

New Ways to Create Community

Parent-to-Parent Support Groups Are the Nineties Answer to Extended Family

by Melinda Blau

After moving with her family to a new community on Staten Island, New York, Susan Schaub Raisch felt lonely. She knew no one and had no family nearby. "It's not like the old days when you had Grandma living upstairs," says Schaub Raisch, a public relations consultant and mother of four. So, she invited some other mothers in the neighborhood over for coffee.

Ten years later, that coffee hour has percolated into the strongest of parenting support networks. Members pick up each other's kids from soccer games, celebrate holidays together, and provide moral support during trying times. When Schaub Raisch's fourth child was born prematurely with respiratory distress syndrome, other families in the network rushed in to express their concern, take care of her older children, and make a candlelight dinner for her and her husband, Ken. "I felt like I was repaid tenfold for getting the group started," says Schaub Raisch gratefully.

Multiply that success story by thousands, and you get a picture of how parents today are revitalizing the concept of "neighborhood" and redefining "family." Parenting support groups are one of the fastest-growing categories of support groups in the country, says Lynn Pooley, senior program development specialist at the Family Resource Coalition in Chicago. And groups aren't the only form of parent support. Every day, hundreds of cyberspace moms and dads plug in to help solve each others' problems on Prodigy, CompuServe, and America Online. Millions more turn



Mother and child reunion: Playgroups offer a refreshing chance to socialize with other parent-and-child pairs.

to parenting publications, ranging from newsstand magazines to newsletters to small-budget "zines," like the Oakland, California-based *Hip Mama* (see "Parent Support on Paper," page 106).

Breaking through the loneliness and isolation of parenting is perhaps the most compelling reason why today's moms and dads are reaching out for support as never before. Until he started a playgroup for other home-based dads of preschoolers, "I felt like I was the only one out there,"

says John Wengler, a father of a 3- and a 5-year-old in Winnetka, Illinois. "The playgroup has completely changed my outlook and job satisfaction." Busy parents may also seek help from other group members in the form of babysitting, carpooling, or help in a family emergency. And many moms and dads who regularly plug into parenting forums in cyberspace are looking for information, advice, or just reassurance from other networkers that they're on the right track.

5 Steps to a Successful Support Group

To start, select, or improve a parenting network, keep these ideas in mind.

1 Limit the number of members. In groups of five to eight, everyone gets a chance to participate.

2 Determine a goal. A clearly defined purpose, such as sharing experiences and feelings about being new mothers, helps members to bond

and make a commitment.

3 Meet consistently. Scheduling specific days, times, and locations improves attendance.

4 Make sure everyone in the discussion group gets a chance to talk. One approach: Go around the room and give each person a turn to speak up. Another approach is to set aside time

at the end of the meeting to ask if anyone needs to discuss an issue.

5 Pinpoint specific discussion topics for each meeting. The ideas should come from group members, in order to ensure that the members' biggest parental concerns are being addressed at every get-together.

—Glenn Michael Gordon

new family

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You can begin by asking yourself what kind of support system will best serve your situation. If you're an employed parent with little time for group activities but all the right computer stuff, you might decide to join a "plugged-in" community (see "Cyber Moms, Cyber Dads," page 108). If you're eager for more help in print, check out "Parent Support on Paper" (*below*). And if you want to join a face-to-face support group, there are several variations to choose from. Here are a few.

Playgroups. Mothers have long known the benefit of playgroups, which may meet at members' houses or in a central place in the community. News of a group is often spread by word of mouth, but you might also call the local Y, community center, church, or synagogue about playgroups. Playgroups offer a refreshing chance for both you and your child



On a roll: These moms are getting the parenting support they need while taking care of their babies.

to socialize with other parent-and-child pairs. While the kids play, you get to observe your child with other children. You might get a chance to swap parenting advice, too. You'll find, however,

that since your kids are with you, you can count on your conversations being interrupted often. **Self-help groups.** These groups generally meet outside the home and are for adults only, al-

Parent Support on Paper

Parent publications offer everything from recipes for French toast to thoughtful ideas on raising multiracial kids. Here's a sampling of what's out there.



MotherShip is a quarterly newsletter from a network of mothers' clubs in the San Francisco Bay area; \$25; Jennifer Walton, P.O. Box 169, Concord, CA 94522-0169.

Hip hip hooray! There are "zines" for parents, too.

Welcome Home is a journal published each month for home-based mothers; \$18; 8310A Old Courthouse Rd., Vienna, VA 22182 or (800) 783-4MOM.

