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WITH ITS UNIQUE SUPPORT GROUPS, SOHO PARENTING HAS BECOME AN OASIS FOR URBAN MOMS SEEKING EVERYTHING FROM SLEEP ADVICE TO ADULT FRIENDSHIP

BY RAQUEL WILLERMAN



Lisa Spiegel (left) and Jean Kunhardt (right) of Soho Parenting

"Is there a money-back guarantee?" I asked the receptionist at Soho Parenting, a comprehensive downtown parenting support center. "You see, my husband is a diplomat. He has negotiated peace in war-torn countries and has persuaded killers to lay down arms. But not even he can convince our 3-year-old son to lie quietly in bed." The receptionist politely responded, "Jean can help you."

Such was my first visit to the modern yet playfully designed offices of Soho Parenting, where my husband and I ventured seeking advice on getting our 3-year-old son to fall—and stay—asleep.

And help they did—by tailoring a bedtime plan to the needs of our household. It took work to implement, but the results were life-changing. Months later, fresh from a good night's sleep, I interviewed Jean Kunhardt and Lisa Spiegel, co-founders of Soho Parenting, about their unique practice and authoritative perspective on issues facing New York City families.

Soho Parenting runs 12 to 14 mother-child discussion and support groups per week, with new groups starting every month. The center also offers par-

enting consultations, long- and short-term psychotherapy for individuals, couples counseling, child therapy, assessment and referral of children, and trauma processing. "Jean and I have very eclectic backgrounds. We are always learning new techniques, such as body/mind therapies, and incorporating them into our work," says Spiegel.

Kunhardt and Spiegel believe that their practice works so well because of its dual focus on practical information and internal exploration. In the mother-infant groups, time is divided between discussing baby-related things, like feeding, play, and attachment, and talking about the women's own development as mothers. "We had been in parenting groups that were just about infant/child development, and they were flat and boring, because women weren't sharing what was going on inside," says Spiegel.

Internal exploration is important as a parent because struggles that are not dealt with can be inadvertently passed on to children. Kunhardt and Spiegel have seen many clients with a history of sexual abuse who have buried or avoided the trauma, which inevitably resurfaces in their parenting. "Intergenerational transmission of

psychological issues is just part of human nature," say the two experts.

At the core of the center's work is its philosophy of women using other women for support. "If we can help women have supportive relationships, where they can help shine a flashlight on each other's blind spots, that is a piece of gold for us," they stated. Kunhardt and Spiegel strive to make their groups a haven from the outside world of pressure and competition, a place where women can feel safe enough to share their struggles.

Spiegel and Kunhardt met 25 years ago at Bellevue Hospital, where Spiegel ran an infant/toddler program and Kunhardt ran a preschool program for the outpatient clinic. The two women did not become friends, however, until they each had a child (within a month of each other), left Bellevue, and began to see each other socially.

Spiegel and Kunhardt found themselves edging into parenthood at the same stage. It was during that early motherhood period that they concocted the idea of running a mother-infant group for mothers like themselves. They taped fliers up and down

Broadway and ran their first group of eight women in Spiegel's living room.

"It was intense and magical," says Spiegel. They quickly understood that many of these women were brilliant and very successful in their own professions but were unprepared for motherhood. "We alerted them, and by proxy their husbands, early on in their mothering careers to things they needed to know," says Kunhardt. One of the most valuable things about the groups is that they provided opportunities to demonstrate what was being discussed. For instance, if a mother tried to feed her baby during the session when the baby clearly was not hungry, that could be the basis for a discussion about how to be in sync with the baby's appetite. Kunhardt and Spiegel developed an eight-week agenda for these groups that they still use today, more than 20 years later.

Soho Parenting has expanded into services that stretch far beyond infancy. "When their babies got older, the mothers didn't want to leave the groups. So we started mother-toddler groups. Now, we have groups with 13- to 14-year-old children," explains Spiegel. The friendships among the women are just as cherished as the parenting support. "These groups are part of the fabric of their lives," says Kunhardt.

Kunhardt and Spiegel have enjoyed raising their daugh-

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ters—they each have two girls—in Manhattan, citing great public educational experiences and diversity as two wonderful parts of city living. But they acknowledge that the city can be much harder on families these days, particularly in terms of generating parental and child anxiety.

This uneasiness often manifests as perfectionism in parents and children. Spiegel cites the example of a parent who is so anxious about whether her child will get into preschool that she tutors the child to not be shy at the preschool interview. "We advise against this kind of pressuring of children, but at the same time we have to help people figure out how to adjust to a world where, indeed, there are more applicants than available slots at schools," says Spiegel.

Throughout their practice, Kunhardt and Spiegel emphasize the importance of communication and teach parents how to discuss difficult topics like sex or death in developmentally appropriate ways. They also advocate having a parent's "sticky" issues out in the open and banning shame and secrets in the family. "The idea is not to 'get past' your issues. That's probably impossible. The idea is to stay connected with your child through the thick and thin of life and to remain authentic and honest with yourself as well," says Spiegel. ✦