

# Tinker Toys vs. Tonka Trucks: Creating a Parent –Led Support Group Model Responsive to Participant Needs

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## Abstract

In 2013, Children's Institute, Inc. (CII) was awarded a 30 month grant to develop 100 support groups for parents of children 0-5 across Los Angeles County. The goal is to develop opportunities for underserved, at-risk parents that foster social connections, reduce isolation, and encourage sharing of knowledge and skills. Although not just for parents of children with disabilities, they were primary target participants. The groups were developed in collaboration with 5 Community Based Organizations (Weingart East LA YMCA, Para Los Niños, Family Focus Family Resource Center, For The Child and Parents' Place Family Resource Center, The Village Family Services was added in year 2). The USC UCEDD had a primary role in designing the model and developing support group materials. The model grounded in the tenets of mutual support, required the use of peer facilitators; parents with lived experience. Providing community parents with the opportunity to learn new skills and assume leadership positions has been core to the design since its inception. Happily, these values were echoed through our needs assessment.

The needs assessment strongly endorsed several values: flexibility, group decision-making and community-connected facilitators. It favored peer-led support groups facilitated by well-trained and supervised parents with lived experience. It identified nine types of groups: Nurturing Babies, Nurturing Toddlers, Nurturing Preschoolers, Preparing for School, Special Needs, Self-Care, Behavior Challenges, Young Parents, Young Children and Men Nurturing Children. Using the identified values, CII and the UCEDD developed the Tinker Toy model, which provides flexible components that can be used to develop support groups responsive to participant needs and values. The Tinker Toy model distinguishes itself in several areas. It recognizes that the type of group, while influencing recruitment, doesn't dictate what the groups actually discuss. What is discussed in the group is dependent on both group and individual needs. Given that these are support groups rather than classes, a rigid curriculum wasn't a good match. However, since the facilitators are all community parents with little or no previous facilitation experience, they do need supports to help ensure their confidence and competence. Therefore the Tinker Toy model provides tools including initial and ongoing training, Topic Guides with resources and ongoing reflective supervision.

Over 100 community parents have been trained to conduct PSLAC support groups thus far. An additional 21 parents were trained to conduct focus groups and key informant interviews. For many of the parents this was their first opportunity to participate in a leadership role. When asked about big, medium and small events that occurred within or related to their support groups, many of the facilitators responded that the biggest event they saw was in themselves as a result of their participation in PSLAC.

## The Tinker Toy Model

A response to community expressed values for

- flexibility,
- group decision-making and
- community-connected facilitators.
- peer-led support groups facilitated by well-trained and supervised parents with lived experience



Tonka Trucks represent a rigid approach to support groups: a truck is always a truck. Tinker Toys provide the components to design the group based on participants needs and preferences.

## Key Features/Products

- Peer Facilitator Training Support Groups
- 3-day Facilitator Training
- Topic Guides
- Support Group Observations
- Monthly Facilitator Supervision
- Bi-annual All Facilitator Meetings
- 2-day Training of Trainers
- Reflective Practice Supervision Training
- All materials in English and Spanish



## Facilitator Supports vs Support Group Curricula

### 9 Types of Groups

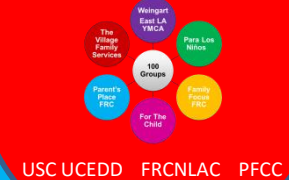
- Nurturing Babies
- Nurturing Toddlers
- Nurturing Preschoolers
- Self-Care
- Special Needs
- Challenging Behaviors
- Preparing for School
- Young Parents/Young Children



## 16 Topics over 9 Groups Behavior Challenges and Discipline

- Breastfeeding
- Developmental Milestones
- Domestic Violence
- Family Life
- Financial Literacy
- Healthcare
- Helping Your Child Be Successful At School
- Job Preparation/Issues
- Interacting With Your Child
- Nutrition
- Resources
- Safety/Crime
- Self-Care
- Sleep

## Children's Institute, Inc



**Parent Support Circles**  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY

A project of



In partnership with



Funded by



## Outcomes (as of today)

- 127 Topic Guides
- 6 facilitator trainings
- 110 trained facilitators
- 4 training curricula
- 80 groups
  - ↑ Protective factors
  - Social Support
  - Nurturing and Attachment
  - Child Development/Knowledge of Parenting