

BRIGHT MOMS, BIG CITY, LITTLE BABIES, LOTS OF QUESTIONS

With Big City Moms, **Risa Goldberg** And Her Sister, **Leslie Venokur**, Discovered The Best Thing You Can Do For A New Mom: Help Her Meet Other New Moms

BY SARAH ZORN

SITTING WITH RISA GOLDBERG at the headquarters of MTV in Times Square, where she is a director of Internet ad sales research, she seems so calm and focused and friendly that, if you didn't know anything about her, you wouldn't have any clue of the demanding balancing act she pulls off every day. But if you are a mom—and a New York City mom at that—chances are you could relate. In fact, if you are a new mom, you may have benefited from Risa's other line of work. For in addition to her job at MTV, she is the co-founder of Big City Moms, one of the city's most popular moms' organizations.

"Everyone asks me, 'How do you do it? How do you manage everything?'" says Risa, who also is a devoted mother to her 4-year-old daughter, Hallie, and 1-year-old twin sons, Harrison and Cooper. "I just have a really good support system. I have a wonderful husband, a great babysitter, a great family, and I also have the help of my sister. And that's how it works. I'm very lucky."

It was with her sister, Leslie Venokur, whose own day job is being the director of retail at Kidville, that Risa first came up with the idea for Big City Moms. This was in March 2004. Hallie was 4 months old, and Risa had just returned to her job, then at ESPN, and found herself frustrated that all her favorite events and activities for moms were held during the day. "One Sunday night, I was complaining to Leslie about how difficult it was meeting new mothers and maintaining friendships while working full-time," she says. "And

Leslie said, 'Then let's start something for working moms to get together.' That was it. We were off and running the next morning."

The sisters started by launching a series of "Moms' Night Out" dinners, held twice a month at various restaurants, which featured guest experts on such topics as birthday party planning, balancing work and motherhood, and preschool admissions. As word spread and the group's popularity grew, they expanded to luncheons, shopping events, educational seminars, class samplers (sponsored in conjunction with a variety of the city's leading children's enrichment and activity centers), holiday parties, and expectant moms events as well.

The typical BCM event is marked by its mix of educational offerings, tips on making the most of raising kids in the city, and its friendly social atmosphere. The event can be done on the scale of a New Moms' Lunch, which typically attracts around 30 moms, or run along the lines of "The Biggest Baby Shower Ever," which was held last October at American Girl Place, for over 300 moms.

"We took over the whole store," says Goldberg. "We had about 40 different vendors, including Destination Maternity, Bugaboo, and Stokke. Every 20 minutes there was a seminar on a topic like breastfeeding, finding a nanny, what to put on your registry, and so on. And, of course, we had gift bags and raffles."

Now that Risa's and Leslie's little social experiment has blossomed into a company with thousands and thousands of members,

■ *Risa Goldberg with her sons, Cooper (to the left) and Harrison (on her lap) and daughter Hallie, photographed at the ice cream parlor in FAO Schwarz by Thaddeus Harden/www.thaddeusharden.com*



AND THE Fun BEGINS

By Risa Goldberg

Risa's 7 Favorite Things to Do in NYC with Young Children

1. Take a class. We are so fortunate to have a great variety of children's classes throughout the city. Some of my favorite music classes are Rockin with Andy, Little Maestros, and Broadway Babies. But you can't go wrong with any of the classes at places like 74th Street Magic, Kidville, Gymtime Rhythm & Glues, 92nd Street Y, Appleseeds, NY Kids Club, Gymboree, and Jodi's Gym.
2. Central Park. My idea of a perfect afternoon is grabbing some sandwiches and chips at Lenny's and having a picnic with my kids and their friends in Central Park. Whether you are hanging out on a blanket, playing in one of the many playgrounds, or
- visiting the zoo, you can never get tired of Central Park.
3. Go for a walk. There is so much to see and explore in the city that one of the best things you can do is explore your neighborhood—or another neighborhood!—with your child. Not to mention all the street fairs and festivals.
4. Spend a morning at FAO Schwarz. Play on the piano and hang out with the dolls and the cars. Come for story time. Likewise, take your child to one of the many NYC bookstores, like the Scholastic Store, Books of Wonder, or Barnes & Noble that, in addition to having a great selection, also have special places for you to read with you child.
5. Spend an afternoon at one of the city's great child-friendly museums. Visit the Children's Museum of Manhattan, Children's Museum of the Arts, and the American Museum of Natural History. All have family memberships, by the way.
6. Go out to eat. You would be surprised at how family-friendly many NYC restaurants have become over the years. It can be a huge treat and a wonderful distraction, for example, for kids to watch the sushi chefs make the sushi.
7. Attend a Big City Moms event, of course.



Big City Moms co-founders and sisters Leslie Venokur and Risa Goldberg

attending a BCM event is almost as compulsory as buying a stroller for many city moms. "Once you're pregnant, it becomes part of your plan for getting to know the city in a new way," Risa explains.

And, even better, it allows you to meet other women experiencing similar changes and concerns. "The first challenge a new mom faces is the fear of the unknown, of making sure you are doing the right thing, feeding your baby at the right time, getting your baby to sleep, et cetera," says Risa, "and probably the most important thing we do is help moms meet other moms. One of the most important things I've learned is that moms trust other moms. They trust the experience other moms have."

With that in mind, Risa is especially proud of the fact that Big City Moms doesn't cater to, as she puts it, "an exclusive prototype of moms." Rather, she says, we've tried to be "the go-to organization for expectant moms, first-time moms, second moms, single moms, moms with twins, all moms really. Everyone is welcome."

Kimberly Stamler, a BCM member, couldn't agree more. "As a new mom going back to work full time, Big City Moms afforded me the opportunity to meet others like me," she says. "Risa's thoughtfulness in pairing moms she thinks will benefit from meeting has allowed me to make the friends I've made."

Risa herself started her job at MTV—which is part time—last September. But she had given birth to BCM—not to mention her three children—while she was working full time, first at ESPN, and later with Microsoft. Not surprisingly, she has regularly enjoyed BCM events with her own children, and at the same time has gathered an incredible amount of practical and emotional wisdom from the experts with whom she has worked. Want to know about the pros and cons of using certain kinds of strollers in the city? Want to know which local sleep experts moms turn to in pinch? Ask Risa.

"For me, in my job and in my whole life...there is nothing I like more than positive feedback, from my job, my teachers, my business, my moms. I just love knowing I do a good job and I help people out," she says.

Soon, actually, it'll be Leslie's turn to reap some BCM benefits in the most personal way. In March, she let the word out that she is pregnant. "Risa and I always joke that running Big City Moms is a 9 to 5 job like everyone else's—it's just that it's 9 pm to 5 am!" Leslie says.

Well, if she ends up looking for some new tips on how to balance it all with grace and determination, she'll have no better role model than her older sister.

"When you're at work, you're at work. When you're at home, you're at home. You don't want your children to remember you as always checking a Blackberry," Risa says. "Just because I have three kids, my life's not going to be handicapped. You figure out a way to do it, and you do it with a smile." ☺

You can read more about Big City Moms at www.bigcitymoms.com.