



Moms, & babies & friends

Mothers' groups are about more than the children

By Chantelle Lusebrink

Like nearly every expectant mother, Sarah Ashton was excited about the arrival of her first child.

She eagerly counted down the days. But being new in town, Ashton said she was also a bit nervous.

There were so many "new mom" things that had crept up during her pregnancy and many more were on the horizon after her son Malachi's birth, she said.

That is when she decided to turn to a moms' group.

"As a first-time mom, it was important for me to have others' help and advice, and to have companionship for myself and Malachi," Ashton said. "I had heard that moms' groups were a cheap and good way to do that, so I looked for one."

Ashton said she thought she'd be able to get information about local groups or activities at the hospital after giving birth, but they didn't have anything. When she got home, Google didn't give her any answers either.

"I couldn't find one in our area, so rather than be without, I decided to start one myself," she said.

Since its beginning in March 2007, The Issaquah Moms Group has grown to about 150 members — so many that organizers are starting to limit enrollment. They hope that other moms will begin another group or two.

What the group offers

What started off as play dates at homes and local parks

By Greg Farrar

Moms and their toddlers play in the children's room at the home of Aileen Treadwell (left), who has toys and snacks set out for everyone to enjoy.

quickly grew. There is at least an event a day for members, and often, there are several more.

In October, there were more than 20 play dates. There were also several baking, arts and crafts, and story time events.

"It is socialization for the children, because it allows them to play with others, but it is also an opportunity for the moms to share with each other," group organizer Deann Lewis said about play dates.

They're also a good opportunity to begin your child's education, said organizer Dana Verhoff.

Verhoff, a teacher in the Issaquah School District, recently planned a play date to help children begin distinguishing shapes, textures, sizes and colors.

"It is interesting to see the evolution and what happens as children play and learn," she said.

The group schedules field trips, like going to the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery, Salmon Days or Toddler Time at the community center. Members are also



By Greg Farrar

Aileen Treadwell plays with her daughter Taylor, 2, who changes from costume to costume during an Issaquah Moms Group gathering

trying activities and classes — small gymnastics facilities, music and language classes, and Stroller Strides, where groups of moms pick a route and walk through a neighborhood for exercise.

The group also gives moms an opportunity to talk about raising children.

"As a first-time mom, there is a lot that you don't know,"

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By Greg Farrar

Matthew Nanakul crawls up on a coffee table with toddler picture books during an Issaquah Moms Group get-together at The Bubble Shack, a family-friendly tea and coffee house in the Klahanie Shopping Center.

New parent programs

Since 1983, the Program for Early Parent Support has been helping new parents connect and grow with their children in their communities.

The organization's mission is to bring parents together to support one another during the earliest times of parenthood, so they can share triumphs and challenges, and learn from one another.

There are two programs — newborn PEPS Groups and Little PEPPERs.

Newborn PEPS Groups are held for 12 weeks in two-hour sessions and bring new parents together to share, bond and learn from one another. The groups are intended for parents with newborns to about 5 months old. There are group daytime and evening sessions, during which between 10 and 14 parents attend. Volunteers, who have been through the program as parents and have been trained by the organization, facilitate the groups. The groups meet at members' homes on a schedule that rotates each week.

PEPS Groups are formed by demand. Officials match parents with groups by geographic region and community, so they can build lasting friendships and relationships beyond the program.

There are typically four daytime and four evening groups in the Issaquah/Sammish area. If there is more demand, officials said they have trained volunteers ready to form new groups.

Little PEPPERs is offered at four sites: North Seattle, West Seattle, South Seattle and Bellevue. It caters to parents with an infant and toddler at home. Each two-hour session is self-contained and includes playtime for the toddlers, and sharing and learning time for the parents. These groups are formed two times a year.

To attend an orientation session, call 206-547-8570 or go to www.pepsgroup.org. The organization also works with those facing unique parenting challenges.



By Greg Farrar

Dana Verhoff (above) finds daughter Natalie, 15 months, playing with her favorite toys, an inflated pit of plastic balls. Sam Scharfenberg, 4 months (left), plays with a rattle and motion toy as his mom Leia, encourages him.

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said organizer Jamie Plant. "On your own, it can be so stressful to be a parent. But I have a network and wonderful resources through our group."

Adults-only activities, too

But it isn't all about the children. Every mom needs some time away from being a mom.

"We were all professionals before we became moms," Lewis said. "We don't have an office to go to, because we don't live that life anymore, but it is still nice to have oth-

ers to talk to about something other than children."

