherings
- online options
- rotating schedules

When planning timing, consider:

- school schedules
- transport
- fatigue levels
- caregiving responsibilities
- community preferences

Session Length

Long sessions may become overwhelming for some parents.

Parents often described valuing:

- shorter topic presentations
- opportunities for breaks



- flexibility to leave early
- time for informal connection

When planning sessions, consider balancing:

- information
- discussion
- wellbeing activities
- practical support
- connection time

5. Thinking About Location and Environment

The physical environment significantly influences whether parents feel comfortable attending and participating.

Parents consistently preferred:

- informal and welcoming environments
- community-based settings
- familiar locations
- spaces that do not feel overly clinical

When choosing a location, consider:

- parking availability
- public transport access
- accessibility
- sensory environment
- seating comfort
- noise levels
- lighting
- availability of quieter spaces



- access to refreshments or outdoor areas

Small details such as:

- coffee
- snacks
- comfortable seating
- natural light
- quieter rooms

were consistently described as helping parents feel more relaxed and welcomed.

6. Thinking About Facilitation

Facilitators play an important role in shaping the culture and safety of a group.

Parents consistently valued facilitators who were:

- approachable
- flexible
- authentic
- supportive
- practical
- understanding
- neuro-affirming

The role of facilitation may include:

- welcoming participants
- guiding discussion
- supporting quieter participants
- managing group dynamics respectfully
- providing practical guidance
- helping people feel included and comfortable

It can also be helpful to:

- recognise that some participants may dominate conversation unintentionally



- allow different communication styles
- gently support balanced participation
- avoid overly formal facilitation approaches

Parents often responded positively to facilitators who:

- created a relaxed atmosphere
 - acknowledged real challenges
 - allowed humour and honesty
 - focused on practical support and connection
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7. Ideas for Group Components

Groups may include a combination of:

- peer connection
- practical support
- wellbeing activities
- learning opportunities
- informal social connection

Possible activities may include:

- guest speakers
- practical workshops
- walking groups
- art or craft
- coffee catch-ups
- yoga or movement
- discussion groups
- peer mentoring
- resource sharing
- wellbeing activities
- Q&A sessions

Parents generally preferred:



- practical and discussion-based content
 - low-pressure activities
 - opportunities to connect naturally
 - flexible participation
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8. Ongoing Connection Between Sessions

One of the strongest findings from the project was that support often extends beyond the session itself.

Parents valued:

- follow-up contact
- ongoing communication
- trusted relationships
- knowing someone would check in
- continued sharing of information and supports

When developing a group, consider:

- email updates
- text communication
- closed social media groups
- peer check-ins
- informal catch-ups
- sharing community resources

These ongoing connections can help strengthen belonging and continuity.

9. What Parents Often Do Not Want

Parents consistently described support models that felt:

- overly clinical
- lecture-heavy
- rigid
- highly structured



- judgemental
- exhausting
- another obligation

Parents also expressed that they did not want groups to become:

- overly negative
- focused only on problems
- spaces where some voices dominate others
- environments where they feel pressure to attend or participate perfectly

Groups are often most successful when they feel:

- welcoming
- realistic
- balanced
- supportive
- practical
- hopeful

10. Final Reflection

A strong message throughout the Thriving Together project was that meaningful support does not always need to be highly formal or complex.

Parents consistently described the value of:

- feeling understood
- having practical help
- connecting with others
- being able to relax
- sharing experiences
- feeling less alone



When developing parent wellbeing supports, one of the most important considerations is creating spaces where parents feel:

- safe
- welcomed
- valued
- supported
- able to participate in ways that work for them

The most meaningful models are often those that:

- listen to parents
- adapt over time
- prioritise connection and belonging
- reduce burden
- remain flexible and realistic
- recognise the importance of both practical and emotional support

Ultimately, strengthening parent wellbeing also strengthens families, communities, and the broader support systems around autistic children.