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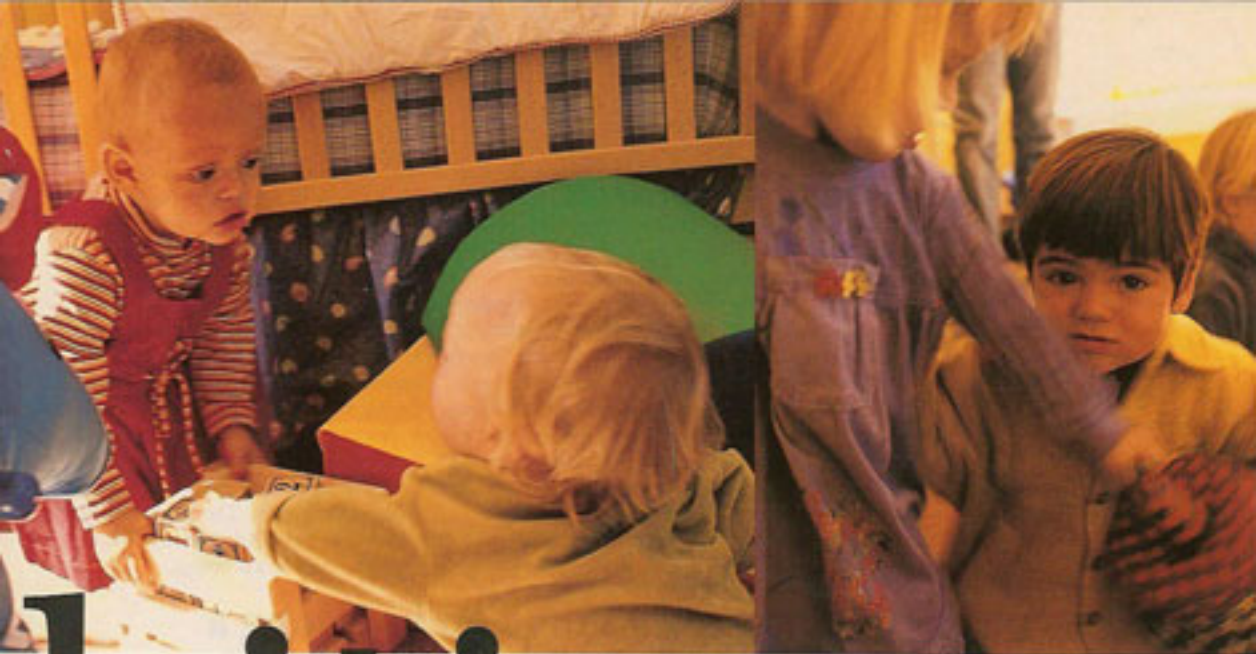
How parents in four playgroups handle classic kid conflicts. BY SUSANNA SCHROBSDORFF

I AM SO SORRY ABOUT THIS," I SAID, staring sheepishly at the reddish-blue welt rising up on the soft skin of my daughter Pia's 2-year-old playgroup playmate. My affectionate 20-month-old, who gives each of her stuffed animals a morning hug, had chomped so hard on her pal's arm that you could see the outline of all 16 of her teeth. I was embarrassed by the incident but hardly surprised. On that particular day, every time Pia picked up a toy, her little friend would pull it away from her. I would step in, usually giving the toy back to the friend—even if Pia had it first. At no time did the other mom

ask her child to share, so my frustrated kid took matters into her own teeth.

The next time the group met, I decided to take a stand. When the little snatcher grabbed a book out of Pia's hands, I turned to the mom and said, "Let's find another book so they can each have one." That way, I was drawing the mother's attention to the problem without calling her discipline skills into question.

Remember the days when playgroup discipline meant keeping a few 6-month-olds from rolling into one another on the blanket? As passive babies turn into mobile, territorial toddlers, finding tactful ways to handle



biting, share

discipline becomes a priority for moms and dads involved in playgroups. Here's how parents in several groups resolved four potentially sticky issues.

WHEN DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES DIFFER

"We knew we had a problem when one of the mothers in our gathering said that 2-year-olds should not be disciplined. Her child was not encouraged to share or discouraged from hitting the other kids," says Sandy Katzman, who brings her son, 3-year-old Matthew, to an after-work playgroup in Washington, D.C. "Her thought was, 'They're toddlers, what can you do?'"

At one meeting, the child repeatedly smacked one of the girls in the group—without any intervention by

his mother. Soon, the other parents were skipping playgroup dates to avoid facing the unruly toddler and his mom.

