

# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

## **I'll get by with a little help from my friends Family Friends takes the pressure off young mothers and provides them with networking strength**

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Even the most devoted parent will admit that caring for a baby, or toddler can be a mixed bag. The joy and laughter that come with spending each day in the company of a "newly minted" person discovering the world around him or her can be offset by feelings of boredom and isolation. The transition to stay-at-home parenting for individuals who previously held full-time jobs or interacted often with other adults can be difficult, and caring for one or more little ones can be overwhelming. When you throw in the typical anxiety-producing questions that new parents ask themselves — "Am I doing this right?" — the need for contact with other people in the same boat seems pretty clear.

Enter Family Friends. This organization for young families living in Central New Jersey provides parents and their children with regularly scheduled opportunities to spend time with each other.

Jennifer Kelly is a co-president of Family Friends, and she initially came to the organization for the same reason that many members did: "My first child was about 8 months old, and I was desperately looking for something to do with myself and my baby because I was a new, stay-at-home mom, and I was going a little bit crazy at home with not much of a social network at that point," she explained. "And I loved it instantly. There were a lot of moms who had the same concerns that I had. We had lots of things to discuss concerning kids, and our lives were in a similar state."

Family Friends, which dates back to 1984, was created by a small group of parents and children who originally met for coffee and playtime at a church in New Brunswick. The organization currently consists of 45 families who contribute minimal dues (\$65 a year) and some sweat equity to keep things running.

Family Friends hosts play groups every Monday and Wednesday morning in the party room at Birthdays For B.R.A.T.Z. in Metuchen. In addition, the organization supports a book club and hosts day trips and dinner outings approximately once a month, as well as occasional holiday parties and other events.

The organization, incorporated as a nonprofit with typical executive positions such as president and treasurer, has a formal structure but an informal vibe. The theme of Monday play groups depends on the creative interests of those members in charge of the mornings' activities. A parent may want to share classical or jazz music with the young participants, who cover the spectrum from newborns to kindergarten-aged children, or may decide to work on a craft project with them, said Kelly, whose son, Liam, is 18 months old, and whose daughter, Anna, is 3 1/2.

Evening activities, which bring out more dads than daytime programs do, also are initiated and run by members. Fundraising, new member outreach and the monthly newsletter require volunteer effort as well. As is the case with most volunteer-run organizations, for Family Friends that's both the good news and the bad news.

"The enthusiasm and talent of our members brings so much to the group," Kelly said. "But it's such a large group, and some members at first don't realize what it takes to keep it going. We have a volunteer coordinator who gets in touch with a member and tells them that you are required to participate, to volunteer, on two occasions in a year, and that could be anything from unlocking the door, turning on the lights and getting out toys to working on a party."

Even with fundraisers ranging from garage sales to a special shopping night at Toys R Us in Woodbridge, Family Friends doesn't have a large budget, and there is rarely money for advertising to attract new members. Kelly said that the organization relies on word of mouth, a large open house in the fall and the Internet. Central New Jersey parents using the Web to find play groups or opportunities for parent-to-parent contact will come across the Family Friends' Web site, as well as other sites where the organization is referenced, Kelly explained.

When Nicole Lauster, who lives in Piscataway with her sons, Michael, 6, and Evan, 4, and her daughter, Miranda, 2, went looking for a play group on the Internet, Family Friends caught her eye. She's been a member for almost five years.

"You get all the great benefits of being around lots of interesting people, and it doesn't cost you an arm and a leg," Lauster explained. "We have all different kinds of people ethnically, people who have had all different kinds of careers before becoming stay-at-home parents. We have artists, writers, attorneys, therapists. It's a really interesting community."

What Lauster enjoys most about Family Friends is the opportunity to connect with other people, some of whom she ordinarily might not have met. But it's equally important that her children enjoy it. "That's been the biggest motivator for going," she said.

Some members create a bond to Family Friends that is strong enough to survive the aging-out of their children.

"This year we instituted an emeritus membership where the family pays a reduced rate and stays in touch and participates in parties and dinners and other things other than play group," said Kelly, who noted that the majority of members live in Middlesex County, with strong representation from Metuchen and Edison. "A lot of families make great friends through this organization."

**Upcoming Family Friends events include**

Jan. 8 — Bring a Friend to Playgroup Day

Jan. 15 — Birthday Party at Playgroup to celebrate Jan. birthdays

Jan. 20 — Moms' Night Out at a local restaurant (to be announced)

Jan. 28 — Book Club Discussion at Rutgers Student Center, Busch Campus, 7 p.m. (book to be determined)

Jan. 29 — Winter Beach Party at Playgroup

Feb. 13 — Valentine's Day Party, 6:30 p.m.

A Parents' Night Out will be scheduled in February.

For more information about Family Friends, contact the organization at [familyfriendsinc@yahoo.com](mailto:familyfriendsinc@yahoo.com), or visit the Web site at

<http://www.familyfriendsinc.org/>.