

DECEMBER 2020/JANUARY 2021



**GGMG** | GOLDEN GATE  
MOTHERS GROUP®

magazine

# Finding Your Sweet Spot





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# Letter from the Editor: Finding My Bittersweet Spot

By Sonya Abrams



Sonya is a freelance editor and mom of three living in Cole Valley.

**W**e all know those people—usually childless—who, when asked how they're coping with the pandemic, give a slightly bashful smile and admit that things are pretty good, that Covid has really allowed them to slow down, relax, even take up new hobbies and projects. And if you're like me, you kind of hate those people.

For most of us, the pandemic has caused incalculable stress, anxiety, and the loss of routines, sources of pleasure, and—in the worst cases—even friends or family members. The tendency to emphasize the negative is natural; there's so much to hate. I miss my friends, family, and freedom of movement, and I'm devastated to see the economic destruction that has ripped through my community and erased friends' livelihoods. It's easy to fall back on the grim and bleak aspects of our current reality—and commiseration is definitely a glue that helps bond my friends and I during these dark times.

**“There are gifts all around us, even in times when the world appears broken.”**

But lately I've been consciously trying to lift my head above the darkness, a balancing act that requires acknowledging our suffering but also seeking out the bright spots in our lives. I've started to more fully recognize the meaningful experiences the pandemic has ushered in, like our family's outdoor explorations of new corners of San Francisco, and my reinvigorated love of hiking, the perfect solo activity. As our

family's social circle has been throttled to a few bubble buddies, we've deepened the relationships with the friends still in our physical lives. And there's even some bright sides to Zoom (the unofficial sponsor of COVID-19). Moving my long-standing book club online has allowed members who moved to Tokyo and Texas to rejoin our monthly conversations; it's been a joy to welcome these old friends back into my life.

Our writers this issue hunt for the sweeter side of some very big topics. Clare Deignan wades into the landmine-strewn landscape of holiday get-togethers to share advice on how to keep conversations flowing and avoid heated arguments during this year's holiday Zoom. Lindsay Shauer takes a deep dive into the world of co-op preschools to help parents seeking a balance of autonomy and involvement in their children's early education. And Jennifer Kuhr Butterfoss takes a wide view of the educational landscape and offers tips on seeking the support, resources, and environments that work best for your family as you try to hit that educational sweet spot in the midst of a global pandemic.

No one would ever accuse me of being a Polyanna, and there's a profound danger in dismissing the devastating aspects of the pandemic. Suffering needs to be recognized and addressed, and we need to learn from this dark time in history. But I also refuse to chalk up a year-plus of my life as a total loss. The Leonard Cohen lyric “There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in” flows through my mind daily. There are gifts all around us, even in times when the world appears broken. It doesn't diminish the devastation to acknowledge the beauty, and it may just provide the hope we need to carry us through to the other side.

# Letter from the Board: Finding Sweetness In Our Community

By Erin Cahill



Erin is both a mom—to Alyx, Jack and two orange tabbies—and a partner in a large accounting firm. Her husband and co-parent, Niall, helps to make this all possible. When she has free time, of which lately there is not a lot, she enjoys hiking, running, trying the latest restaurants, and, of course, wine.

**2**020. What a year. And to top it off, no traveling home to see the family for the holidays this year. While at first I was saddened, I have reflected on the joy and sweetness of being here in SF—we are in an amazing city surrounded by our SF “family” and making new memories with them here. As I write this, we are in the midst of a Thanksgiving food (and wine!) coma, only to be gearing up for “Friendsgiving” with our COVID pod. Last night we put up the Christmas tree, listened to holiday music, decorated the tree (the kids only broke a few ornaments) and got out the matching PJs for the annual obligatory tree picture.

2020 has been a year of challenges, of hardships, of exhausting days, but it has also brought a lot of different opportunities and memories we wouldn't have had: Zoom meet-ups with family I collectively see only every 4–5 years, dance parties with my kids in between work phone calls, California road trips with my pod, and date nights at the park with my husband. While it has been a tough year, there have been a lot of sweet experiences I wouldn't have had in a non-COVID world.

