

Family-to-Family Connections**Morning Travelers Create Friendship, Fun***By Sharon Randall*

I'm not sure with whom my son Davis will go to the prom. He's known Amanda since the beginning and she's wonderful, but Ashley, Meg, Lindsey and Abby have recently come onto the scene, and boy are they cute! Maybe they'll just all go as a group, and Matt, Jacob, Tommy, Will, Jack and Deven will join. What a handsome crowd that will be.

Does this seem silly, this type of speculation? Does it seem even sillier if I tell you that Davis is only three years old? Perhaps, but all of these children are friends, and they just played together a couple of weeks ago.

MorningTravelers, a playgroup started by Maura Russo, Charlotte Gray and myself, came out of our desire to provide friendships for our children. We had been to support group meetings and wanted something different. Here's what we started, how it's different from what you may have experienced, and how you might get started creating a group of your own.

What We Started

MorningTravelers is a group of infants and toddlers who meet monthly for play time together. On a rare occasion, we will have an older child or two (they are always welcome), but for the most part, children are three years old and younger. We have sixty families on our email list. Families come from all over to join us. In addition to monthly meetings, we have occasional group outings.

How It's Different

MorningTravelers is primarily a playgroup, rather than a support group. This is what we see as the differences:

We are focused on the children. Our times together are for the kids, often including siblings. This is about forming friendships that we hope will last a lifetime.

We restore normalcy. Telling a friend that you have a support group meeting suggests something different...something different that you do because your child has Down Syndrome. Telling a friend that you have a playgroup for your child suggests normalcy. We are robbed of so many "normal" experiences when we have a child born with Down Syndrome that the gift of "normalcy" that our playgroup gives to our families is truly wonderful, reassuring for us, for our families and our friends. And when you walk into a room full of families where having a child with Down Syndrome is the norm, you can take a deep breath, relax and know that you belong.

We defeat our common fears together. Many thoughts go through our minds when we have babies with Down Syndrome, and I have heard many say one of the first random thoughts to worry a mother's mind is the possibility (aren't we imagining the certainty?) of adolescent loneliness. In this small example of the prom, we can envision a happy event together, and the vision is possible because we are putting friendships into place

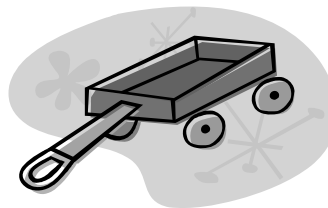
for our children now. Part of the wonderful thing about our group is that we get to walk with each other at the same point in the journey. This is unfolding for us together.

We celebrate. On occasion we have dinner out. Across an evening's conversation, there is both shared laughter and shared heartache. We have found adult dinners to be appropriate places for those types of conversations. However, we have decided it is impossible to not rejoice together when we are around our children. We see their development, we see their beauty, we even see their misbehavior on occasion, but mostly we see our children interacting with their friends....who would not celebrate in that environment?

How To Get Started

There are many ways to get started. I can just tell you how this formed for us. A couple of us became friends, and found that our friendship was a tremendous joy and comfort. As we met others with children the same age as ours, we invited them into this circle of friendship. Massachusetts' Down Syndrome Congress (MSDC) was kind enough to let us put postcards at a conference to reach out to new friends there. We've printed cards and carry those for random meetings in grocery stores with new friends. We also placed an article about *MorningTravelers* in a local newspaper with an invitation to join the group. Email has been a tremendous tool for us as well. No cost, easy, and accessible 24 hours a day...what a perfect way to reach parents!

Through *MorningTravelers*, we have made wonderful friendships for our children, and for ourselves. We have been given the gift to take something that was painful and turn it into an opportunity to provide comfort and reassurance to others. And we have more hope for our future because of our playgroup. That is a recurrent theme in our email traffic. What reassurance and hope comes out of our little Saturday morning playgroups!



Sharon Randall is the mother of three active boys. Her son Davis has Down syndrome and is a graduate of the Professional Center for Child Development Early Intervention Program in Andover. Now 3 years old, Davis attends Franklin School in North Andover. His mom says, "He enjoys seeing his friends every month at our Morning Travelers playgroup and invites everyone to come out and have fun with us!"

For more information about the playgroups, please contact *MorningTravelers* at morningtravelers@yahoo.com.