



Read an overview of the chapters in *A Stay-at-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* and an excerpt of the Introduction.

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Introduction: Making New Friends for You and Your Child

Recently quit working to stay home with your children? Just moved to a new neighborhood? Obviously you have made some important decisions and major changes in your life, but now that you have made them, you may be finding yourself wondering what to do next. As a matter of fact, it's not unlikely that you may be feeling isolated and cut off from the world as a stay-at-home mom in a new neighborhood. Of course, you have your child with you, but you still feel alone. You may even be a bit concerned that your child is lonely as well. These feelings and concerns are normal, so don't start doubting your judgments; instead, take steps to improve matters. Reach out for the support you and your child need.

In 1995, I was in the same position as you are, and my solution was one that I am suggesting to you now: Start a playgroup! Right now, you can benefit from something I didn't have at that time; that is, a book that will take you step by step through the process of starting and maintaining a playgroup written by a stay-at-home mom who has founded five successful playgroups.

Why This Book?

My efforts since 1995 have produced not only five active playgroups, but also lifelong friends for my four children and me. In addition, I have been able to share my playgroup experiences

with literally hundreds of at-home moms and their playgroups all around the world via the Internet, first with MillbrookPlaygroup.com and then with OnlinePlaygroup.com. Ever since the web site for our playgroup was first designed in 1998, fellow stay-at-home moms from all over the United States and from as far away as Japan and Switzerland have addressed two questions over and over again: How did your playgroup get started? And, how can I start a playgroup?

In researching materials to answer the latter question, I found very little resources beyond a short chapter here and there in various books for at-home moms and a few articles in women's magazines highlighting the basics of starting a playgroup. Gathering information from my own experiences as well as from the experiences of other playgroup "veterans," I collected tips for starting a playgroup for a page on our web site. As the tips increased, I realized many of them could be expanded to include step-by-step instructions for starting and maintaining a playgroup.

At the same time, I began to receive email from moms and dads thanking our playgroup for providing information that was sorely lacking and gravely needed and asking for even more practical help in starting their own playgroups. I was delighted to offer advice and share my experiences with them as I helped them start their playgroups and keep their playgroups going.

When I co-founded a local homeschool support group for parents and their children, I applied the playgroup tips to organizing it and realized these "playgroup tips" would assist any number of groups, not just preschool playgroups. Again, a little market research revealed an untapped niche market. Perhaps other stay-at-home moms and homeschooling families would benefit from a book that takes them step-by-step to starting and maintaining their own playgroups, custom designed to fit their needs as well as those of their children. *A Stay-At-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* was born.

Finally, a book that can answer any question regarding how to start a playgroup, any kind of playgroup, and how to keep one going! Sure, many national mothers' organizations feature playgroups as a benefit to their members, and some moms may prefer joining these established groups. Indeed, these organizations boast thousands of members. However, some areas of the country do not have local chapters of the national organizations, nor do all local chapters feature playgroups as a benefit. *A Stay-At-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* maintains that you can start your own playgroup without the assistance of a national organization, if there's not one available. Besides, what works in one part of the country does not always work in another, and what one group wants may not appeal to another group of moms. In addition, anyone can start a playgroup with little or no initial expenditure of money and with minimal investment of her valuable and limited time. She can custom design the perfect playgroup for herself and her child and find other moms who want the same thing.

It's easy, once you know how! And this book will show you how by taking you through each step and giving you options along the way. As a result, not only will your playgroup be custom designed for you and your child, but it will also be a successful playgroup for as long as you need it.

How Our Playgroup Started

I didn't know I was custom designing a playgroup in early 1995 when I first began thinking about the need for a playgroup in my hometown. Then, as now, our relatives lived two states away, so we didn't have that essential support system of an extended family. At that time, my little family of four had been living in our new home for less than three months. I loved our bigger home, although the neighborhood didn't have any young children or stay-at-home moms. I had resigned my position in public relations at a local university the year before to stay home and raise our children. I loved being a stay-at-home mom, although I sometimes felt isolated at home with a preschooler and a toddler. I didn't regret my decision to quit working, but I did miss the camaraderie of my colleagues, the stimulation of adult conversation, and the busy and active lifestyle I used to lead. I also missed the friends we had left in our old neighborhood, and I wasn't the only one who did.

"Mommy, when am I going to play with my friends?" my four-year-old daughter, Megan, asked me. Sharing her playtime exclusively with her baby sister was becoming boring. She sincerely missed her little friends.

What could I do? Fighting city traffic on the way to our old neighborhood to meet our old friends on any regular basis was out of the question. Once or twice, maybe, but that would get old real quick! Unfortunately, our new neighborhood did not have at-home parents or young children.

My husband came up with the solution by accident one evening while dropping off paperwork at a colleague's home in a neighborhood about a mile away. He had literally found a treasury of children in that neighborhood! Toys littered nearly all the yards, and minivans filled the driveways.

"Start your playgroup there," he advised.

I tried not to get too excited as I thought about weekly playgroup sessions and impromptu afternoon playdates, someone to talk to about parenting issues and something to do besides sing nursery rhymes and change diapers!

I didn't know how to begin and there were no books to serve as resources, so I just jumped in! We drove through the neighborhood writing down the addresses of every single house on every street. I wrote a letter addressed to "Neighbor" explaining that I was a stay-at-home mom with preschool children seeking others to start a playgroup. We mailed 92 letters, and I waited anxiously for responses. What if no one responded? What if I got 30 calls? I didn't know what to expect, and I didn't have a plan for either scenario. I just hoped and prayed for the best.