Similarly, GGMG has been impacted by COVID—I know we are all longing for the days to be back in person with events such as Preschool Preview Night, Fall Fest, and Spring Fling.

**“While this pandemic has delayed life a lot longer than many of us expected, GGMG's sweet spot is the connectivity with other moms, and the support and care we give to each other.”**

But the resiliency I see in our members and our willingness to help one another, offer advice, and the levity of some of the recent forum posts reminds me why I joined GGMG, and ultimately highlights our sweet spot: this amazing group of

mommas. Through all this we have stayed true to our mission to “nurture ourselves...to create an environment of support... learn, teach, create, have fun...” While this pandemic has delayed life a lot longer than many of us expected, GGMG's sweet spot is the connectivity with other moms, and the support and care we give to each other. Let's remember that as we move into 2021, and continue to reimagine GGMG in this world.

I hope to see people rediscover what GGMG means to them, and the “sweet thing” about GGMG that made us all join and want to stay and be engaged as a community of moms. Virginia is rolling off from her position as Chair, and we will miss her dearly with a huge THANKS to all that she has done to lead GGMG through a challenging year. I look forward to 2021 joined by Connie as Vice Chair. And if you have any thoughts on what we can do in the upcoming year, we would love to hear from you!

## Housekeeping

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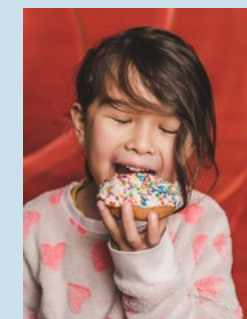
**NEXT ISSUE:** Endurance

Have an idea for an issue theme or article? Please email [editor@ggm.org](mailto:editor@ggm.org).

**THIS ISSUE MADE POSSIBLE BY:** Buying a house, long solo walks, dreaming of far, far-off future vacations; Cold water swimming, hedge foraging and making Christmas puddings; Transitioning back to work; Wearing the tread right off my sneakers on urban hikes; Going through kindergarten for a second time—all on Zoom; Raiding the isles of Lehr's German Specialty Store in Noe Valley for all the holiday favorites

**STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:** Nurture ourselves, our children, our partners, and our community; create an environment of support, information sharing, and connection; learn, teach, create, have fun, and provide balance in our lives and in the lives of our growing families.

## Cover Outtakes



**Only one shot can make it to the cover. Here are some of our other favorites.**

Cover photo by Mini Anna Photography  
Cover model: Bradley (6)



# Sweet Shops Around SF

By Colleen Morgan Illustrations by Alissa Harrison

Attention, shoppers: Put down the check-out aisle candy bar! Life is too short to eat mediocre sweet treats. Indulge at one of these small, local bakeries instead.

## Breadbelly

This contemporary Asian bakery and café specializes in “approachable, yet refined” Asian treats. The kaya toast, kaya bun, and brown butter mochi are magnificent, but don’t miss out on the Gyeran Bbang: a sweet and savory Korean cornbread with a whole egg inside.

[breadbellysf.com](http://breadbellysf.com)



## Flour Chylde

While this 100 percent gluten-free bakery is located in downtown Novato, you can purchase their incredible selection of baked goods at local farmers markets.\*

[flourchyldebakes.com](http://flourchyldebakes.com)



## Noe Valley Bakery

Fresh baked bread, pastries, and individual desserts are offered in abundance, with an exciting rotation of holiday and seasonal desserts.

[noevalleybakery.com](http://noevalleybakery.com)

## Not Too Sweet

Sign up for a weekly “CSA” box, which includes an assortment of creative pastries, cakes, or cookies for delivery or pickup in San Francisco. To order, DM the professional pastry chef via Instagram

[@nottoosweet.sf](https://www.instagram.com/nottoosweet.sf)

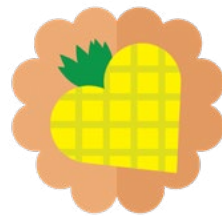
\*Farmers markets also sell fruits and vegetables.

