

## Playgroups – A Gift of Community

by Amy Robertshaw

We moved to this region when our son was just ten months old. When my husband left for work in the mornings, the hours stretched out before me. The days felt long. I was yearning to meet other moms with young children. We were still in a hotel, waiting to close on our new home when my ten-month old son and I made our way to our first parent-child playgroup. That playgroup was at Sophia's Hearth Family Center and I realize now what a treasure I found when I walked into that organization. As my children moved into being two and three, we also found a wonderful playgroup at the Monadnock Waldorf School. We are fortunate to have both of these in our region. Certainly there are others in our area that offers rich experiences as well.

Moving or being a single parent can certainly create feelings of isolation. But even if you have lived in one area all your life, once you step onto the path of parenting, we all need to seek out kindred spirits to share the journey. In the book *Parenting with Spirit* by Jane Bartlett she states, "Social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. The more we are plugged into a social network, the happier we are."<sup>1</sup>

My many years of participating in playgroups have created friendships and deep support that is difficult to find elsewhere. Of course we share the wonderful times. There are many days we come together eager to share the exciting milestone or the silly anecdote that just must be told. But then there are other moments too. The difficult moments that are just as real and part of the parenting journey as the joyful moments.

"I am hardly sleeping at night; my baby just will not sleep for more than a two hour stretch. I am exhausted." ... "My husband (wife or partner) and I are arguing a lot"... "My in-laws are coming to visit and I am feeling overwhelmed..."

Having the possibility to share these moments, allows us all to know that we are not alone. I have gone to children's music classes with my kids, dance classes, gymnastics, and of course many, many trips to the park. And as enriching as all those experiences can be, when I am there, I tend to be known as "Isaac and Ava's mom". These are not the places where you can often share your struggles with weaning, potty training, or dinner time behavior. A good playgroup however, does foster that sort of environment. Friendships develop, play dates are organized, and phone calls to check in on one another often follow.

We all sat in wonder as Christopher rolled from his back to his front. And then, he continued to roll back and forth from front to back and back again... In the space of one week he had begun rolling in earnest. As his parents beamed proudly, we all felt their joy. And then that little unwelcome bit of worry – as we think to ourselves, "my child does not seem to have the slightest interest in rolling over!"

In a playgroup where the children of similar ages are together you learn a lot about the varying timetables of each child's development. As you look around the room you can see that different children are always working on their own tasks, and can take great solace in knowing that when the time is right your child too will begin to explore that task. As a parent you are given confidence to let your child's development unfold naturally, without undue pressure to "get on with it". You can observe why faster does not always mean better.

The knowledge I have gained during my time in playgroups has been invaluable. They are lessons that will stay with me throughout my parenting life. At Sophia's Hearth playgroups we learn about the gifts of deeply observing our children, of the importance of all the stages of movement, and the value of giving your child freedom to have unrestricted play. We learn about nutrition, gentle care giving, language development, respectful disciplining practices, and how to support the natural and healthy conflict that arises in the toddler. And in the process of all of that we learn lullabies, lap songs and finger games that enliven our home life as well. At Monadnock Waldorf School playgroups I learned to knit, created puppets and stick horses, learned even more circle and lap games, and learned to make delicious millet rolls as well.

She sat on a little stool and slowly, slowly worked on taking off her own shoes. Mom sat close quietly with her attention fully on the child's task. When the child finished she looked up with a beaming smile, as if to say, "I did it!"

Playgroups are certainly enriching to a parents life for the support, friendship and knowledge that you gain. But are they also helpful to the child? Indeed in a world where things are rarely (if ever) paced at a child's speed, where the child hears "hurry up, we are late!" more than we would like, in a world where we often expect the children to fit into the appointments, schedules and activities that swirl about for the rest of the family... it is a relief to have a place to step out of that busyness. This is your child's time and space. This is a place where your child can take her time taking off her jacket and undoing her shoes. We don't need to rush, we can just "be" with our child in a relaxed environment.

When you walk in to Sophia's Hearth you see soft lambskins, a cozy hammock, and toys that are appropriate for your child's age. There are soft colors on the walls, and warm wool carpets on the floor. The child feels safe because mom and dad feel safe. Without ever saying it explicitly a child understands that he or she can explore and move at will. They are allowed space, time, and quiet.

At the Monadnock Waldorf School playgroup children knead dough into rolls, feed the chickens, and perhaps climb their first tree. They can explore the garden and take a walk in the forest or field with the views of the mountains in the distance. We pick apples in the fall and gather sap in the spring. And when the snow falls we bundle up and explore the lovely gifts of winter.

So, as you begin to explore playgroups, here are some things you might look for:

- Look critically at the environment. Is it safe for your child to explore without you having to be "on alert" for danger? Is it truly child friendly in both it's pace and in the choice of toys in the room?
- Is it pleasing and comforting to the eyes and other senses? This allows for a place for both parent and child to breathe out and relax.
- Is the group facilitated? This can be helpful for the group. And if it is, do you feel supported and cared for by the facilitator and others in the group?
- Is your child treated respectfully and warmly by the adults?

I was talking to a friend last night on the phone when she began to reminisce of the days that we sometimes took our kids for lunch after playgroup. They were still in high chairs, and it was not always smooth sailing... lunch or life in general. We were grateful for the companionship of each other then as we struggled through the ups and downs of toddler hood. Our children will enter second grade together this fall, and those days can seem like just yesterday – and at the same time long ago. We still have a dear friendship, and know each others children well. This is a lasting gift from our days in playgroup.

#### **FOOTNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Parenting with Spirit, p. 179

May you all find friendship, support, and kindred spirits on your path of parenthood.

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