

Finding Your Tribe: Feed Your Soul while Feeding Your Kids

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Web Exclusive

Vicki and I are cleaning out her fridge. The vegetable bins have somehow warped and have to be jiggled out, revealing a slimy green pepper and a distinctly brown head of iceberg lettuce. Laughing at the disgusting items, Vicki holds open the lid of the compost bucket, and I dump in the veggie remains. A minute later my toddler wanders into the kitchen and tugs at my shirt. While I sit cross-legged on the floor and nurse her, Vicki washes out the bins and hands out crackers to her two children and my three year old. Then, with everyone fed and content for a few more minutes, we start on the next shelf of the fridge.

By the end of the day, when our husbands arrive, we'll have cleaned the bathrooms, vacuumed all the floors, finished a couple of loads of laundry, and prepared a meal for both families to enjoy. And tomorrow we'll do it all over again at my house.

I'm not exactly sure how Vicki and I first thought of this way of sharing our time. She had worked with my husband, and when she decided to stay home with her first baby, our friendship blossomed. My first child was born soon after, and we both discovered we were incredibly lonely.

The day Vicki brought her daughter home from the hospital she walked into the house and burst into tears. She was terrified by the thought of coping alone with this new baby. I, too, had my own lonely days with my infant son. My husband left for work, taking our only car, before I was even out of bed. The day stretched out endlessly in front of me--changing diapers, washing clothes, cleaning house--with at best the TV or radio as a substitute for adult company. During the cold Canadian winter, even getting outdoors was a challenge.

Vicki and I were spending hours on the phone with each other, but that didn't help. So we hit on this new plan--on one day her husband would drop her off at my house on his way to work. We'd spend the day together, doing housework and caring for our children, and then at the end of the day her husband would come back to our house, and both families would have dinner together. The next day, I'd get dropped off at her house.

The routine continued for several years as our babies grew into toddlers and preschoolers, and then new babies joined our families.

We did not do this every single day, of course, and some days were more productive than others. Sometimes we spent several hours lying together in bed while our babies nursed and older children played on the floor. We talked and sometimes cried. Other days we took the bus to doctors' appointments or to do some shopping.

We discovered that Vicki is a better cook, and I am a better baker. We developed our own categories of housework--I like "wet" work (washing dishes, laundry, washing floors), and she prefers the "dry" variety (vacuuming, sweeping, tidying). We complemented each other. And we always had someone to talk to, laugh with, hold a baby for a bathroom trip, give a hug.

When I read Jean Liedloff's book *The Continuum Concept*, I realized that we had formed our own, very small tribe. Spending our days together satisfied our need for adult companionship without separation from our babies, and working together made all the chores--even cleaning disgusting stuff out of the bottom of the fridge--more fun.

Eventually our husbands both found work in other communities, and our daily time together came to an end. But I had seen how important this kind of relationship is for me, and I deliberately tried to recreate it with other friends.

Not long after Vicki and her family moved, I was at a church picnic when I saw Lorna for the first time. She and her family had just arrived in our community. Something about the way she held her baby was familiar to me, and I went up and introduced myself.

She, too, was looking for a tribe, as she had recently moved away from her family. Soon my new friend Lorna and I got together every Thursday to bake bread (and sometimes other foods) for our families for the week. She had a bigger house and roomier kitchen, so we generally went there. We split the cost of the ingredients, and as our children played together (by then, I had three children and Lorna had six), we kneaded and shaped the dough. While the bread was rising, we talked and tended to other tasks. I often brought a basket of things that needed mending, so we could work together while we were waiting.

We were there when she miscarried her seventh baby, and she tended to my older children while I was giving birth to my fourth. I still think of

Thursday as baking day, even though Lorna now lives hundreds of miles away.

My children are almost grown, but I still work with parents. The theme of loneliness is as strong and prevalent as it was when I sat crying on my bed with my new baby, wondering how I'd cope with no one to talk to. Certainly the desire to overcome isolation is one of the reasons why women return to work; it's a need easily understood by those of us who opt to stay home with our children.

We truly are social animals; we need to be with other people to feel good, whole, and happy. It's worth the effort to create tribes, however small and imperfect they may be.