Colleen is a mother of two and a pie subscription enthusiast. Her pandemic sweatpants were worn frequently while researching for this article.

## Pineapple King Bakery

This Chinese bakery serves a vast assortment of fresh-baked sweet and savory options, seven days a week. Cash only!

[pineapplekingbakery.com](http://pineapplekingbakery.com)



## Saltwater Bakeshop

On Sundays, head to the San Rafael or Fort Mason Center Farmers Markets to try the fresh-baked breads and pastries at this tiny bakery stand.\* The cinnamon twist is perfectly sweetened and light, and flaky enough to warrant a weekly visit.

[saltwaterbakeshop.com](http://saltwaterbakeshop.com)

## Three Babes Bakeshop

Whether you order a whole pie from their commercial kitchen or simply a slice from their stand at the Ferry Building Farmers Market every Saturday, you will love “The Babes” offerings.

[threebabesbakeshop.com](http://threebabesbakeshop.com)

## Twisted Donuts

This mom and pop gem has been serving traditional and speciality donuts in the Sunset since 2014. Stop by on the weekends when “things get a little crazy” to try the S’Mores Galore, Nutty Monkey, or Cookie Monster donut.

[twisteddonutsf.com](http://twisteddonutsf.com)



# Li'l Kid, Big City: SF Slow Streets

By Christine Chen

The SF Slow Streets program began in April to limit traffic on certain residential streets for safe walking and biking. The Great Highway is closed to cars along the beach. Golden Gate Park is virtually car-free from Stryan Street to Ocean Beach.

A list of neighborhood closures is below:

- 20th Avenue from Lincoln Boulevard to Ortega Street
- 20th Street from Lexington Street to Potrero Avenue
- 23rd Avenue from Lake to Cabrillo Streets
- 41st Avenue from Lincoln Way to Vicente Street
- Arkansas from 23rd to 17th Streets
- Cabrillo Street from 45th to 25th Avenues
- Chenery Street from Burnside Avenue to Lippard Avenue
- Clay Street from Arguello Boulevard to Steiner Street
- Duncan from Guerrero to Sanchez Streets
- Excelsior Avenue from London to Munich Streets
- Golden Gate Avenue from Masonic Avenue to Broderick Street
- Kirkham Street from 7th Ave to Great Highway
- Lake Street from 28th to Second Avenues
- Lombard between Mason and Powell Streets
- Mariposa Street from Kansas to Mississippi Streets
- Minnesota from Mariposa to 22nd Streets
- Noe Street from 18th to Duboce Streets
- Ortega Street from 47th to 15th Avenues
- Pacific Avenue from Steiner to Gough Streets
- Page Street from Stryan to Gough Streets
- Sanchez Street from 23rd to 30th Streets
- Shotwell Street from Cesar Chavez to 14th Street
- Somerset Street from Silver Avenue to Woolsey Street
- Tompkins Avenue from Andover to Putnam Streets

Learn more at [sfmta.com/projects/slow-streets-program](http://sfmta.com/projects/slow-streets-program).

Christine is mother to a 6 and 4-year-old who both enjoy biking and scooting in the street.

# Bay Area Tea Rooms

By Jessica Perry

During this pandemic, many people have found that it’s the little things in life that get them through the day—reading a book in peace, taking a quiet walk through the park, or savoring a delicious cup of tea. Lucky for people living here in San Francisco, there are many places\* where you can enjoy good tea when you want to explore life beyond your living room.\*

*Lovejoy's* is a cozy tea room in Noe Valley that feels like a British bed and breakfast. Festooned with ceramic teapots, many crocheted doilies, and all things UK, there is no shortage of eye candy to take in while sipping your tea. Outdoor dining allows for good social distancing and you can order as simple as an à la carte dish or go as fancy as high tea service. Adult and kid-oriented teas are both on the menu.



