

PARENTING/FAMILY MANAGEMENT

# PEPS Affinity Program Connects Parents With Shared Identities

Evolving parent support groups displace a one-size-fits-all approach to building community for parents with specific identities

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“Parenting – particularly at the beginning – is such a culture shock. Having other new parents to connect with is one of most valuable resources that I have found,” says Megan Otis, mom to 1-year-old Ruth. PEPS, has been connecting parents in the Puget Sound region for 40 years, and more recently, the organization has added support groups for [parents of teens \(https://www.parentmap.com/article/pat-parents-teens\)](https://www.parentmap.com/article/pat-parents-teens). But even among new parents, parental identities are more complex than the simple, if often overwhelming, reality of the arrival of a new baby.

## Learning and listening

“At PEPS, we want to be really mindful that parenting is not one size fits all,” says Melanie Roper, PEPS program director. “There are a million affinities that you could choose from, and we need to be really thoughtful and intentional in the ones that we’re taking on.”

In 2021, PEPS began launching [affinity groups \(https://www.peps.org/programs/affinity-programs\)](https://www.peps.org/programs/affinity-programs) designed to help build community around the shared experiences that come from parents’ intersecting identities: LGBTQIA+ parents, single parents and working moms. PEPS identified the need for affinity groups based on feedback from past participants and a review of the services provided by other organizations.

Programming leads also considered their own areas of expertise and available resources to determine which affinity groups to develop. They then worked with professionals to develop specialized curricula. They also worked with consultants to review the materials through an antibias lens for racism, gendered language, ableism and trauma-informed care. They ran multiple iterations of pilot groups with trained facilitators who share the groups’ affinities, many of whom have participated in PEPS programs themselves. With each new review and pilot cohort, PEPS adjusted the course materials, taking into account weekly survey feedback provided by both facilitators and participants.

“Across all of our groups, our main goal is creating a space where parents can talk to other parents who are in a similar life stage [so they] feel less isolated,” says Jennie Capron, PEPS leader support and curriculum manager.

## LGBTQIA+ parent peer-support groups

“We have done a lot of antibias work on our overall curriculum to ensure that it is appropriate to deliver to a variety of communities,” says Allanah Raas-Bergquist. She knows firsthand that participating in an unbiased community is not the same as being in your own community. Raas-Bergquist first experienced PEPS when her daughter, who is now nearly 10, was born. She valued the information the group provided, but as a transwoman who was not yet out, she didn’t really connect with the other dads in the group. Years later, she started working at PEPS as operations manager, and became a frequent group leader who advocated strongly for the development of the LGBTQIA+ affinity group.

“I think the biggest thing is just knowing that this is going to be a safe place where nobody is going to be like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’” says Raas-Bergquist. “Any time we can bring people together who are experiencing early parenthood and who also have shared experiences as a queer person, the opportunity to build connection and build community out of that is just beautiful.”

The LGBTQIA+ affinity group was the first one developed, beginning as a supplement to the core program that only dealt with topics that are particularly relevant to LGBTQIA+ families, such as, for example, second-parent adoption. Guided by pilot participant feedback, this supplemental programming evolved into a 12-week program that covers an additional six topics that are specific to the affinity. It is now offered four times per year for any family that identifies as LGBTQIA+ and has an infant younger than 1.

“It’s about the specific things that we’re covering every week, but it’s also about human connection and how difficult it is to raise children. We [as a society] don’t really have the village anymore, so it’s nice to find ways to build a community,” says Kaitlyn Rosin. Rosin participated in the LGBTQIA+ group with their spouse. They were equally glad to be in a group where they didn’t have to explain their choice to raise 7-month-old Orion in a gender-neutral environment and to be able to turn to trusted peers for practical parenting advice.

“One doesn’t always feel like trial and error to see what works. And just being in a community that is well-held and caring feels very supporting. It’s a nice shot of courage when you’re feeling down,” says Rosin.

## **Single-parent peer-support groups**

The other most-requested service was a group for single parents. Currently in its pilot phase, this group will likely launch as a permanent PEPS program within the year. For some single parents, participating in groups for newborns filled with couples sometimes highlighted their own challenges. In addition to topics from the core curriculum, the nine-week group for single parents of babies up to 12 months of age addresses caregivers’ unique situations. Groups have shared creative ideas for self-care, such as using the YMCA Kid Zone during workouts, and discussed questions such as how to tell your child their family origin story.

“Parenting in general can feel very lonely, and single parenting even more so, even when you have a good support system,” notes Otis. “I have long been a believer of the cliché ‘It takes a village to raise a child,’ and sometimes you have to make your own village.”

Although still in the pilot phase, this group has already formed some powerful bonds. When Otis contracted COVID-19 during the program, the group provided moral support through frequent check-ins. But they also provided concrete help by dropping off gift cards for meal delivery.

Meghan Wagner, mom to 6-month-old Benjamin, enrolled in the pilot group for single parents after participating in a PEPS Group for newborns.

“I’m grateful that I did the Newborn Group because it showed that it’s hard no matter what,” she says. “But I came out of that first single-parent meeting and burst into tears. I had no idea that I needed that as much as I needed that. It was the first time in this

journey as a parent that I was in a group of like-minded parents who understood the uniqueness of being a single parent by choice.”

Although Wagner is blessed with a large, supportive community of friends and family, she describes this PEPS Group as “the only group of people I can text at 3 a.m., because I know that it’s on their mind, too. It’s different talking to people who are going through it right now with you.”

## **Working moms peer-support groups**

The latest affinity group in development serves parents who identify as working mothers of children ages 0–5. Based on initial feedback, the groups are organized around the moms’ stage of work: about to return to work; have just returned to work; or those who have been back at work for some time. The Working Moms program is still under development, but current pilot groups are being tested as an eight-week program for moms with children up to age 5. Unlike the other affinity groups, this program only covers topics specific to the affinity, i.e. the challenges of juggling work and parenting, as well as the burdens of parenting that primarily fall to mothers.

“Some people might wonder why that group is necessary, given that all parenting is labor. But what we know is that our current system in the United States lacks a lot of the structural and social supports for parents — which means that parents need to rely on the goodwill of their employers. Mothers in the U.S. face pressures, obstacles and societal expectations in raising children. There’s been a lot of research lately on the mental load that mothers carry and the gendered pressures that women experience in the workplace,” explains Roper.

Although these pressures often fall on the birthing parent, Roper notes, “It is inclusive of any parent or caregiver experiencing misogyny in the workplace. The group should be a place of reprieve, a place to explore and reflect with other people who have similar experiences.”

Roper already firmly believed that all parents can benefit from peer support when she participated in a Working Moms pilot group — this was when her second child was 4 months old.

“The group was a really amazing space, and it was a space that I actually didn’t know I needed. I was surprised by how healing it was for me,” she says.

## **How to join a PEPS affinity group**

Because affinity groups are, by definition, built from a smaller population, they are held virtually to accommodate families from a wider geographic area than the standard neighborhood-based PEPS Groups. Parents who are interested in joining an affinity program can register online (<https://pepsportal.peps.org/acls/peps/Groups>). Those

who would like to suggest a new affinity group can fill out an [online interest form](https://analytics.clickdimensions.com/cn/akpxr/AffinityInterestForm) (<https://analytics.clickdimensions.com/cn/akpxr/AffinityInterestForm>). There are Flexible Pricing program fee options for the LGBTQIA+ affinity group at this time. The Working Moms and Single Parents affinity group pilot programs are currently offered free of charge, though it is expected that a participation fee will be attached within the year. This new fee structure would still be within Flexible Pricing, and a zero-dollar fee option would still be available.

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