



LISA SPIEGEL



AMANDA BEESLEY WITH SAVANNAH



LIZ BENTLEY

KIRSTEN KERN AND
JESSICA ORBACH

ALICIA FIDELMAN



GRETA PETERMAN WITH DJOUMÉ

The Soho Parenting Center in New York City is a special spot where new moms can come to chat, confess, complain, and comfort each other as they ease into their new roles. *Child* listened in as Lisa Spiegel, one of its founding directors, led a group of eight moms, all with children under a year, in a discussion of life with baby.

LISA SPIEGEL: Growing up in American society and watching all those dizzy old movies, we all sort of got the idea that once you have a new baby, you finally get to live happily ever after. And there certainly are those moments of supreme joy. But there are also harder parts to parenting that can make you feel isolated and insecure.

Parenting can bring up issues of jealousy, competition, and division of labor between partners. We're in the midst of an interesting and difficult time between genders. We've launched into a feminist world where women are making careers and fulfilling lives for themselves. Of course, men are, too, but most of us were raised in a culture with a very different kind of division of labor between the sexes. And in the middle of this upheaval, couples are struggling to figure

out how to be parents together and make their relationship work in an equitable way. That's a big challenge to families right now.

Besides the relationship she has with her husband, a woman needs to think about her relationship with her mother and how it filters into her own mothering experience.

There's a real struggle for women today to balance work with mothering; to meet your own needs, your family's needs, and your child's needs; and to make the decisions that feel best for you. These are some of the things we're going to talk about today. **ALICIA FIDELMAN:** My mother stayed home, so it's kind of different that I'm actually working. Just recently, since I had my second child, I went part-time, which is a lot easier, but it's still not perfect. It's hard to balance everything, even working part-time,

New Moms

Tell It
Like
It Is



“The emotional issues of parenting are the hardest.” —Liz

because you don't feel you're giving enough to the office and you certainly don't feel you're giving enough to your child.

JESSICA ORBACH: I wasn't raised in an environment where I had any female role models who balanced home and work. I had a terrific mother, but she never really had a job or even any outside interests. I'm feeling guilty about wanting to know when I'm going to get to fulfill my own needs, because right now I know you're supposed to put your husband and child first.

LS: Who said you're supposed to do that? Do you think your mother instilled that in you?

JESSICA: Yes.

KIRSTEN KERN: I haven't gone back to work, and that's hard, too. It's like you don't have an identity of your own anymore. You went to college and spent your whole life building up a career, and now that you don't do that, you realize how much your work was a part of who you are.

LIZ BENTLEY: What I've discovered is that it's the emotional issues of parenting that are the hardest to grasp—not just physically doing it all. It's all about getting an identity and being emotionally happy with what you're doing.

Chat with moderator Lisa Spiegel, author of *A Mother's Circle*, in an online moms' group at www.schoparenting.com.

DEBORAH ROGERS: This job we have as mothers is a completely full-time job and should be honored as such.

LS: That's right. You're CEO of the family.

DEBORAH: You really do have to manage your employees, who include your husband and yourself and, sometimes, your nanny or daycare. It's just as if you were CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Managing your personal life is critical, too. Time to yourself is an important part of your life to manage.

KIRSTEN: The struggle is that women tend to feel very guilty about doing things for themselves. They expect to do their out-of-home jobs and their at-home jobs, have a relationship with their spouse, keep up their friendships, and do all of this without giving something back to themselves. That's utterly impossible. But there's not a woman I know who doesn't struggle with guilt over going to the gym or having dinner with a friend. You feel that it's a luxury.

JESSICA: Even when I was on my way here today, in the taxi, I was feeling so bad about leaving my daughter. She's at home with my husband now. I've called a million times to see if she's okay, and he keeps saying, "Yes, don't worry, everything is fine." But the fact remains that I'm not there. My breasts aren't there; they're here! [Lots of laughter]

LS: I think that brings up another thing, which is that our generation of parents is so focused on our children being emotionally healthy that we all wonder how we might be damaging them. Previous generations never thought about emotional health. For them, the most important thing was that their children were well behaved. We're so worried about how our kids are doing that we've become hypervigilant parents. I think the reason women are so tired is that we're doing everything and worrying triple-time.

ALICIA: I analyze myself constantly. But my mother didn't analyze herself. She had six kids and never read any books, and none of us have any problems. My mother just looks at me and shakes her head.

GRETA PETERMAN: We're all high achievers who want everything to be the best it can be.

LIZ: Since I've gone back to work, I worry much less about stuff. I just don't have time. And my son is happy.