Hip Mama is a quarterly "zine" geared to younger and single moms, blended and multiracial families; four issues are \$12 to \$20 (you decide how much you can afford); P.O. Box 9097, Oakland, CA 94613.

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NUTTY HAM AND CHEESE

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 sub roll (8-inch), split | 2 leaves curly lettuce |
| 3 Tbsp cream cheese, softened | 4 oz sliced ham |
| 2 Tbsp coarsely chopped pecans | 2 slices Swiss cheese, halved diagonally |
| 2 Tbsp chopped green onion | ½ cup alfalfa sprouts |
| ½ tsp garlic salt | Reynolds Wrap aluminum foil |

Combine cream cheese, pecans, green onion and garlic salt; spread on roll. Layer ingredients in order listed. Wrap in Reynolds Wrap aluminum foil.

SMOKEHOUSE CALIFORNIAN

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2 slices whole grain bread | 2 slices Cheddar cheese |
| 2 Tbsp mayonnaise | 2 slices cooked turkey bacon |
| 1 Tbsp thick & chunky salsa, drained | ½ medium avocado, sliced |
| 6 fresh spinach leaves | Reynolds Wrap aluminum foil |
| 2 slices tomato | |
| 3 oz sliced smoked turkey | |

Combine mayonnaise and salsa; spread on bread. Layer ingredients in order listed. Wrap in Reynolds Wrap aluminum foil.

new family

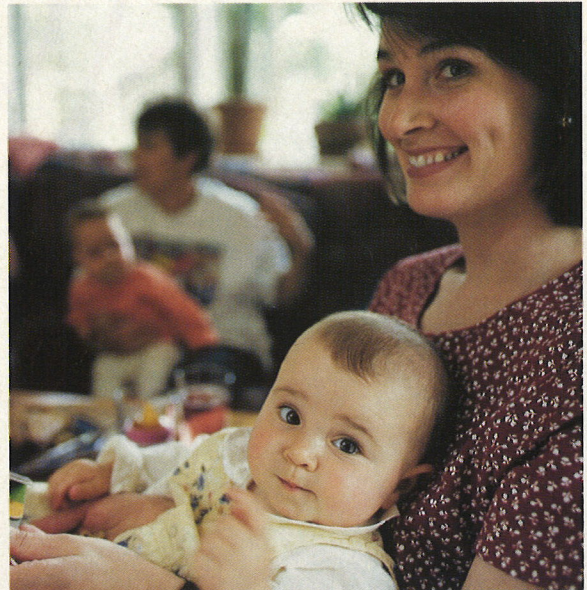
though some may provide babysitting in a separate room while the meeting is going on.

Before you join, make sure you understand the group's goals (see "5 Steps to a Successful Support Group," page 105). The group's focus might be on sharing information, socializing, participating in community action, or a mixture of all of the above.

Many groups are also geared to handling specific parenting challenges. "When we left the hospital, we had no information, no support," says Sally Schaub Rivero, who is Susan Schaub Raisch's sister and the mother of a 7-year-old with cerebral palsy in Vero Beach, Florida. But since she and husband Andy joined the local branch of the Family Network on Disabilities of Florida, "It's like having a whole

you might consider doing what Schaub Raisch did, and round up some likely parents for coffee. Spread the word at the playground, the library's

professional's office. "Of course, peer support is fine, but if you have the blind leading the blind, you could be in trouble," says Alvin Poussaint,



Good news travels fast: Mothers often hear about playgroups from other moms in the community.

story hour, or any place where you're likely to bump into other parents.

M.D., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Cyber Moms, Cyber Dads

Need parenting support fast? Thousands of parents are turning to these on-line parenting forums:

- **America Online covers health, education, and more; \$9.95 per month for five hours; (800) 827-6364.**
- **CompuServe offers bedtime stories; \$9.95 a month plus \$4.80 per hour; (800) 524-3388, ext. 664.**
- **Prodigy has tips on daycare, siblings, and more; \$9.95 per month plus \$4.80 per hour; (800) PRODIGY.**

—Liza Hyland and Karen Loftus

bunch of sisters and brothers to help you get through it all," she says.

Some parenting support groups are so organized, they routinely bring in guest speakers. Others stress companionship over information. If you want to start a self-help group in your own community,

Groups led by experts.

These groups offer parent support as well as expert guidance, and are often advertised in parenting publications and on community bulletin boards. In this type of group, a mental-health professional is on hand at some or all meetings, which may be held at the

each other," adds Schaub Raisch. They learn that it's okay to question, express fears, reach for help in time of trouble, and offer help to others who need it, too. ■

Award-winning Child contributing editor Melinda Blau lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.



Reynolds has it all wrapped up.