



Stop the Chaos!

10 tips to run a successful playgroup

By Amanda N. Wegner

Running a successful playgroup requires a unique skill set, especially when toddlers are involved. The children need guidance and intervention as they learn to play together and share. The adults need to navigate a variety of parenting styles, personalities and beliefs. And someone needs to organize it.

But playgroups are well worth the time and effort, for both the children and the parents.

"It's a great opportunity for the children to socialize and learn important life skills," says Madison mom Molly Dermody, who's been part of a strong playgroup for two years. "It's also a time to connect as women, not just as moms. Many of us have become great friends."

Dermody's playgroup began when a group of new moms defected from a larger drop-in group. Despite having a variety of

political, religious and parenting beliefs, the moms' bonds have grown stronger in just two years, through pregnancy, birth and other life changes, including the death of one infant during birth.

"What has sustained us is our friendship," says Dermody.

Now comprised of 12 toddlers, the group continues to meet weekly on Tuesday mornings, new babies in tow. The group also coordinates evening and weekend activities so dads and those parents who can't meet on Tuesday morning can participate, as well as moms-only gatherings.

At times, says Dermody, playgroup is a bit chaotic, and the moms are doing a lot

more "intervening" than they used to as their toddlers develop their personalities.

To minimize the chaos and keep the gatherings organized and exciting, here are 10 sure-fire tips for playgroup success.

1. Set up an environment where it is easy to have fun: the pool, the beach, the playground or a big backyard or playroom full of fun things to do, says Stacey Kannenberg, a consultant, mompreneur and award-winning author on child development in Fredonia, Wis.
2. Structure it for parents and kids to both have fun. Depending on the size, pitch for extra help to be there to keep an eye on the kids and allow the parents to socialize, too.
3. Utilize the Internet to coordinate dates and outings, says Dermody. Her group has set up a Yahoo! group, which allows the parents to email the group.
4. Plan activities, including parties and



field trips. Or have someone else do the work for you. For instance, the kid-friendly Bean Sprouts Café in Middleton has weekly story times, cooking classes and tea times that are perfect for playgroups, says café co-owner Shannon Seip. “This is an alternative to the traditional play date, where the host usually gets stuck with the preparation and cleanup. At Bean Sprouts, that is all taken care of.” The café can also coordinate special events for playgroups.

5. Know the personalities and group dynamics to keep conflicts to a minimum for both parents and kids.
6. Have rules: We must respect each other, be polite and treat others as we want to be treated. Alert your child that if he or she can't do that or is having a bad day, you'll leave early.
7. Agree on a structure for the playgroup, including how many children the group can accommodate and what ages. “A big thing for us was deciding that we had to close the group,” says Dermody. “There came a point when there was too big of an age range and it became more difficult to connect.”
8. Have a set time, such as 9-11 a.m. on a certain day of the week, every two weeks or once a month. Short intervals are always best.
9. Alternate locations and have each parent bring a healthy snack to pass: muffins, juice, fruit, veggies, etc. Bean Sprouts now offers a “Playdate Platter,” available in the café or to go, that includes four healthy snacks and can feed six to eight children, says Seip.
10. If you're just starting your playgroup, set a time and date and invite people your children meet at the local playground or church. Talk with the parents and watch how the kids play to determine if you want to invite them to your house to start your own circle of friends for yourself and child. Helping your toddler build a social network will allow him or her develop life skills to ultimately be successful in school, says Kannenberg.



With seven toddlers in the neighborhood whose ages are all within a year of each other, Madison mom Amanda N. Wegner prefers spontaneous backyard play dates.




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