Often we try to approach this problem by creating playgroups for our children. I think this has to do with our penchant for independence. We try to pretend that we don't need to be around other people, but we acknowledge that our children do. The result is often that the playgroup meets the children's needs, but the adults are still frustrated.

Create Your Own Tribe

In my experience, there are three important components in finding or creating your own tribe (however small) in our very nontribal society. Spend a good deal of time together. Short visits are simply that--visits. Everyone is on his or her best behavior; there is a sense of one person being the host and the other person being the guest. The relationship is still distant.

I know that when my sister comes to visit with her children, the first day is inevitably awkward. Even when she tries to help out around the house, she doesn't know where to find things, and I feel uncomfortable thinking that I should be the hostess and not imposing on her.

By the second day, though, there is usually a shift. And by the third day we are happily working together and wishing we could live with each other all the time. What seemed hard on day one feels natural and enjoyable by day five.

You need enough time to experience the rhythms of the day. You want to prepare food, eat, and clean up, and then perhaps nap together--adults and babies alike. You need to experience both talking and comfortable silences. It doesn't have to be several days in a row, although I think that helps, but even one day a week will eventually give you that closeness.

If it's true for my sister and I, with our strong family history and connection, I think it is even truer for friends. We are not used to being in tribes, and yet

we long for these connections; it is worth persisting until the awkwardness of the early days fades.

Work together. This is one of the big differences between having a playgroup and "being tribal." The purpose is not for the children to be "socialized" or have fun (although both of those things will happen), it is for you and your friend or friends to accomplish some tasks. The satisfaction of completing your work project--even if it is just cleaning the house or preparing a meal together--will strengthen your relationships and help you feel more like a functioning adult.

One friend commented to me that cleaning house with someone seemed "too intimate." I suggested she start with meal preparation. Invite your friend's family over for dinner and then just ask her to chop some vegetables, stir the sauce, or toss the salad. The food will taste better because you prepared it together.

You can do other projects, too, such as the baking day Lorna and I enjoyed. I live near an old-order Mennonite community now, and the women frequently come together to can foods, make quilts, and complete other large projects. In fact, the whole community will gather to build barns and bring in the harvest. Perhaps you and your friend can plant a garden, or you could have a "mending session," or a time when everyone brings unfinished projects--crafts, sewing, knitting, woodworking--to complete as a group.

How do you work with small children around? Other friends who have tried this say it can sometimes turn into one person watching the children while the other one works. This has happened to me, too, especially in the early stages when the children were still getting used to each other and a stranger's house. It also tends to happen with new moms, who take frequent nursing breaks and care for their infants.

But both of these impediments are temporary and improve over time. Slings and backpacks make it easier to work with a baby or toddler. There may be days when you feel as though you have not accomplished much thanks to a fussy baby or an older child who has had a difficult day. When this happens, remind yourself that life isn't about accomplishing as much as possible. It's about being together, working with and supporting each other. Try not to be too picky. People who actually live in tribes are born into them. And I suspect that if we lived in tribes there would be people who we would get along with easily and those with whom we wouldn't mesh quite as well.

When we are looking for someone to be in our tribe, we are often searching for someone who will agree with us about everything, and we may pass by some wonderful people by doing that. Vicki and I were initially drawn to each other because we were both young, living a long way from our families, and feeling very lonely. That was about it. We had different ideas about many other things. Her first baby was weaned to a bottle at three months, while mine kept nursing for more than two years, for example. In our discussions about parenting, religion, and politics, we always felt free to respectfully disagree.

Respect, I would guess, is the key. It doesn't matter if one of you is a vegetarian and the other eats meat, as long as you can respect each other's choices.

Are there places to draw the line? I think we all have our own limitations. I know that I wouldn't be comfortable spending a lot of time with someone who spans their children or is frequently angry with them. But I have been able to forge very good relationships with friends who had a different set of rules than I did.

Vicki and I now live several hundred miles apart. I have since divorced, and she's started her own business. Yet our friendship is unshakeable. All of our children feel the same way. One day Vicki's oldest daughter--now in her 20s--showed up at my front door with a friend. When I enthusiastically invited them in, she turned to her friend and said, "See? I told you she'd be happy to see me. I am like part of her family."