If you’re looking for something with a more Asian flair, wander down to the San Francisco Ferry Building and get some takeout from the *Imperial Tea Court*, where you can select from a variety of Dim Sum in addition to tea snacks and entrees to nosh on while you sip your tea.

*Sip Tea Room* in the Inner Sunset offers an afternoon tea service on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday where you can sit outside under a canopy. Adult tea services come with optional mimosas, and they also offer a children’s afternoon tea.

Just around the corner from Sip Tea Room, nestled in Golden Gate Park, is the *Japanese Tea Garden*. Meander through the grounds and take a break in their tea room afterward where you can enjoy a selection of green tea, hot chocolate, udon soup, and much more.

*Crown and Crumpet Tea Salon* features Japantown and Marin County locations and is open Tuesday through Saturday. Reservations are strongly recommended. They offer a full afternoon adult tea service in addition to “Nursery Services” (kid-friendly food and beverages).

If you’re craving a quick jaunt out of the city, head down Highway 1 to Pacifica to *Lovey's Tea Shoppe*, which is open for pick-up and delivery. They offer assorted tea trays and tiers as well as lemon curd, Devon cream, etc.

\*During the production of this issue, indoor and outdoor dining were shut back down in San Francisco due to COVID-19 restrictions. Times above correspond to when outdoor dining is open. Once things open back up, please also check out *Samovar*, *Laurel Court* at the Fairmont Hotel, and the *Ritz Carlton* in Union Square.

Jessica is a writer, editor, and lifelong tea enthusiast. She savors exploring the city and enjoying the finer things in life with her husband and her two little crumpets, Talia and Ella.



## Family Dentistry

With Dr. Lynn Mojica



Dr. Lynn Mojica, DMD, MAGD has a solo practice in the Outer Sunset. She is a recipient of the Mastership Award with the Academy of General Dentistry and a Fellow with the International College of Implantologists. Contact her at [mojicadmd.com](http://mojicadmd.com).

### What are some of the biggest mistakes you see parents make when it comes to their children and dental care?

The biggest mistake parents make is letting their kids brush their teeth on their own. Close supervision at a younger age is key to developing lasting habits. Stop trusting them completely with their teeth and do not let them have access to snacks after brushing at night. Another mistake is letting them sleep with the bottle in their mouth—especially if it contains juice or milk. I always have to stress the importance of taking care of baby teeth. I so often hear, “Oh, it’s just a baby tooth anyway” when it is so important to treat cavities, even at this stage. Then there’s the never ending debate regarding the safety and efficacy of fluoride. Many myths have been scientifically disproven. The following link is helpful to clarify the myths surrounding fluoride:

[iikemyteeth.org/fluoridation/dangers-of-fluoride](http://iikemyteeth.org/fluoridation/dangers-of-fluoride).

### What advice do you have for parents to impart proper dental hygiene in their kids?

Parents themselves should practice great dental hygiene habits. When kids see their parents brushing their teeth after a meal, they will naturally follow and develop good habits. It is a fact that bacteria from parents’ teeth and gums can easily be transmitted to their children. Secondly, until the age of 7, when kids achieve hand dexterity, they should closely monitor how their kids are brushing. Provide a timer so they actually brush for two minutes. Monitor how much toothpaste is used especially for children under 3-years-old—just a smear is fine at this age—so as to avoid ingestion.

### How can parents best moderate their children’s sugar intake? How much is too much?

If they give juice, water it down. Milk has a lot of sugar content and when left on the teeth for a period of time, without rinsing or brushing, this can lead to decay. Chewy fruit snacks, lollipops, and caramels should be completely avoided as they literally soak the teeth in sugar. Chips may be salty, but they are carbohydrates which convert into sugar, and should be

eaten in moderation. Avoid carbonated and sports drinks, which can easily dissolve enamel and make teeth prone to cavities. Water is still the best beverage.