Although the errant mom eventually dropped out, the conflict prompted members to talk about the behavior they wanted to encourage during playgroup time. "We decided that it was important for everyone to actively monitor their kids. Our thinking was that a child will grow out of a difficult phase if the parent responds appropriately. We were able to set basic ground rules on things like sharing," says Katzman.

To encourage cooperative play, the group set limits on how long each child could play with a sought-after toy, and decided that the kids could wait about one minute for their turn. After that time, an adult makes sure that another

child gets a chance. With an activity like bouncing on the trampoline, the parents use the kids' counting skills to measure the length of the turn, usually about 20 jumps. Counting the jumps helps the child prepare to get off.

The group also instituted cleanup time, when the kids help the grownups put the host's home back in order. "Even if the kids put away just one toy, they get the point that you shouldn't leave the house a mess," says Katzman.

According to Lisa Spiegel, director of the SoHo Parenting Center, a family counseling service in New York City, agreeing on some basic concepts in advance can prevent discord. "Adults in a playgroup should meet every four to six months without the kids," Spiegel advises. "That way they can address

changes in the children's development and come up with rules for that particular stage—rather than thinking about things in the heat of the moment.”

Spiegel suggests that groups come up with a list of five or six issues to talk about at their meetings. “The more you can organize beforehand, the less trouble you will have,” she says.

HOW TO COPE WITH AN AGGRESSIVE CHILD

“When he was about 18 months old, Allan was called the gentle giant. Now he has turned into King Kong,” laments his mother, Diane Morancie,

controlling Allan's behavior is especially important. The mothers have what they call a “board meeting” during naptime, when they make plans and talk about issues affecting them.

“We worked out a way of dealing with Allan's aggression collectively,” explains Morancie, who did not need any prompting from her playgroup to bring up Allan's problem. She was acutely aware that Allan needed to learn to be more gentle since she was also doing a lot of mediating between Allan and Stephen at home.

Morancie asked the other moms to help her monitor Allan during the

use some of the same diplomacy skills. We address issues in a global way so we're not ganging up on someone because their kid is biting everyone,” she explains. They start difficult discussions gingerly with a phrase like: “Let's talk about how to handle biting.” Morancie appreciates their empathetic approach all the more now that Allan is the one with the problem.

Spiegel suggests that some of the fiercer kid conflicts can be avoided by changing the playgroup format to have more organization. This is especially important after 14 months, when aggression can be a problem.

Encourage sharing by setting limits on how long a child can play with a sought-after toy.



of Lawrenceville, Georgia. Allan and his twin, Stephen, are 3½, but Allan is considerably bigger than his brother and the five other kids in his playgroup.

“His verbal skills have not caught up with his size, so when he gets angry at another child his instinct is to flatten him,” explains Morancie. “It's hard on me when he is aggressive. I think most mothers are sensitive when their child hurts another. We then tend to overcompensate and apologize a lot,” she says.

Because Morancie's group meets daily from about 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.,

playgroup. If he gets too rough, Morancie is alerted. She gives him an automatic time-out, and he has to apologize. “We also do a little role-playing before playgroup,” says Morancie. “I tell him that another child may take his toy and that he should call Mommy or punch a pillow if he's feeling angry.”

Morancie's group uses their board meetings to discuss everything from the art of teaching manners to touchy issues like hitting. “Several of us were managers during our careers and we

“It doesn't have to be elaborate,” explains Spiegel. “Break up the activities by having a specific snack time and storytime. Start out with certain kinds of toys set up, like all the trucks, and then rotate them every 20 minutes. This will keep the aggression down and change the direction of the group if the mood is deteriorating.”

KNOWING WHEN TO STEP IN—AND WHEN TO BACK OFF

Linda Morrison was proud when her normally timid 3-year-old daughter Ali stood up for herself during a recent playgroup. Ali steadfastly hung on to two toy cars that one of the other kids was trying to grab away from her. “Ali is passive, so she often just watches them take the toy away. I'm trying not to rescue her as much, and I think she is becoming more assertive,” says Morrison, who brings Ali and her 1-year-old sister, Cheyenne, to two playgroups in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Though Ali managed to hold her ground, Morrison saw that her daughter had been upset by the dispute. She decided to pick Ali up and comfort her rather than leave her alone.