Fortunately, eight stay-at-home moms called within the next two weeks. Perfect! I scheduled our first meeting for the following Wednesday morning at my house.

Next dilemma! How do I prepare? I had some idea of what to expect because I had started a playgroup in our old neighborhood about eight months before we moved. I planned to adopt what worked from that group and to try to avert what didn't work. However, like the old saying that every pregnancy is different, so I learned quickly that every playgroup is different as well.

Some ideas worked; others had to be changed a bit; while still others were completely unsuited to this particular group of moms.

Since then, the Millbrook Area Playgroup has gone through a number of transformations, and the members have made a few adjustments here and there to make it better for both the moms and our children. Best of all, not only have the moms made some lifelong friends among our group, but our children have as well. Indeed, all of my four children have made their first friends at playgroup, even baby Windsor.

Only I remain from the original nine moms, but I still keep in touch with the other eight, as well as with more than fifty other moms and dads who have been playgroup participants at one time or another over these last years. They are now scattered all over the U.S. and the world, from Florida to California to Guam! And they are all repeatedly amazed and pleased to hear that our playgroup is still going strong.

Actually, many former participants have enjoyed our playgroup so much that they have started their own playgroups in their new hometowns, using MillbrookPlaygroup.com and OnlinePlaygroup.com as valuable practical resources. With this book, our playgroup can reach even more at-home parents, both moms and dads, who seek peers for themselves and their children in a career field that can be isolating, sometimes confusing and often contradictory, yet always deeply satisfying. As in any career field, to be truly happy as a stay-at-home parent, you need support, encouragement and advice from veterans in the field. For colleagues like that, you need a playgroup.

What Is a Playgroup Exactly?

For a stay-at-home parent, playgroup is quality time with your peers – yours and your child's! Where else can you find support, encouragement, advice – in short, friendship? So if you don't have a playgroup, find one or start one!

A playgroup is any gathering of children, generally with their primary caregivers, on a regular basis. Playgroups are wonderful opportunities for children to play together and for their parents to socialize. Indeed, playgroups are as important for the moms as they are for the children. Stay-at-home parents need the support and encouragement that a playgroup provides just as their toddlers and preschoolers need the socialization.

Playgroups give moms a chance to make new friends, to share problems with other moms who have older children, or just to get out of the house. Only other stay-at-home moms can understand exactly how isolated you sometimes feel and can provide insight into dealing with the unique problems associated with being at home. After all, who else can give you firsthand advice about dealing with infant sleeping problems, potty training or sibling rivalry? Not only that, but you can see for yourself how others handle certain discipline situations, and decide for yourself what works and what does not.

In today's society many new mothers not only have postponed having children, but also have moved great distances from their families and friends. They no longer have that built-in support system that all new moms need. Playgroups fill that gap.

Generally composed of stay-at-home moms who realize a need for social interaction for their children, playgroups give children a chance to play with others besides their own siblings. Playgroups can be the ideal introduction to socialization for the preschool set. Whether an informal hour of free play or a more structured period with a story time or craft, playgroups can be tailored to any group of children. While the children play together, they gain valuable social skills for school, learning how to share and take turns. In a playgroup setting, they often form their first lasting friendships.

What to Expect from this Book

Whether you are seeking support for yourself or little friends for your child, you will find what you need to start and maintain your own successful, custom designed playgroup from the information in this book. Unlike other books for at-home moms that may devote one chapter to starting playgroups, *A Stay-At-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* provides helpful instructions and practical suggestions for starting and maintaining different kinds of playgroups and mothers' groups without bogging down in minute and needless details. Additionally, this book covers ways in which the Internet can help. In this digital age, the Internet can only help any organization, and every chapter contains some reference to the Internet at every stage of creating your playgroup. One entire chapter is devoted to how you can use the Internet for promotion, information and organization of your playgroup. However, while the Internet is a valuable resource, let me stress that you do not need to be online to have a successful playgroup.

Although *A Stay-At-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* features a week-by-week guide of children's activities, the activities are purposely limited to 52 simple crafts and games that a playgroup can use to get started for one year. The object of the book is to get the playgroup started, not to list craft ideas.

This guidebook will not only help you get your playgroup started, it will also help you maintain it successfully. Use this book to assist you with:

- * Planning what kind of playgroup would best serve your needs.
- * Finding other moms and children who want the same thing.
- * Using the Internet to help your playgroup.
- * Setting guidelines and establishing rules.
- * Preparing to host a group in your home.
- * Providing extra services and benefits.
- * Planning special activities.
- * Functioning as the leader of a successful playgroup.
- * Troubleshooting any potential problems.
- * Creating special playgroups for homeschooling families, at-home dads, working parents, adopted children, premature babies, children with disabilities, and more!

All to help you and the other moms and children enjoy the benefits of a successful playgroup!

A note here about the term "moms" in reference to playgroups: "Moms" mean at-home moms, working moms, work-at-home moms, single parents, homeschooling parents or even at-home

dads! Playgroups are not exclusive to stay-at-home moms, so don't let that prevent you from starting your own playgroup, however you conceive a playgroup to be. Also, don't delay starting a playgroup just because you think your child is too young. You'll be surprised how much you'll both get out of it!

And now, here's one early piece of advice in getting your playgroup off the ground, and it's really a simple two-parter: Decide to do it, and then do it!

Order *A Stay-at-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* online NOW for only \$13.95 at:

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