AMANDA BEESLEY: I'm a writer, and I stay home and write articles occasionally. Someone comes in to take care of my daughter twice a week so I can take a class. My husband is also a writer, so he's around the house, too. It sounds perfect, but I still can't be happy with it. If I have a day where I just hang out with my daughter and we don't make it outside, I think, Oh, my God, she didn't get any fresh air today. If she cries a lot one day, I feel

MEETING OF THE MOMS

LISA SPIEGEL, 40, codirector of the Scho Parenting Center, moderator; **AMANDA BEESLEY, 33**, writer, mom to Savannah, 5 months; **LIZ BENTLEY, 31**, magazine ad director, mom to Teddy, 6 months; **ALICIA FIDELMAN, 34**, associate TV producer, mom to Hannah, 5 months, and Joshua, 3 years; **KIRSTEN KERN, 36**, chef, mom to Max, 9 months; **JESSICA ORBACH, 22**, student, mom to Eve Grace, 6 weeks; **GRETA PETERMAN, 37**, business manager, mom to Djourné, 11 weeks; **DEBORAH ROGERS, 38**, fashion designer, mom to Alex, 3 months, and Lucas, 2½ years; **CYNTHIA STERN, 45**, photographer, mom to Nicole, 11 months.

Roundtable

like I've blown it. I would love to know if anybody has figured out how to just enjoy living in the moment with your baby.

CYNTHIA STERN: I'm a photographer, and I work sporadically. So I'm home a lot with my daughter, and I have a full-time nanny. And I still worry. Sometimes my nanny will take Nicole out in the stroller for three hours. Then I get upset because I think that if she's being strolled around all day, she won't learn how to crawl and walk and climb. But before, I'd told the nanny she should take Nicole out a lot. The nanny said, "I don't know what you want me to do."

LS: You basically can't win. On another topic, some of you have mentioned your husbands. Let's talk about having a partner, or not having one, to parent with you.

CYNTHIA: For me, being a single mom is the only thing I know, so it doesn't seem exceedingly difficult. But the hardest part is not having someone there so you can say, "Look what she just did." I want to share all those little things with somebody else.

DEBORAH: It's funny—after you have a baby, husbands become assistants. And they're not really good assistants. [Laughs] I tell my husband that if he were really my assistant, I would fire him. And that if he doesn't want to be looked at as an assistant, he has to do some things on his own without my having to remind him of everything.

KIRSTEN: I try to be comfortable with my husband's style. I'm a detailed organizer and he's more into the overview. Both our styles work; they're just different.

LS: As your children grow, these issues don't disappear. They become, in certain ways, much more complex. There are whole lives that you've got to organize: friends, classes, homework, term papers, and concerts.

DEBORAH: Who does the detail things like schedule-keeping in your family—you or your husband?

LS: We've learned to sit down and decide what we're going to do together. But I don't know many families where the woman isn't a little bit more in charge of things.

ALICIA: My husband feels he gets neglected a lot. The kids want Mommy's attention, and he wants time for us, too. He's been

begging for a romantic dinner out since Joshua was born. But I don't want to leave the kids. And I'm breastfeeding, so it's like we only have a two-hour window.

KIRSTEN: That's one of the biggest changes when you have children. Even if you had a very busy job, you still found time for each other. But once the children come, they become such a priority that it's really hard to carve out that time for your husband.

LS: Some time alone with your spouse can really fill you up for a long time—one weekend away, or one dinner out. It's not like you need a three-week trip to Europe. That might be nice, but you need to recognize that even a little bit of time can take hold in a strong way inside of you. Time with your husband is a way of putting the family first.

KIRSTEN: My husband and I have done things we never would have done before we had children because we would have thought they were so contrived. Like going to an inn nearby for the night.

ALICIA: Did you enjoy yourself?

KIRSTEN: Absolutely. You feel bad that you're leaving your kid, but there's nothing more important than doing things that keep you healthy as a person and as a couple. I know that from experience, because my father is an alcoholic and my parents are divorced. When they got divorced, I was 11 and my sisters were older. But they were very frank with us. The split was about their own relationship being wrong, and it was about their



DEBORAH ROGERS



CYNTHIA AND DJOUME



CYNTHIA STERN, JESSICA, KIRSTEN

“After I had my child, I realized my mother was a god.” —Alicia

own self-esteem. My sisters and I haven't had any of the problems that they had, and I credit it them with that. They were good parents.

DEBORAH: My parents got divorced when I was 10, and we went to live with our dad. We all turned out okay, but I remember crying my eyes out over the fact that my mom wasn't there. Now that I have two kids, I can't even fathom the thought of leaving.

To me, keeping the marriage together is the most important thing if you really want to do what's right for your children.

LS: Looking at it another way, your parents struggled and they let you know. They did something that felt like a healthy decision for them. I think you reaped the benefits of that.

KIRSTEN: Focusing on the marriage is hard. I finally get the baby. *Continued on page 132*

NEW MOMS TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Continued from page 58

to bed and I am completely exhausted. But I still have to spend time with my husband. I just can't let myself zone out.

