Group grows up
Parenting Now! takes family support into the next generation

Posing the same way they used to pose their babies on the floor at Parenting Now! are (clockwise from lower left) Rachelle Villano, Sarah Petersen, Liz Fine, Darci Mitchell, and Roz Carrier. (Paul Carter/The Register-Guard)
When Sarah Petersen’s twin daughters were born 13 years ago, she knew she wanted to be in a Birth To Three group.

The nonprofit organization, since renamed Parenting Now!, already had been offering supportive parenting groups, later with an education component, for more than two decades by then.

“I really wanted to be a good mom, and I felt I needed some input, some feedback from other people,” said Petersen, 52, a medical social worker who lives in Eugene.

What she got was parenting education, plus several new mom friends.

“Just having that community,” said Liz Fine, 47, another mom from Peterson’s group, “and knowing you’ve got a community of people that you know and trust, that have been with you all the way through … even though we don’t see each other on a routine basis, the community is there.

“It’s tightly knit.”

Fine and Peterson are among at least 95,000 parents and children who have been through Parenting Now! support groups since the program began as a support network in 1978 in Eugene, founder Minalee Saks estimates. The nonprofit group’s programs have grown to include not just its First Three Years classes but support for parents of older children, as
well as Spanish-speaking classes and curriculum that the organization sells throughout the United States and internationally.

Because of how many people have participated over the decades, it has become a widely known fixture in the Eugene-Springfield area, especially for new parents.

Ask local parents if they were in a Birth To Three group, and you’ll easily find many who were. And while some groups quickly drifted apart, many still keep in touch with at least some of the others from their groups.

Among those who have remained connected are Darci Mitchell, 41; Roz Carrier, 48; and current Parenting Now! board President Rachelle Villano, 45, who were in Fine’s and Petersen’s group.

“Almost everywhere I go, literally, from the supermarket to the dentist to anywhere, people say, ‘Oh I was in Birth To Three. I still see members from my group. We still get together;’” said Saks, who was the executive director of the agency for 35 years and retired less than two years ago.

“The majority of people form connections that last over time, a long time.”
The early days

Birth To Three began because Saks recognized her own need for making connections after her first son was born.

Saks said yes to an infant temperament study at the University of Oregon so she could have contact with people interested in talking about babies. She clicked with two research assistants involved in that program, and together they founded the nonprofit group.

In the beginning, they found new parents through addresses published in the newspaper.

“They were so grateful to have somebody call and be interested,” Saks said.

In those early days, there wasn’t a curriculum. The parents, mostly moms and their babies, just got together in other members’ homes and talked about their experiences.

As time went on, the program incorporated research and science about the developmental stages of children.

Still, “The core of helping parents connect and being able to see that they’re not alone — there’s other parents going through the same things that they are and helping them connect with each other — is really important,” Saks said.

These are important, vulnerable and precious times in a family’s life, Saks said, and those are among the reasons that people seem to make such lasting connections.

“What I think it is, is that when you go through a really critical life change,
like when you go away to college or people who are Army buddies, you’ve experienced something, you’ve shared a time together that was really critical in your development and your family’s development,” Saks said.

**From birth to 50**

Saks has heard a number of fun stories about long-lasting connections, including that two babies from one group grew up to marry each other.

Saks attended a different wedding of another Birth To Three baby, and she was delighted to see that among the other guests were many other children and parents from their group.

Jenny Allen’s group has similar lasting connections.

Although some members still connect with each other regularly, the last time a large number were together was at their kids’ high school graduations 10 years ago.

Until recently.

Several members from the original group reconnected to talk last month at Parenting Now! Participants included Jenny and her husband, Mark Allen; Debbie Moore; Judy Collins; David Schwieger and his wife, Melissa Schwieger; Lauri and Kirk Simrin; and Lynne Swartz, a group member who went on to become the current executive director of Parenting Now!

“We all just kind of became friends instantly in a sense,” said Moore, 64.

Eventually they had mom’s night out, a tradition that lasted through middle school. They scheduled some girls’ weekends away. They attended birthday parties for one another’s kids. They signed their children up for
the same preschool.

The moms continued to get together, even after their kids had made their own other friends. It was a warm and supportive group, said Collins, 62, who joined the group when her older daughter was young.

It helped the parents to see that their kids were on track developmentally, said Mark Allen, 60. They became like an extended family to one another, helping out with carpooling and child care and giving each other a chance to interact with other adults.

What was it like to have a group of other people who had known their babies their whole lives?

“Should have been Birth to 50,” said David Schwieger, 64, drawing laughter from the group.

**Laying the foundation**

Swartz thinks these connections are valuable to the community at large.

The kids get early socialization, she said, making them more equipped with the interpersonal skills needed in school. The parents are less isolated and have less stress.

It’s a foundational organization, Swartz said, not only locally but across the United States, in terms of pioneering parenting education.

The impact is “hard to quantify,” Swartz said. “It’s almost like ‘how many heart attacks did an exercise program prevent?’ It’s hard to say, but you know it works.”
Currently, Parenting Now! has classes for Incredible Infants, Wonderful Ones, Terrific Twos and Thrilling Threes. Baby Connection, a program for parents that includes breast-feeding information, is offered in the Parenting Now! building in coordination with PeaceHealth and volunteers.

Parenting Now! also offers a play group; Make Parenting a Pleasure classes, meant for especially stressed parents with kids age birth to 8; groups for teenage parents; and Crecer, a Spanish-language group that has a curriculum that also incorporates the cultural differences in parenting for Latino families.

That cultural awareness, was something that Briselda Molina, 32, appreciated.

Molina first began a Crecer class when her 4-year-old son was an infant. She credits the support for helping her identify her postpartum depression, for helping her feel less overwhelmed and with making many friends.

Later, she began teaching the classes.

“I see the difference that we make,” Molina said.

Soon, Saks will begin leading The Joy of Grandparenting, a new class for Parenting Now!. It’s aimed at some of those parents who were among the original Birth To Three participants and their demographic peers.

Parenting Now! employs about 25 people, many of them part time.

The biggest change in recent years has been to the name. There was brand confusion, Swartz said, because Birth To Three sells its curriculum all over the United States, and it was not the only organization in the country with
the name Birth To Three.

“It’s been really a tough kind of thing to do because people so identified with Birth To Three, but it’s much better than it was even a year ago,” Swartz said.

**By word of mouth**

Although there are other ways for parents to connect and for babies to find their first friends — such as the MOMs Club, church social groups for mothers and indoor playgrounds — Parenting Now! is one of the best-known options in this community.

Hannah Flier experienced that last year when — while she was pregnant with her now-5-month-old son, Jack — numerous people suggested that she sign up, from her obstetrician to her boss and even her maternity photographer.

“The main thing that we heard was that the people that you meet in these groups just become such a lifelong support system,” Flier said. “It really is starting to feel that way.”

“There’s really something amazing about going through these early stages with the same group of people,” she said.

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