



When playgroups provide more stress than support, it's time to rethink your participation.

# Bye-Bye, Playgroup

SHOULD YOU STAY OR GO? HERE'S HOW TO DECIDE—AND WHAT TO SAY IF YOU'RE GOING. BY BETH KANTER

**M**y newborn son, who had never fallen asleep during daylight hours, drifted off just as I pulled up. Once inside, I marveled through my sleep-deprived haze at how the other moms not only managed to arrive on time but did so showered and in spit-up-free outfits. “Welcome to playgroup,” I heard someone say. In response I tried to be polite and not burst into tears.

When a neighborhood friend invited me to join her already-in-progress community group, she billed it as a regular outing and a way to meet other moms—both of which I

thought I wanted. So with hopes of commiseration and camaraderie over sleepless nights, exploding diapers, and extra postpartum pounds, I gave it a try. But instead of bonding over the fog of new motherhood, I found myself feeling more insecure and isolated. Looking around the room, I quickly noticed that all of the other moms had babies a few months older than mine. Some even had kids old enough to crawl and eat Cheerios. And all appeared to have successfully scaled the new motherhood mountain. I, on the other hand, could barely find base camp. Although the moms were perfectly nice, I clearly was at a different place, and the group's focus reflected that.

The following week, I decided to give it another try. But it just wasn't clicking. Only after weeks of forcing myself to attend did I make the break. I nervously told my friend it was too hard to get there with my son falling asleep before every meeting. She didn't seem to mind at all. (In fact, she left the group a few months later when her maternity leave ended.) When the next Tuesday morning rolled around, I was so happy to not be going. The more I talked to other women, the more I discovered I wasn't alone. As much as joining

playgroups is a rite of passage, leaving them is almost as universal. But even when leaving is the clear choice, it's still hard to call it quits. Like so much else in life, when it comes to playgroups, breaking up can be hard to do. Here are five common playgroup pitfalls along with advice on how to prevent them from happening in the first place.

### Playgroup Pitfall **THE KIDS ARE NOT THE SAME AGE AS YOURS**

As I learned firsthand, "when you have a newborn or a young baby, one week makes a huge difference in terms of development and what the baby is doing," says Andra Davidson, founder of Mothersclick.com, a social networking site for mothers. "It doesn't matter so much in a group of toddlers if there's an age difference of a few months, but if you have an infant, you really want to be with other mothers going through exactly what you are. And you don't want to worry about toddlers trampling on your baby," she adds.

**Possible solution** If you're brand new to motherhood, be choosy. Try to join a group where most of the kids were born in the same month. To find such a specific age bracket, see if the hospital where you gave birth organizes playgroups. Your pediatrician may know of new groups that are forming.

Do you want a structured format focused on baby—or a gab session for moms?

### Playgroup Pitfall **OVER-SHARING**

It's not uncommon to join a playgroup thinking you'll be comparing notes on nap schedules and rice cereal and instead wind up with an earful of inappropriate tidbits.

Shortly after suburban Maryland mom Alyson Weinberg gave birth to her oldest daughter, Josephine, she joined a six-week-long new mothers' class. When it ended, Weinberg started her own less-formal version of the meeting, inviting a few women from the class and some neighbors with newborns. "In the beginning, it provided great support. We talked about poops, breastfeeding, and sleep deprivation," she recalls. But then Weinberg's group morphed into a forum for revealing personal information. "Moms talked about how much sex they were having," she says. "One woman told us how she conceived her child. I think people were dying to reconnect with who they were before they had babies, so they got into these pseudo-racy conversations. Most of the moms reveled in talking about things besides the baby. But to me it was forced intimacy." The final straw was when they asked about the kind of underwear her husband wore. "What color, what style," she says. "I sent the group an appreciative e-mail thanking them for their support, saying I wouldn't be coming anymore."

# buying guide

HERE'S WHERE TO FIND THE PRODUCTS FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE.

## Happy Feet

Page 18

Kangaroos: [shoes.com](http://shoes.com)

Lacoste: [macys.com](http://macys.com)

Levis: [gmi-usa.com](http://gmi-usa.com)

Reebok: [rbk.com](http://rbk.com)

Rhinestone Roxy: [rhinestoneroxy.com](http://rhinestoneroxy.com)

TYR: [tyr.com](http://tyr.com)

## Ahoy, Matey!

Page 64

Alternative: [alternativeapparel.com](http://alternativeapparel.com)

American Apparel: [americanapparel.net](http://americanapparel.net)

Buster Brown: Famous Footwear stores

Cabana Life: [cabanalife.com](http://cabanalife.com)

C&C California: [lalaling.com](http://lalaling.com)

Disney: 800-757-5933; Disney stores

Flora and Henri: 888-749-9698;

[florahenri.com](http://florahenri.com)

Garnet Hill: [garnethill.com](http://garnethill.com)

Gymboree: [gymboree.com](http://gymboree.com);

Gymboree stores

Hatley: [hatleynature.com](http://hatleynature.com)

Imoga: [frecklefaceboutique.com](http://frecklefaceboutique.com)

Jeanine Johnsen: [jeaninejohnsen.com](http://jeaninejohnsen.com)

Keds: [keds.com](http://keds.com)

Kurent: [shopintuition.com](http://shopintuition.com)

Lands' End: 800-356-4444;

[landsend.com](http://landsend.com)

Little McNeal: Balaboo,

949-587-1400

Mini Boden: 866-206-9508;

[miniboden.com](http://miniboden.com)

Old Navy: 800-OLD-NAVY;