### What are some of your best tips to ensure a child’s first trip to the dentist is a success?

Positive reinforcement is key. Practice beforehand opening their mouths wide. Give your child a sneak preview. Take your child with you for your next checkup to see you having your teeth examined and cleaned. Lots of books and online resources are geared toward teaching children about oral health and dentist visits. Delta Dental’s children’s website, [mysmilekids.com](http://mysmilekids.com), has stories and fun activities. Plan for plenty of time so that the visit isn’t rushed and make sure your child is well-rested so that he or she feels relaxed and comfortable. Never say the words “hurt” or “pain” or make the trip to the dentist seem like a punishment. Do not tell your kids about your bad experiences as a child, if you had any. Our office tries to make their visit as entertaining and as pleasant as possible. We introduce children to the instruments and tools

**“The biggest thing parents can do to help their children with dental care is be hands-on in developing their dental hygiene habits and always remember, do not wait until it hurts.”**

used, and even have them touch some of them. It’s a sensory experience so they become comfortable in the dental chair and office.

### Is there anything else you want families to know about pediatric dental care?

Brushing 2 to 3 times a day and flossing at nighttime before brushing is key. Parents need to be diligent in making their six-month check-ups and proactive when something feels “not right” with anything in the oral cavity. Do not wait until there is pain involved, because often it is either too late or the treatment can be invasive, not to mention costly. Parents can be more fearful of the dentist than their children and anxious about what reactions their children might have. This anxiety translates into their children developing unwarranted fears. My advice is to get young children into the dentist as soon as their baby teeth appear. The biggest thing parents can do to help their children with dental care is be hands-on in developing their dental hygiene habits and always remember, do not wait until it hurts.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

### Donate to Homeless Prenatal Program and Make a Tangible Impact on Families in Need



Homeless Prenatal Program (HPP) is a San Francisco nonprofit dedicated to ending childhood poverty and family homelessness.

HPP runs a weekly food and essentials pantry where families can pick up food and other supplies like masks and diapers. Since COVID-19 hit, they are serving over 500 families each week (previously they provided food weekly to 80 families). Watch their video [here](#).

**Can You Imagine?** “Families who were unsheltered or unstably housed were faced with an agonizing choice: gather with others in shelters and risk virus exposure or stay alone on the street.”

**HPP staff and volunteers are there for these families helping them feel supported so they can care for their families safely and healthily.**

“The need was huge in those first weeks and months—but now, the need is enormous. In addition to needing groceries and other items, families are seeking twice as much support from case managers, as counseling and therapy sessions, now virtual, have doubled since March.”

If you can, **please join us in supporting this amazing organization.** Donate funds [here](#). Be sure to choose “GGMG Gives” in the gift designation dropdown at the top of the Donation Information. It will help us track donations.

## CONTEST

### Porta Via! (“Open Door”!)

The San Francisco Italian Athletic Club, founded in 1917, supports Italian cultural events for its membership and the community at large and offers Italian language classes and Italian food to the general public. Located at 1630 Stockton S., facing Washington Square Park, the Club is part of the heartbeat of the North Beach neighborhood.

Compliant with all prevailing COVID orders, the restaurant offers Porta Via to-go dinner and drinks for pickup on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Please see their Instagram account [@sfiac\\_events](#) for details.

The Club follows CDC and SF protocols to keep the facility sanitized and to keep guests and members as safe as possible. They have invested in a hospital-grade disinfectant light that they run to disinfect all surfaces—from tables and chairs to door knobs and countertops—ensuring a consistent, thorough, and sanitized clean before each event. Also, all chefs, servers, and bartenders are required to take their temperature upon arrival and to wear masks and gloves.

Our prize is a gift certificate valued at \$100 towards SFIAC Porta Via dinner and drinks, either to-go or, when allowed by prevailing regulations, for indoor or outdoor dining.



