

Starting a group



Advice from the Home Education Network
<http://www.home-ed.vic.edu.au>

The number of groups in Victoria is growing all the time, and many families will be able to find an existing group which meets their needs. However, if there's no group near you, or if the focus of existing groups is not what you are looking for, you may decide to start your own.

If you decide to take this route, HEN can help you in the following ways:

- HEN has a \$40 million public liability insurance policy. If a home ed group/event is non-profit and run by a HEN member it can be listed as a HEN event on our insurance register with the member as the volunteer responsible for it listed as the contact.
- Members can advertise their interest in starting a group via the HEN Facebook page/weekly emails, and can use the same channels to advertise once a group is running. Group details can also be added to the HEN Events/Groups pages.

Those who are interested in starting a group may find the following information useful for planning purposes.

The key question for any organiser is "what am I looking for?" If you are investing time and energy into creating a new group, you need to make sure it meets the needs of your family.

When you know what you want, you need to find others who share your vision. There's no point finding a venue and advertising a group, only to discover that there's nobody else looking for a French language chess club.

Organise a meeting, get all the interested families together, and talk through the following points to come up with a plan. Meeting together will give you an idea of group dynamics, and give a better idea of the level of commitment. Many people are happy to click 'going' on Facebook, or say 'count me in', but balk at coming along to a meeting and making a commitment; if the majority of those interested fall into this category, you may struggle to sustain a regular group.

Share the load. For anything more organised than monthly social at a park, there's work involved, and there's no reason you should do it all yourself.

Whilst there is no one template for a successful group, but the following questions may help you clarify your ideas and anticipate potential issues.

Who

Who is the group for? Everyone, teens, kids who love nature, gifted kids, German speakers
Should you have an age range?

Is it open to all, or do you have entry criteria?

Do you have minimum/maximum numbers?

Who will run the group? An individual, a committee, everyone?

If you are running organised activities, you should consider who will the following responsibilities: organising/teaching, sourcing materials, handling the money, dealing with enquiries, making bookings for activities, cleaning up, storing materials.

When

How often will you meet? Monthly, weekly, once a term?

Which day of the week works best for you? This may be dictated by the location, or the meeting days of other groups/activities locally.

Time? Morning, afternoon, all day. Do some families have school pick-up/drop-off? Are some of the children likely to find a long meeting too tiring?

Where

Parks – Free, but not so great during extreme heat/cold. Is there a covered area/toilet block? Is there a fenced play area, or are the kids old enough to roam unsupervised?

A local home – This can work well if you know everyone attending well, but what if something gets broken? Consider parking and the reality of having lots of people in your home – will you mind if the kids make a mess, drop juice on the carpet, is your space toddler friendly?

Hiring a venue – Consider availability and cost. How will you cover the hire cost? If people pay on arrival, what happens if everyone is sick and you don't cover the cost? Is there a kitchen/outdoor space? What about heating and cooling? Some locations require a bond to be paid, and it's handy to have a contingency fund in case (for example) a window is broken.

In addition to Neighbourhood Houses/community centres, you might be able to hire space at the library or use the hall of a community organisation such as Rotary or Scouts.

Why

Is your purpose social, academic, skill based, or a combination?

Will you run activities on a set topic, work through a curriculum, share a unit study, or work on art projects? You could have a theme for the week or term, have a board game group, take a walk at a different location each session, arrange for speakers from different countries – the possibilities are endless.

Do the kids have special needs, and how will these best be met?

What

What else do you need to consider?

How will you deal with any issues which arise? Clashes between parenting styles, personalities, and expectations all have the potential to be problematic. Who will deal with any problems, how do you ensure that this is done fairly?

Do you need a mission statement? Having a few short sentences to describe the group can help to keep you on track, and make the purpose and organisation of your group clear to new members.

What commitment do you expect from families? Circumstance may differ substantially between families, but most people are able to contribute in some way. If your group is more structured, those who are unwilling to help are often a cause of resentment. Make your expectations explicit (preferably in writing). You will always need to make accommodations for illness, special needs, new babies etc. Someone who is unable to help with running activities, may be able to answer emails, bring morning tea, or be responsible for liaising with the venue.

How much will you charge? Make sure you cover costs, with a little spare for emergencies. Will you charge per child or per family? If you end the year with a profit, will you return it to members, add it to your contingency fund, have a party?

How will you communicate with group members, and organise activities etc. Emails are fine if one person is making all the decisions, but not so good for group discussions. A private or secret Facebook page might suit your needs. Alternately a private forum can be set up via Proboards.

Legal and safety issues

Quasi Schools

A home ed group or co-op that meets once or twice a week for activities is definitely not a quasischool. Exactly where a group would cross the line into being considered a quasi-school is difficult to define but the things the VRQA are likely to consider in making such a determination would be:

- whether parents are handing over the primary responsibility for educating the child
- whether parents are present
- whether fees are being charged and wages paid.

So a group which meets every day with parents taking turns to teach and being absent at other times – that might be regarded as an unregistered school and organisers. The penalty is approximately \$1585.70.

Working With Children Cards

WWCC are not required by parents participating in events/activities with their kids. They are therefore not required for most home ed events.

Any outside facilitator working with kids (aged under 15) with parents absent should have a WWCC. For activities where parents remain, it is not mandatory, but it's a good idea – particularly if the person is not know to you.

WWCCs are free for volunteers. The govt info on who needs a WWCC and application details are here <http://www.workingwithchildren.vic.gov.au/home/>

Indemnity Forms

HEN insurance doesn't require the use of an indemnity form of a sign in register. Legally, they have little value. The main purpose is to alert people to be responsible for their own kids. If you would feel more comfortable having parents sign a form, that's fine.

Medical issues

If you have kids or adults in the group with severe allergies or other life-threatening conditions, you need to consider how to protect them. Ensure that you have clear instructions about treatment readily available (preferably laminated), and that EpiPens are always stored in the same place for the duration of the group. It's also wise to have a decent first aid kit handy. It's also a good idea to have a list of emergency contacts for each family in case they are ever needed.