So, the group's founders started adults-only activities, like meeting for morning coffee or Mom's Night Out — going out to dinner, happy hour, the movies or renting a good chick flick, eating pizza and drinking wine.

"It gives us a chance to put on makeup and put our faces back on," said Leanne Nanakul, who has hosted a Mom's Night Out at her house.

They also volunteer, most recently going to Eastside Baby

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Carla Stevens, at The Bubble Shack with other Issaquah Moms Group mothers, has recently started gathering her own mom's group in Maple Valley, to save gas, be closer to home and have a group of nearby friends.

By Greg Farrar

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Corner to help stuff bags of goods for children and families for agencies in need.

"It is great to have the moms come in and help us," said Karen Rubin, a board member for the nonprofit organization. "They have an appreciation for how to put together our bags and what a child needs during the different seasons of the year."

The latest addition to the calendar is couples' and dads' activities.

"Whenever there is a Couple's Night Out Bunco party, I'm the first to sign up," said Adrienne Newman, a new mom to the group. "It is the best thing ever and a chance to get out as a couple."

In October, dads met to watch the Seahawks game.

Lasting bonds

Lasting relationships keep members coming back and adding new events to their roster.

Most moms who join the group find themselves in Is-

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saquah from other parts of the country and the world.

"We have a pretty decent number of moms that are from out of town like I am," Verhoff said. "But I feel like I've been able to make my own family here — a network of friends that I can rely on when I need someone to watch Natalie or when I need advice in the middle of the night. I feel like I have that."

Another thing the group does is provide support for families in need.

Whether they're new to the area, are having a second child or have lost family members, members bring meals to others or help with child care or everyday necessities.

"That is what is so good about our group," Plant said. "We care about each other."

Mission accomplished

"Our mission is basically to live a happy, healthy life as a mom, partner and friend. We are proud of the diverse membership we have regarding ethnicity, background, religion, etc.," she said. "Our philosophy is to be an open, welcoming, no-drama moms' group that provides a loving culture for our children."

Ashton and Plant said they've learned about coordinating a group the hard way.

The group had very few guidelines for membership or participation in the beginning, but that steadily changed.

"We'd have moms RSVP to things and not show, which isn't nice when people are opening their home or spending time to coordinate events," Ashton said.

She started calling members who were repeated no-shows to explain how important it was, especially as group sessions became harder to get into with the number of members. Since then, most activities are full.

Other simple rules include letting a host know you can't make it if you've accepted an invite, making sure you're not 30 minutes late, not attending if you or your child is ill, and not using the group to solicit other moms for an at-home business or products.

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By Greg Farrar

Jamie Plant (left), an organizer, and Sarah Ashton, founder of the Issaquah Moms Group, sort donations recently at Eastside Baby Corner, along with other moms at an adults-only volunteer activity.

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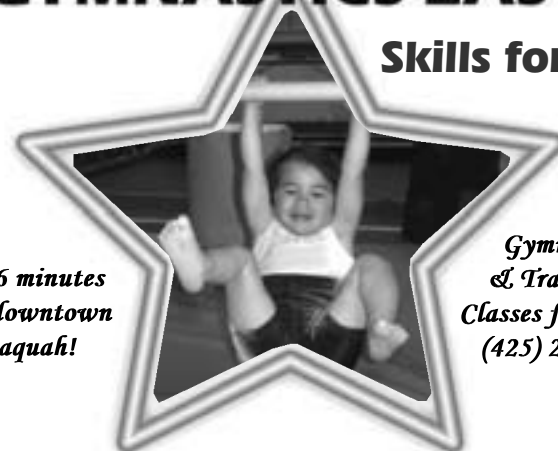
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Carla Stevens, an Issaquah Moms Group member, recently started her own mom's group in Maple Valley, where she lives.

She joined the Issaquah group when she was pregnant. But with gas prices being high, she is gathering a group closer to home.

Stevens has implemented her favorite events for moms in Maple Valley, like Mom's Night Out and play dates.

"Right now, there aren't that many people," she said. "But hopefully, it will pickup."

Until then, she said she'll keep coming to Issaquah, where she's made a lot of friends and has a community that supports her and her son.



Tammy Lai (left) and Nicole Newton sort donated clothing by size and gender into some of the many bins at East-side Baby Corner, during an adults-only outing of the Issaquah Moms Group, giving them time away from being moms.

By Greg Farrar

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