

# Help your child learn important social skills

This month of dying leaves and shortened days somehow feels like the spring-of-new-things, as shiny new stuff seems to grow out of closets and fill living rooms. Pencils, lunchkits, questionable clothes and ill-fitting shoes.

Even if you don't have kids old enough to head off to school, the smells of September can overtake. Like Pavlov's dog, we are trained to look for somewhere to gather with others. Somewhere to connect. Somewhere to announce in a loud and confident voice that you are, indeed, here.

That's how I felt 10 years ago this month when September brought a couple of lasting new connections for me. Like bulbs planted in autumn, they've become vibrant perennials.

On a rainy September night my second child was born and within a week we were sitting with her big sister in the middle of a drop-in gym class for three year olds at the Mission rec centre where kids and their parents connected for that first important class of the season.

I hadn't seen another adult for what seemed like months. I was missing the connections my oldest

daughter and I had made at drop-in activities that had become so much a part of our lives. I couldn't commit to anything that took more than an hour of planning and was so thankful for things like drop-in storytime and skating sessions. Lately though, I had slept and ate and nursed and was lost in that sweet fog of new motherhood, so what I said next seemed perfectly logical at the time.

"We should start our own playschool," I announced. Or somebody did. I can't remember. I was sleep deprived. It was a foolish idea. Wrought with pitfalls. Ill-thought out. But it was September and we could smell those new lunchkits and pencils.

So that's exactly what we did.

Each Wednesday morning for the next two years we gathered at one of four homes. Nothing too formal — we just dropped in on each other taking turns coming up with suitable things to cut and paste, and sing, and read. Meanwhile, the other three parents sat

sipping coffee, discussing politics and families, staring out the window — and laughing.

Our kids? They dutifully learned their alphabet. Went on field trips to vets and farms. Mastered their scissors and glue. But really, those Wednesday mornings were where our children learned

how to get along. They learned how to wait their turn and how to share, when to be quiet and when to assert themselves. They learned how to be friends.

And so did we.

In fact, within weeks of that first Wednesday, we were having so much fun we decided to take another bold step for parents steeped in the caring of others. We decided to take one night a month and start a bookclub. The

laughter was often so loud we'd wake up those young preschoolers who, I now know, were learning more about incredible rewards of sharing and socializing from us than we ever imagined.

These were just some of the unex-

pected benefits of those Wednesday mornings, and of any drop-in program, playgroup, or trip to the park you share with your child. Taking turns waiting for a swing at the park is just as valuable as learning to count to 10 in three languages, and vital if a child is going to get the most out of those later school years.

Most of them will master the scissors and the alphabet with practice and it's the same with socializing. It takes practice. The development of social skills is one of the five most important things a parent can do to nurture their children's growth according to research done by UBC's Human Early Learning Project (HELP).

And it doesn't do the parents any harm either. I can recall the sense of joy and relief I felt as we left that first September drop-in gym class knowing that both I and my two tiny children had somewhere to be the next Wednesday. Somewhere we would learn to scissor and share. Somewhere we would announce: we're here.

Those kids are now 10 years older and busy with the social lives that began in that drop-in gym class and now spill out into a much

bigger world.

But as the days get cooler and the autumn smells fill the air, I still get the urge to connect, so later this week I will once again meet with the mothers of those busy children to begin the tenth year of our bookclub. We'll laugh and read and plant seeds in the dying September sun that will get us through winter to spring. And as we get louder I suspect that at least one of our kids will once again drop-in — just as they learned to do as toddlers.

After all, it's September. Time to gather.

Preschools and daycares are great places to create these social opportunities but not the only places. Here are a few drop-in free or low cost opportunities to help your child begin learning those important social skills: Family Place (drop-ins for September to December), 604-826-3323; Family Tree House, 604-826-8799; Head Start West (Leq'ac: me! First Nation, Deroche), 604-826-1281; Mission library drop-in storytimes, 604-826-6610.

More early childhood information and details of drop-in programming are available at [www.missionrec.com.shawbiz.ca/Home.html](http://www.missionrec.com.shawbiz.ca/Home.html).

## For the Love of Reading



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