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How to make your way with the other mothers, the teacher, and more

by Teri Cettina • Photographs by Ted & Debbie

school

Q The other moms in my child's class all seem to know each other. I feel like a loser when I hear them talking about scrapbooking parties or potluck dinners. What can I do?

A "Just as there are kid cliques, there definitely are mommy cliques," says Michele Borba, author of *12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know*. If you really want to crack the group, don't approach the ringleader. "Instead, watch for someone who's friendly and somewhat on the edge," suggests Borba. Chat with her when she's alone or with just one other parent, instead of sidling up to the big group. Then, questions are easy conversation starters: "Is your son joining Cub Scouts?" If she's chilly, try not to take it personally—as hard as that is. Move on until you find someone you click with, whether she's part of the Cool Mom Club or not.

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Q I'm a little intimidated by my child's teacher. Is there anything I can do about it?

A You'd be surprised (and relieved) to know how many parents privately feel the same way, says Rebecca "Kiki" Weingarten, a former teacher who is now a New York City parenting and education coach. She says our own memories of cutting out paper turkeys (badly) or getting in trouble for talking in class often zoom back into focus when school starts. "Plus, when you meet the teacher, she often has you sit in those little chairs, at that little table. Is it any wonder you suddenly feel like you're back in kindergarten?" Weingarten says. Teachers have a lot of power over our kids' lives, too, which can be unnerving! But know this: The teacher may be as anxious as you are. "She may worry that you're sizing up her ability to handle your child," says Weingarten. Your best bet is just to be friendly. Try asking her something about herself to break the ice, and talk to her like a regular person. Pretend she's someone you're meeting at a book club. She'll probably respond to you the same way: nice, respectful, relaxed. Oh, and it's also okay to ask if there's a bigger chair at those teacher meetings.

Q I'm just not a "group" person, but the other moms in my daughter's class are so chummy! They seem surprised that I don't stay to chat after pickup or offended that I'm not joining their knitting group. How can I respond without seeming rude?

A "You don't need to undergo a personality transplant," says Jodi R.R. Smith, a mom and owner of Mannersmith, a Boston-area etiquette consulting firm. "You can be sweet and breezy when you see these moms," she adds, "but it's okay to be very picky and choose only those gatherings you really want to attend." Still, you can bow out without burning bridges. Smith, also the author of *From Clueless to Class Act: Manners for the Modern Woman*, suggests having a mantra for saying no politely, such as "Thank you so much for always inviting me! I can't make it this time, but I really appreciate being included." Even if you know you're going to turn down the next invitation (and the one after that), you don't have to avoid the other moms. A little chitchat is probably all they need to know you're perfectly nice, just perfectly busy with other things.

Q The other families in my child's school definitely have more money than we do. I'm embarrassed to invite their children over for playdates. Our house is so tiny! Is there any solution?

A If the recent housing and credit crisis has taught us anything, it's that lots of folks are living in houses they can't afford. If you're not, that's great. But regardless of anyone else's situation, what really matters is that your home is a safe and fun place for kids to play, says Christie Mellor, a mom and author of *The Three-Martini Playdate*. Mellor speaks from experience: A preschool friend of her son's once exclaimed, "Your house is so small!" when she arrived for a playdate. "If this had come from an adult, it would have seemed aggres-

sively rude," recalls Mellor. "But this was a five-year-old, so I said, 'Yeah, isn't it great? It's the most fun house and the absolute perfect size for us.' Which is true." Before long, the two kids were playing happily. The bottom line: Even children who live in sprawling mansions will quickly adjust to hanging out in a little bungalow when they've got friends, snacks, and some room to cut loose. "Don't ever be embarrassed by the size of your house," says Mellor. "Unless it really is a closet. And it's filled with sixty-two cats and your collection of rusted railroad spikes. Then you might want to meet at the park."

Q I feel like I have a lot in common with one of the moms from my kid's class, but our children don't particularly like each other. How can I get to know her better?

A This is a common dilemma as kids get older: They have definite preferences in friends, and it's going to be increasingly rare that the mom you like actually has a likable kid of the same age and gender as yours. You're probably better off trying to arrange adults-only playdates when you can. Yes, it's a bit awkward to approach another mom without the comfortable cushion of your kids between you. So keep it casual. See if she can meet you for coffee after you drop the kids off at school, or an hour or so before school lets out, if your schedules allow. "If you need to bring the kids along sometime, consider an activity-based outing like a visit to the park or a session at a paint-your-own-pottery place," suggests Borba.

Q My second child has started school, and I'm totally becoming a slacker mom. I'm not volunteering in the classroom nearly as much as I did with my first. Am I scarring my child for life?

A No way! As parents, we do many things differently (and less often) with our younger children, and they manage to survive, says Weingarten. And let's be real: Your child isn't tallying up your hours and comparing them to what you did for his older sibling. "However, if your child is begging you to volunteer in his class, see if you can do so once or twice. Kids feel very proud when their parents help out," Weingarten says. If you work full-time, ask the teacher if there's anything you can do at home. She probably always needs items cut out for the bulletin board. Explain to your child how you're helping, and invite him to assist you. Remember, though, that volunteering isn't just a pleasantry. "It's one way you learn about other families, meet your child's friends, and see how he behaves at school," says Weingarten. The good news, though, is that "slacker moms" can pick up a lot of that information just by hanging around for an extra ten minutes, chatting casually with other parents, and observing their kids with their friends and teachers. So give yourself a break: You're not really doing less—you're just getting more efficient! ■

Teri Cettina is a mom of two in Portland, Oregon. She respectfully declines to divulge which of the above scenarios were inspired by her own experiences.