

Stay and play – informal toddler group

If there's nothing in your immediate area to bring together young mums and their toddlers, why not start something? A small 'stay and play' group can take place in someone's sitting room; if it gets too big, you might want to think about whether there's a local hall or community space it could move into as needed. But there's something about a home that's, well, homely!

To start with, it would be a question of getting a small bunch of parents together who want to create a group, decide on a location, and make a few small preparations. In particular, you will need toys (and a place to store them). Ask each family to donate some toys; and/or collect from car boot sales and equivalent places. Home-made Playdo is also great.

A reasonable timing would be 9.30am on a weekday of your choice (allowing for time for the school run), until, say, 11.15am. Charge perhaps £1 for parent and child, plus 50p for an additional child. Think of a name for the group ('Happy Beans' etc).

Here are some ideas:

- Take a **Register** as people arrive. Newcomers to fill in a **Registration form**.
- For the first half hour, 'arrive and play', with a toys section and an arts-and-crafts section (including colouring, cutting out, Playdo, etc).
- Then, 'story time', reading from a favourite story-book
- Then more play, plus parents chatting – all very informal
- At, say 10.15am, you might have some snacks – all together. Toast and fruit are good – simple, inexpensive and healthy.
- 11.00am – sing-song, with nursery rhymes and songs (Twinkle, twinkle, etc)

You might also want to help 'bring out' the shy adults. That can be done by asking the group to share any 'good news and bad news from the last week', or 'what's coming up' in the week ahead – helping to create a mutually supportive environment. Another possibility is, each week, to ask someone in 5 or 10 minutes to 'tell their story'. People's personal stories can be fascinating; you really feel you get to know them; and they feel they have been heard and welcomed. Generally, it's good to have clearly designated leaders, not least so that they can deal with any awkward situation (such as a disruptive child with a parent who's not intervening!).

Please note: toys need to be fully cleaned by the group regularly and frequently (fortnightly?). That can be part of the group's activity together. Also, the hosts will need to fit stair-gates, plug covers and fire guards and also have basic first aid materials such as plasters, antiseptic wipes and a cold compress.

From a safeguarding point of view, DBS checks are good, although they may not be strictly necessary if everyone is staying together as a group (and parents remain in charge of their children). It's good to get all parents to sign a **Registration form**, agreeing that it's an informal group of friends and that

children remain fully the responsibility of their parents or guardians. Also, here's an **Accident report form**.

Starting a group like this is a simple thing to do – and it can make a massive difference to adults who might otherwise be lonely or unsupported (and who now, effectively, have a support group), and to kids who learn and have fun with other local kids in a secure environment.