[oldnavy.com](http://oldnavy.com)

Pottery Barn Kids:

[potterybarnkids.com](http://potterybarnkids.com)

Quiksilver: [quiksilver.com](http://quiksilver.com);

Quiksilver stores

Seafolly Girl: Lester's of New York,

212-734-9292

Shilav: [cutelittleme.com](http://cutelittleme.com), [shilav.com](http://shilav.com);

Nordstrom stores

United Colors of Benetton Kids:

800-535-4491

Victoria Kids: [artebebe.com](http://artebebe.com)

Vineyard Vines: 800-892-4982;

[vineyardvines.com](http://vineyardvines.com)

Zutano: [zutano.com](http://zutano.com)

**Possible solution** If the other moms seem to be enjoying the discussion, you don't want to say certain topics are off limits, so leaving the group is the way to go. To avoid the situation, consider groups that are already established so you can get a sense of what a typical session is like.

## Playgroup Pitfall ISSUES WITH THE KIDS

Once the babies in your group turn into toddlers, what the other kids are like becomes as much a factor as how much you like the moms. A child who bullies, grabs, or bites can make playgroup no fun for your sensitive shrinking violet. Still, if you like most of the people in the group, it's worth trying to work through this rather than just ditching the whole affair. Try approaching the mother of the aggressive child by saying something like, "I love your child's energy and spirit, but sometimes my daughter feels intimidated by him. Would you be able to rein him in a little if I give you a signal

that trouble is brewing?"

Indeed, the parent of the problem child may not be aware of the situation and may appreciate your directness. New Hampshire mom Pegeen Dunne says that when her twins, the oldest in a playgroup of multiples, turned 3, they entered a challenging phase, and were a bit too aggressive for the group. "Instead of saying to me, 'Your guys are really wild, so why don't you take a break and work on it,' certain moms stopped showing up to playgroup or made plans around me. I felt like Jan Brady."

Eventually she became aware of the problem and took the summer off while she worked on a discipline plan. When summer ended, so did the behavior—but Dunne didn't want to go back. "I wish people had just been up-front."

**Possible solution** When you're talking to the mother about her child's behavior, avoid dispensing parenting advice. Focus on your child's feelings rather than on her child's problems—even if you think he's a little terror. After

## >> Your Exit Strategy

### THE E-MAIL ROUTE

Head to your keyboard and craft a mass e-mail to the group.

**The plus** You avoid answering uncomfortable, on-the-spot questions. This strategy works best if you don't know the group well and were not in it for very long. If you've been a member for a while, it may seem impersonal.

### THE MESSENGER ROUTE

Tell the person who brought you in that it's not working (your relationship will dictate how much you say). Let her share the information at

the next meeting.

**The plus** Delivering the message is out of your hands.

### THE SLOW WITHDRAWAL ROUTE

Start making it to fewer and fewer meetings. **The plus** People will get the message without your having to give much or any of an excuse.

### THE DIRECT ROUTE

At what will be your last meeting, announce that you're "retiring" from the group. **The plus** Saying goodbye in person may result in less speculation about "what went wrong."

### THE EXPLANATION

If you send an e-mail or speak to the group directly, what should you say?

If you only attended the group a few times, a simple "It's been fun, but I just can't make it work," should suffice. But if you've been a member for several months or longer, finding the right words may be tougher. Vague but gracious often works well: "You guys have been such a great source of support, but I'm finding it's getting harder and harder to make meetings. I'm sure our paths will cross at birthday parties and preschool!"

all, they may end up in the same kindergarten class.

### Playgroup Pitfall **THE MOMS ARE COMPETITIVE**

Ann Murphy, a mother of two in San Francisco, says she enjoyed her playgroup for the first few months, but by the fourth month of weekly meetings, she was fed up. “It felt like nonstop bragging. The other moms would go on and on about what new milestone their amazing, spectacular, gifted baby had just achieved,” she recalls. “My daughter wasn’t doing any of the things the other babies were doing.” All of the comparisons made Murphy anxious, and she grew bored with the fact that all the discussion was focused on the kids. Also, the thought of hosting playgroup threw Murphy into a tailspin. “Having to make sure the house was clean, preparing snacks, worrying about toddlers spilling juice on my furniture—who needs it?”

**Possible solution** If you like the idea of having somewhere to go every week, you could suggest bringing in some new blood. Once you get the green light, invite a like-minded friend to join. After all, working with the playgroup you’re in is easier than trying to start a new one. And if you suffer from hosting

## Why did you leave your playgroup?

- 30%** The moms were too competitive
- 29%** Nothing in common with the group
- 19%** The kids were brats!
- 22%** Other

Source: *AB.com*

anxiety, you can always look for a group that meets at a neutral place like a park or church meeting room.

### Playgroup Pitfall **YOU'RE JUST NOT A PLAYGROUP KIND OF PERSON**

Sometimes the problem isn’t the group...it’s you. If you’re simply not the group type, there’s no shame in calling it quits.

“I’ve joined three playgroups over the years,” says Julie Taylor, of Long Beach, California. “I found it stressful having to be somewhere at a certain time. Out of the whole group, there would be one person I really liked, and I wished I could hang out only with her. I came to realize that groups are just not my thing.”

**Possible solution** Accept that you’re more of a one-on-one kind of gal, and plan to get together with just one other mom for coffee and playdates. How do you find that like-minded person? You never know, she might be at that playgroup you’re about to drop out of!

*Beth Kanter, based in Washington, D.C., recently had her second child and opted out of joining a playgroup.*