

# Band of Mothers

Joining a moms' group is a great way to find the friendship and support you need during your baby's first year.

BY KATHLEEN M. REILLY

**A**my Dando didn't have many friends or relatives nearby when her daughter, Sophia, was born. "Honestly, it was really hard at first," she says. "I just felt so lonely." Then Amy found a moms' group in her hometown of Apalachin, New York, and life with an infant suddenly seemed a lot easier. "I met women who understood exactly what I was going through," says Amy. "Now I always have someone to call with questions—or if I just want to chat."

Whether your family is across the country or around the block, a moms' group can be a serious lifesaver. "New motherhood is often very isolating, so

finding other moms to connect with is really essential," says Mollie Marti, Ph.D., professor of psychology at The University of Iowa, in Iowa City. "Women have a physiological need to bond with one another, and getting that social support can provide a big boost for a new mother's mental health."

Joining a group can have lots of other benefits as well, like the opportunity to swap everything from baby gear to tips about the best pediatrician in town. You'll also make new friends who really get it: Like it or not, your social circle may change when you have a baby, especially if your usual pals don't have

kids yet. A moms' group will give you perspective on the transition to motherhood and help you adjust to your new identity. Occasional nights out with the girls will also help you relax, recharge, and be a happier, more patient mom.

So how do you find these brand-new BFFs? Start by figuring out what kind of moms' group is right for you.

## Big or Small?

Moms' groups come in all shapes and sizes. Some are affiliated with national organizations, have chapters nationwide, and even focus on women with special interests. For example, Mothers of Preschoolers (known as MOPS International) is a support network for moms of small children and has more than 100,000 members in 30 countries. Mocha Moms Inc. targets mothers of color. (Mothers & More and International MOMS Club are two other big-group options.)

Babies can't socialize yet, so joining a group is all about you.



It's easy to track down groups like this online, and if a chapter doesn't exist in your area, most organizations will offer guidance on how you can start one.

Less formal moms' groups are everywhere. To find one, ask friends, neighbors, and relatives for any leads. Keep an eye out for notices in the newspaper and at your ob-gyn or pediatrician's office. The caregivers at a local day care or the bulletin board at your health club or place of worship are other potential

into account. One key issue: If you've got a job outside the home, it's important to find a group whose members are willing to accommodate your work schedule.

## The Right Fit?

Eventually, it all comes down to one thing—how well you click with the other moms. But that doesn't necessarily mean you need to look for women who are just like you. "We've got all kinds of moms in

### MOMS' GROUPS 2.0

If you can't find a group that works for you, try a virtual one. Having access to other moms 24/7 is as easy as turning on the computer. It's pretty thrilling the first time you log in and realize that there's a network of women out there, ready to lend a sympathetic ear. Most sites have lots of different kinds of groups (based on kids' ages, hometowns, special interests, and more), so you're guaranteed to find the kind of support you're looking for. Do a quick search for "moms' groups" to explore your options, or check out our awesome community of moms at [parentsmag.com](http://parentsmag.com).

sources of information. Finally, you can always start a new group yourself. Find members through word of mouth, put up your own flyers, or post your get-together on a site like Meetup.com.

## Structured or Loose?

Once you've considered the various options, you need to decide which type of group feels most comfortable for you. Some are highly structured: They have membership rules, hold regular events and outings, and even host expert speakers. "I love my moms' group because we focus on different topics at our meetings," says Heather Butkiewicz, of Brookfield, Wisconsin. "We've had discussions about things like finances, relationships, identity issues, and even career skills. I feel like I've learned so much."

Other groups are far more casual in their approach. Moms might meet once a week at a local community center to shoot the breeze. Or they might gather informally (and sporadically) at a neighborhood playground or head to one another's homes. Both types of groups have advantages and drawbacks, so you need to take your personal preferences

our group," says Mary Cox, of Lewisville, Texas. "That makes for some fascinating discussions: We debate breast versus bottle, staying at home versus working, disposable diapers versus cloth. But we talk about the issues without judgment, knowing we'll each find what works."

Still, meeting like-minded moms has advantages too: If all of the women in your group are first-time moms with kids roughly the same age, you'll go through their developmental stages together. If you have a special-needs child, it can be more helpful to talk to moms who know just what you're dealing with. Women who've left careers to stay home might appreciate the support of others in the same situation, in the same way that working moms may be more comfortable around other women with jobs. But the only way to know for sure whether you've found the right group is to give it a go. Make sure you connect before you commit: If it's a formal group, go to a meeting or two before signing up. If it's an informal network, let the other moms know you're still on the fence about joining. Then head to a meeting with an open mind: You'll quickly get a feel for whether or not you've found the perfect match. □

# Q & A

**My 10-month-old is suddenly afraid of the bath. He screams and cries the entire time. Any suggestions?**

First, breathe a sigh of relief, because if this is the biggest challenge you're dealing with, you're one lucky mom. That said, it's puzzling when your baby develops an irrational fear of something he used to find fun. Keep in mind that anxieties of all sorts often begin around this age; some babies may actually think they'll be sucked down the drain. That's what happens to the bathwater, after all. Fortunately, these fears usually go away on their own after a month or two. "In the meantime, figure out how to get him clean," says Michael Wasserman, M.D., a pediatrician at Ochsner Health System, in New Orleans. "That may mean just laying him on a towel and wiping him down with a damp washcloth, getting into the tub with him, or even bathing him in the kitchen sink." But maybe it isn't the bath itself that's scaring your son. Perhaps he doesn't like the sound of running water, or maybe the temperature is too hot—or too cold—for his liking. (What you find comfortable may be too hot for a baby; think lukewarm.) You can also try some new bath toys to make it fun. Whatever methods you use, wait a few weeks and try again. By then he may have outgrown his fear.