

Leaving Joyful, Supportive, and Compassionate “Marks”

by Amy Samson

Helping parents navigate the difficult waters of the early months and years of their children’s lives has been both a rewarding and difficult task. Parents often arrive in group looking startled at the tremendous responsibility they feel for the child in their arms.

Parents in my groups:

- may or may not have good models of parenting.
- will have moments of confidence, confusion, joy, doubt, exhilaration, and anxiety.
- want answers to their many questions.

In my experience, the magic of parenting groups is that, most often, parents have many of the answers they seek within themselves. But, in today’s culture of “experts,” parents often feel that they need to look to others—doctors, lactation consultants, teachers, parenting classes, the latest popular book or T.V. show—for answers to their questions. Often those experts do have answers. But parents know their own children best and they often have the answers, too.

As a parent educator I believe my role is, in part, to help parents reach a point where they are no longer startled at the ups and downs of parenting, but expect those ups and downs and feel secure in navigating them. I want parents to find the best way of parenting for themselves, their babies, and their families. I want them to develop good instincts and to trust those instincts. While I see my groups for only ten sessions over the course of twenty weeks, the transformation in their confidence as parents and as a source of support for one another is astonishing.

Another goal I have as a parent educator is to try to balance the different needs of each member in of my groups. These are the needs that I have seen emerge most often:

- information
- support and connection
- confidence and reassurance
- problem solving
- tricks and tips

Being sensitive to a particular group’s culture and being responsive to their needs creates a positive dynamic. I try to check in frequently, in many ways, about the balance of the various elements of my groups and make adjustments if needed. I make a point to ask the group, ask individual members during break times, get written feedback, and check in with group members between sessions when I sense a need. I’ve noticed that sometimes parents aren’t comfortable publicly giving feedback, but if the group could work better for them, it’s worth my effort to find a way to get their honest feedback.

The fifteen years I spent as a teacher, from middle school to the university level, gave me a unique set of skills that has helped me facilitate my parenting groups. Here are some of the most helpful things I’ve carried from the classroom into my Birth To Three groups.

Like students in classrooms, parents have different learning styles. Facilitation style is only one piece of the complex puzzle of good group dynamics. Even a highly skilled facilitator falls short if she or he fails to provide opportunities for parents to learn in an optimal way. I have tried to adapt my facilitation to support each type of learner. In our information-rich culture, parents who don't readily absorb information from written sources can feel lost. I am careful to provide multiple ways of delivering information.

- Visual learners like having flip charts, handouts, or information on a board. They might even take notes. Even if you don't specifically discuss all the information that is displayed, these parents need it and will absorb it.
- Auditory learners need to hear things—partner discussions, small groups, whole group, and listening to others all benefit these parents. Written information will have more meaning for them after the group has talked about it.
- Tactile/kinesthetic learners need to actively explore the world and may find it difficult to sit still for very long. There are many adults who learn best when they have opportunities to take breaks or move around the room. I often ask families to change seats so that they can talk to different parents throughout a session. I also encourage parents to stand up and walk around with their babies. Even this small amount of movement can help these parents be more receptive to the information we're discussing.

In addition to meeting parents' learning needs, their experiences form the core of group discussion. I have come to believe that story is essential to human beings. The pace of our culture is often far too fast to allow time for stories, yet stories are central to every culture on Earth. From birth stories to the story of a night spent with a newborn, I allow time in my groups for parents to bring their stories into our circle. Without exception, it is the stories parents tell and the responses to those stories that build the most powerful connections in group. There are many ways to do this:

- Begin each meeting with a check-in that allows each person to share a story of something that's happened since the last meeting. It might be something as simple as a milestone a baby reached or it could be something deeply personal. Either way, it provides one more opportunity to connect with one another.
- Be comfortable with silence. "Wait time" is essential to discussions that include all group members. Some people need more time than others to formulate what they'd like to share. Ten, twenty or thirty seconds of silence is well worth it if it allows a reticent group member to join the discussion.
- Create opportunities for parents to talk with each other in various configurations—pairs, small groups, different gender groups, interest groups.
- Don't be alarmed when discussions veer "off-topic" or if their stories take up more time than you anticipated. Communication and fostering connections is one of our goals.

Birth To Three groups give parents something unique and invaluable at what is one of the most vulnerable times in their lives. There is a Chinese proverb that says “A child's life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark.” We all know the wide spectrum of marks that are left on children’s lives. As parent educators, we leave an indelible mark as we guide each child’s parents toward a way of parenting that will support their growth and development. By being mindful of the individuals in our groups, we can create supportive networks that can last a lifetime. And our hope is that the children we see will live lives filled with joyful, supportive, and compassionate “marks.” It is a gift—to parents, to children, to ourselves, and the world—that we do this work.