

I Sought, I Found, I Joined; Now What?

by Carol Moxley

You did it! You made the decision to homeschool, and you found other homeschoolers to help enrich your homeschooling experience. Great! But, for some reason, you still feel like you're always on the periphery of the group. Approaching a cluster of moms at park day is awkward; asking to be included in a co-op is unthinkable; having a real friend to call up on the phone is still out of reach. The support you need has to be there somewhere - others seem to have found it - but how do you go about forming the network you so desperately need?

Be Friendly

If you're a shy person, it may be asking an awful lot, but once you set aside your fears and actually step into the circle of your support group, you'll soon forget why you ever hesitated in the first place. Begin by introducing yourself to one or two people and mentioning that you're a new member of the group. There are always helpful souls in the group willing to draw you in. Look for kids who are roughly the same ages as your own. Approach their mothers and mention your own kids' ages. Ask about special activities for the kids, classes within the community, what approach they use in their homeschooling, whatever - just break the ice! Reach out to other new homeschoolers. Chances are, they will be in roughly the same place you are, looking to find their place within the group.

Don't be discouraged if you don't make fast friends with someone immediately. It's quite possible that the others are just as shy as you are initially. By showing an interest in others, you will spark their interest in you.

Be Sensitive

Those who have been members of the group for a while may have already established a working support network that meets their needs. It's not that they want to exclude new people, but what they have built for themselves works so they're not actively seeking to include new people in their lives the same way you are. Getting to know these people may be a more gradual process than getting to know other new members who, like you, are just now seeking out others with which to connect. One day, you'll be one of the "old" members with a solid network that took you several years to build. When that happens, remember the new folks just coming in and try to find ways to help them feel included.

Be Willing

Homeschooling support groups are comprised of people. All the little (and big!) jobs these people do make each group successful. If you're new to the group, then Someone Else has been doing all these little jobs. Someone Else may be tired. Someone Else may need a break. Someone Else may really appreciate you offering to help.

Sometimes, what is needed is something as simple as putting stamps and labels on the newsletters each month or helping with the cleanup committee after an event. These are ways a new member can be helpful. Sometimes what is needed is more involved, like actually being the newsletter editor or serving as an officer for the group. There's no reason why a new member, bringing new ideas into the group, can't volunteer for these bigger jobs, too.

By offering to help the group, you not only do your part for the group, but you also get to know people you might not have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. Increasing your network within the group serves to strengthen your family's homeschool support system. It's worth it!

Be Positive

No support group is perfect; there's always room for improvement. If there are things you would like to see changed, rather than complain about those things, offer to help initiate change. Bring new ideas with you and offer to help implement those ideas. If there's

something the group could have done to help you feel more included, offer to help set that up so new members coming in after you will benefit. Constructive input and an offer of help will go much farther than criticizing the efforts of others.

Be Proactive

If the group doesn't offer an activity you need, offer to organize it yourself. A bi-weekly park day for preschoolers, a teen chess club, a field trip to the local newspaper - whatever you're looking for, chances are there are others within the group who will appreciate and participate in what you set up. If attendance isn't what you'd hoped it to be, don't be discouraged! Many times, people's schedules are already set and they can't squeeze in the new activity. In time, word will spread about how much everyone enjoyed the activity and participation will improve.

Be Appreciative!

Express your appreciation to those who were helpful to you in the beginning. Not only will this strengthen your relationship with them, it will encourage them to continue helping others new to the group. Invite them and their kids for a special coffee and play day at your house. Include a note of thanks in the group's newsletter, if appropriate. Even a hug at park day can go a long way to letting someone know you're glad they were there when you needed a friendly face.

Don't forget those who are giving of their time to keep the group going. Tell the newsletter editor how much you look forward to receiving the newsletter each month. Thank the person who coordinated the field trip or arranged for the group to get the great discount tickets. Pretty soon, you'll find yourself on the receiving end of the thanks!

Be Patient

As with all areas of life, making friends among homeschoolers takes time. Avoid becoming frustrated if the hand of friendship you extend isn't immediately grasped. By engaging in the group's activities, solid relationships will form.

Finding out how the group operates can also take time. Learn the procedures for submitting information to the newsletter. Find out how officers are chosen. Ask how co-ops and other enrichment groups are formed and whether new members can participate in mid-year. Attend meetings and parents' nights out to discover the group's current leaders and what help is needed.

To paraphrase a familiar expression, "You'll only get out of your support group as much as you put into it." Trying to find your place in your homeschool group while you're also struggling as a new homeschooler can be a lot to take on at once. So relax, know that everything isn't going to fall in place at once, and do what you can when you can. Remember: It's YOUR support group, too!