

Reaching out

That's just what the Doha Expat Mums and Kids Group seem to be doing, reaching out to the expatriate mums and their children to form a close knit community that makes them feel at home in a land faraway from their own.

BY NADIA ISMAIL

It's a blessing for any mum to have access to a peer-group offering support and advice, particularly when one's in a foreign land, far away from the supporting network of close family and doting grandparents. Though a young and tender six months old itself, the Doha Expat Mums and Kids Group has had a growth spurt from just 50 members in the first month to almost 300 in its latest count. As its growth has moved from tiny baby steps to the more confident tottering of toddlers, so have the range of activities and advice groups that offer guidance to expecting mums, new mums and those with slightly more experience.

New roots

Initiated by Roxanne Davis almost as soon as she landed in Qatar, backed by the experience of working in mother-support groups in her native Houston, Texas,



where she was administrator of a group with as many as 600 members, the group is designed to help out specifically expatriate women.

"The group that I was administrator to in Houston was a real 'go-to' group, whether it was for parenting advice or more mundane household issues such as where to find plumbers or electricians," says Davis. "So far, I've found

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that Doha is a relatively easy city for mothers to live and move around in, although it is much more difficult to find

activities for youngsters in the way that it was at home in Houston." This has, of course, been appealed by



the presence of the group, which has opened up a range of options to mothers and their little charges. With a mission to connect expatriate mums living (and working) in Doha, it has proved a popular focal point for women here to make friends, find things to do that will keep both mother and child busy and share advice.

Kitchen-sink advice

Since its formation, several activity groups cater to more specific concerns, such as those of expecting and new mothers, imparting kitchen-sink advice from people who actually have first-hand experience (rather than 'scientists' giving advice). This is held in addition to an expectant mother's night out, aimed at those working during preg-

nancy. Both groups give peer advice on how to deal with a child with colic, or a baby who has difficulty sleeping.



In addition to this, there are 'new arrivals coffee mornings' held each week, which welcome and introduce newcomers to Doha or the group (or both), which takes place at The One in Landmark Shopping Mall. A highly popular book club has also been created; giving mums the much needed mental exercise away from constant kiddie-talk.

"Monthly activities take place, including film nights, featuring both the latest Hollywood hits, as well as feature films on parenting techniques or related topics, just incase you're interested in that kind of thing," says Davis. "There are also monthly trips around Doha and outside the city, the most recent of which was a trip to an organic farm. The range and nature of activities available to members of the group depend very much on who volunteers to host them."

Personal time

And just to tempt mums to

spend some time watching films together, evenings featuring film-screenings are often without children, giving them a well-earned break and period of relaxation away from the children.

Most of the activities that are involved as part of the group are not structured, in that, nothing is planned beforehand. Each playgroup, which is hosted voluntarily by different members at private residences or compound clubhouses, is more a means of allowing little ones freedom to play whilst the mothers can socialise and unwind.

International spread

In the grand tradition of multiculturalism that is Doha, the group is equally as heterogeneous as you can get. With around 54 different nationalities on the membership role, the only common aspect between members is the fact that they have children. "We have literally everything in our group



between Argentina and Zimbabwe, and everything in between,” says Davis, “For me, this has been one of the best things about the group, getting to meet so many different nationalities in one place, sharing advice and very often having the same sort of issues.” These issues range primarily from healthcare down to problems finding school places (both quite salient points in bringing up offspring in Qatar). The general reaction to the group has, not surprisingly been very positive, a point amply illustrated by the immense speed with which it has attracted new members. Davis notes how even some longer-term residents of Doha have reacted with pleasure at the group’s creation, which has filled up a much-needed hole in the childcare market.

Personalised advice

“Most women that come to

the group are just happy to have a more personalised forum than something online, for instance, where they can ask questions, get advice from people they have met before rather than having to post them to the whole world,” Davis notes. “On other public forums that may appear online, part of the problem is you don’t know who’s looking at the questions you ask, who the questions are open to, and in many ways I find that lack of privacy quite uncomfortable.”

Extending this principle to the group and the relative smallness that Doha, as a city, still maintains, the close-knit community that the Doha Expat Mums and Kids (DEMK) has become is a welcome area for mothers to express these concerns in complete confidence. The group’s website (<http://www.dohaexpatmumsandkids.com>) also acts as an online forum open only to members

of the group, where the same questions and ideas can be brought up for general input.

Giving support

“We’ve had several mothers lately give birth here in Doha, and several of them have been disappointed as they had to have C-sections, which is the preferred way here,” says Davis.

“Others may be having issues breastfeeding, and the more experienced mothers in the group have been tremendously useful for these new mothers, giving advice.”

For mothers, the opportunity to discuss issues with other mothers has at least prevented any feelings of isolation they may feel from living so far from families and close friends back home.

For one mother, Nadia Khan-Ayoub who has been a member for several months now feels that the group has provided her and her

17-month-old child, Yousef, with a safe network within which they can take part in activities. “In a society like Qatar, where most of us are away from our families, kids risk leading isolated lives,” she says, adding, “DEMK playgroups ensure that you find the right playmates for your child, and help build social skills which might otherwise be difficult to acquire out here.”

Farwin and her two-year-old son, Kumayl, have found the DEMK group to be a great outlet to get the little one more proactive and interactive.

“My husband and I felt it was important for Kumayl to be raised in a multicultural atmosphere, and with this group, there’s the opportunity for him to really interact with others his age,” says Farwin, “I also love this group because there is more of a focus on the mothers than on just the children.

It lets us interact with each other whilst the children just get on and play with each other, and we also have the chance to speak to each other over online forums covering a range of topics.”

At the moment there are no specific support or advice groups that have been set up, although this is one aspect that Davis is hoping to see set up in the near future.

“We’re forming sub-groups within the group, with some focusing on parents of older children who are as in need of help and advice as those with newborns or toddlers. We’d also be interested in setting up a specific breastfeeding group if there was enough interest in this.” ❧