Because some of the other parents had just been discussing the benefits of not intervening as much in the kids' play, Morrison questioned whether

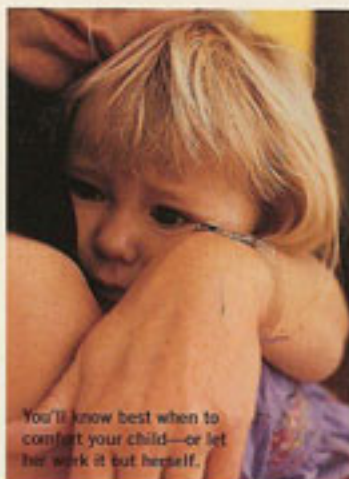
plucking Ali out of the fray was in keeping with the group's hands-off philosophy. "I wasn't sure if everyone thought that protecting her was the right thing to do," Morrison says. "I think a lot of mothers struggle over when to trust our instincts. Sometimes the thing you want to do as a mom is not what everyone else is doing."

"You want to draw the line between being overprotective and helping your child to be autonomous," advises Sara Wilford, director of the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center in Bronxville, New York, and a member of *Child's* advisory board. "Of course, if she's actively distressed, you want to comfort her. Ask yourself, 'With a little support from me, could she manage on her own?'"

If you've determined that your child is not overwhelmed, Wilford advises reinforcing her newfound courage: "Get down next to her and tell her it's okay to say that you want to hold on to those cars," says Wilford.

DISCIPLINING ANOTHER PARENT'S CHILD

Three-year-old Mitchell usually lets out a pretty loud yell when he has been pushed by his best playgroup friend Jordan. But that's not always enough to



You'll know best when to comfort your child—or let her work it out herself.

curb Jordan, who can be a lot more forceful than his pal. Someone usually has to step in to keep Jordan in line.

Surprisingly, the best person to handle the situation and intervene is often Mitchell's mom, Jennifer Christensen, of Gainesville, Florida, rather than Jordan's mom, Stephanie Nichols, also of Gainesville. Says Christensen, "We found that if I say something like 'Jordan, it makes me sad when you do that to Mitchell,' he really listens to me. We started to notice that it was really effective

when someone other than their mother disciplined the kids. It really got their attention."

Made up entirely of professional colleagues, the group has been meeting since the children were newborns. "I think it works well because we're friends and we have really similar parenting ideas," says Christensen.

Of course, this kind of discipline is not always an option, even for groups like Katzman's, which prefers to take a discipline-your-own-child approach. Lisa Spiegel agrees: "Unless the parents are really comfortable with one another, it's better to have everyone be responsible for their own child. Otherwise resentment can build."

The parents in Katzman's group do, however, enforce the guidelines they've come up with on sharing and cooperating. Says Katzman, "We're fine about other parents saying, 'Your time is up and now it's Carly's turn.'"

Wilford says that kids in a playgroup can benefit when all the parents reinforce simple guidelines such as "We don't hurt one another physically." Advises Wilford, "Try and establish a common vocabulary and a consistent way to talk to children when someone pushes or takes a toy. Ask, 'What words could we all use when this is a problem?' Because something like sharing is an abstract concept, you should agree on ways to explain what you mean, such as 'She's not finished using that toy.'"

Coming up with a cohesive discipline strategy for your playgroup has lots of advantages. Not only will you have plenty of support in handling that toddler-size fight over who threw the sand first, but you can also demonstrate how rewarding it is to work constructively with your peers. And there's nothing better than teaching kids by example. ■

Susanna Schrobsdorff is a Brooklyn, New York-based freelance writer and the mother of one child.

playgroup predicaments

SITUATION

Your 18-month-old has developed a kissing fetish—she wants to kiss everyone. At playgroup one child loudly objects to her attempts, and she is visibly upset.

A half-hour into the playgroup, your 2-year-old is still sitting in your lap, crying and saying that she wants to go home.

On the day the playgroup meets at your house, your 2 1/2-year-old suddenly can't share a single toy.

SOLUTION

A young toddler will probably not understand that some kids feel their bodies are private and that she has to ask before she plants a kiss. To make your child feel better, get down on the floor and say "I want a kiss," or "Your friend Sally wants a kiss." Or redirect her affection toward a stuffed animal or a special lovey.

A playgroup is no place to deal with separation anxiety. If your child is having a bad day, focus on calming her down. Try to get her interested in a toy or project. If that doesn't work, don't push her. Leave and try again next time.

Pick out a few toys that you know he's no longer interested in to share with the group. Also, try buying some inexpensive toys, such as bubble bottles and crayons, and put them in a separate box marked "Playgroup." Explain to your child that these toys are only for use during playgroup time.

—Gail Rosenblum