LS: The demands on new mothers' time are incredible. But one thing that keeps coming up here is the worry over some of the smaller things. I would urge you to think back more to your own childhood. When you find yourself worrying about one thing, stop and think about how you were parented and how you may be overcompensating for it.

ALICIA: I have a new appreciation for my mother. I always thought of her as just a mother, and I see that my son thinks of me that way, too. I'm not really a person to him; I'm a mommy. It was only after I had my child that I realized my mother was a god.

LS: Mothers are gods. I like that concept.

ALICIA: She was a tireless person who never complained. She was a stay-at-home mom. Dinner was always on time. I can never get dinner ready on time; my husband has to do it. Every day, I call her and say, "I just want to tell you—you are amazing."

LS: That's good that you tell her; you'll want your children to do that for you, too.

JESSICA: I'm so scared of my kids not knowing who I am as a person.

AMANDA: But you are a person, and it's also scary to let them know too much.

LS: I think, in this time of parenting, we have permission to say "I don't know" or "I really screwed up yesterday" to our kids. That helps children accept us and see us as human beings. But you shouldn't overcompensate by sharing too much. You want to make sure that your child knows you're not a kid; you're a woman taking care of a child.

LIZ: My mom didn't work full-time, but she was involved in a lot of activities and was very entrepreneurial. I didn't pay attention—what was important to me then was that my mom was there for me. Now, the relationship has changed, and what's important is how much I respect her. My admiration for her pushes me to be a good mother.

KIRSTEN: My mom doesn't know what to do now. I'm 36 years old, so she hasn't been a full-time mother for a long time. But she

still has no clue what to do with her life because she has no identity except being a mother. I'm paranoid about that, because I don't have a job right now.

ALICIA: But did she have something before she got married?

KIRSTEN: No.

ALICIA: So you're different already. You have an identity. My mother didn't have anything before she went straight into motherhood. I feel our generation of mothers is different because we have an identity.

LS: Everybody has an identity. A job isn't necessarily what defines your identity. As mothers, it's really important for us to say to ourselves, "Whether I'm working or not, I have an identity."

ALICIA: But society doesn't treat you like that. The first thing people ask is, "What do you do?" If you say you're a mother, they treat you like you're invisible.

LS: Can I give you one hope for the future? That really changes. Because as more people around you start parenting, that's what they will want to talk about.

LIZ: Being a mother is not only about having a kid. It's about being a whole person.

DEBORAH: But when you say to someone, "I'm a mother," they get a one-dimensional view of what your world is about.

LS: The things that mothers do to help create the personhood of their child are so varied. I always tell mothers not to worry about going out of the work force for a while; if you can manage to take care of your home and your children, then you have such good credentials and organizational skills. You can set yourself up for less disappointment by thinking, "I'm sometimes going to be really happy with what I'm doing, and I'm sometimes going to be really uncomfortable with it." It's a good goal to be mostly content with your decision. You can struggle about whether to

work more, but if you mostly feel good about caring for your baby, then you are making the best decision for yourself and your child.

It's also important to connect with women who have children the same age, because your child's development is going to determine, in a lot of ways, what your interests are. And it's often your friendships with women that will get you through parenting.

DEBORAH: You have to build a community.

KIRSTEN: You have to have someone who lives close to you so you can call and say, "Oh, my God, he was supposed to be asleep, but he's not. Let's go get coffee."

AMANDA: Like the group I was in here at the parenting center: We still get together for a playgroup, and we know that we have that hour a week to look forward to.

LS: It takes a while to get fully comfortable with the role of mother. I don't think it's six weeks or even six months; it's more like a six-year process. All your identities converge, and you finally settle into being just you with these different aspects of your life.


DEBORAH: I think what you're saying is that motherhood is very humbling. Just when you think you've got it under control...

LS: ...it all changes. Whatever phase you and your kid are in, you always feel this balance of hardship and wonderfulness.

LIZ: And we don't really know how it's all going to turn out.

GRETA: Perhaps one of the lessons here is that we'd all be better off learning to drop the expectations for perfection early in the parenting game.

DEBORAH: And we should try not to be so judgmental of each other.

LS: I always say mothering is a competitive sport. It brings out the deepest, most intense feelings because we're all struggling and wanting so much to succeed. Everyone is just trying to do her best. 

CHILD (USP 001-041), February 2001, Volume 16, Number 1. Published 10 times per year, monthly, with combined June/July and December/January issues, by Gruner + Jahr USA Publishing, 375 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post International Publications Mail Product (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 827037. Canadian GST registration number is R123245250. Canada Post, Box 1051, Fort Erie, Ontario L2A 5N8. Subscriptions: Canadian Annual rate \$29.94 (plus GST) in Canadian funds. Foreign annual rate \$44.00 payable in advance in US funds; 800-627-3333 or address below. POSTMASTER: Send address change to *CHILD*, P.O. Box 3175 Harlan IA 51593-0366.