Please enter by emailing [contest@ggmg.org](mailto:contest@ggmg.org) with the subject line “Italy” no later than January 15, 2021.

The winners of last month’s contest were:

Kit to spark young imaginations, from ages 4–8, valued at \$150, is Courtney DiCarlo. Bunny Box winner, perfect for ages 3–6, valued at \$55, is Sasha Fahimi.

Thanks to all our generous prize donors. Please patronize their services!



# Food & Family

by Bharat Jindal

After starting my day off at 6 a.m. with Greek yogurt, along with espresso from freshly ground beans, I could not find a way to focus during my early morning meditation. My mind kept on going back to the to-do list: Brayden, my 8-year-old son's school checklist app for COVID-19, my work meetings starting at 7, my wife's workday ahead, and, most importantly, what will Brayden have for breakfast. The gentle healing voice in the meditation app reminded me that "it's OK to have your mind go anywhere as long as you recognize it and gently bring it back to your breathing." At the same time, I heard footsteps approaching and realized Brayden had woken up earlier than usual. My mind raced: "Do I have to wrap this up quickly?" To my delight, Brayden approached me quietly, sat down, rubbed his eyes, and waited for me to finish the meditation.



In that moment, I intuitively recognized how much he had grown within a year, despite all the 2020 challenges. I admire the resilience this generation has already built, tackling these unprecedented times. As that thought passed through me, I immediately felt connected with my breath at a deeper level. Later that morning, in addition to regular breakfast, Brayden got to enjoy banana nut bread from the coffee shop next door.

**"In most cultures, cooking for others is an act of love, an act of giving, of caring and nourishing, of building meaningful connections."**

I grew up in India with a distinct love for food, and my wife, who is half-Indian, half-Irish, grew up in Canada enjoying home-cooked Indian meals. There is something about cooking that brings joy. In most cultures, cooking for others is an act of love, an act of giving, of caring and nourishing; of building meaningful connections. My mother was a perfect embodiment of these acts with a deep-seated desire to give, and cooking for others was one of the ways in which that desire manifested itself. She particularly enjoyed watching her kids eat Indian sweets during festivals like Diwali. Her memory is alive in many ways, and one of those special ways is

through the food she cooked, the joy she took in watching us eat, the aromas of her cooking around the house.

While we lack an appreciation for many things as children, those cooking experiences with my mother did become a part of me. And that's what I now go back to in defining who we are as a family and who Brayden will be as he grows up. So much of that is reflected in our family experiences. Brayden loves the way we cook and how we engage him in the process—even the simplest foods where he could just be hanging around in the kitchen while we cook means a lot to all of us. And it brings comfort to realize that these experiences will always be a part of him.

Like most San Francisco families, both my wife and I work full-time, but we fully realize the important role cooking and food play into our family, along with staying healthy and active. Zarah engages Brayden in making breakfast on weekends and I do the same for dinners. And we have responsibilities for cleaning, storing leftovers, dishes. We've found our groove without explicit agreements; it works and evolves as we stay flexible and support each other.

Food is an essential part of our shifting identity and beliefs as first-generation immigrants. My wife and I came to this country

before the dot-com boom, watching the likes of Bill Clinton paint an amazing picture of the American story of freedom, entrepreneurship, equality, and that "sky's the limit" for immigrants of all stripes. That is a story that we find ourselves reflecting on quite a bit especially after the last four years, as we get ready for upcoming holidays.

*Bharat is in the software industry & lives in San Francisco with his wife Zarah and son Brayden. He loves travel, biking, cooking, reading and reflection. He is currently reading How to be an Antiracist by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi*

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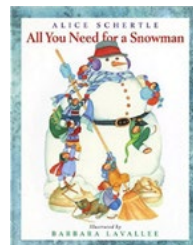




# Holidays & Winter

By Laure Latham

'Tis the season for eggnogs, cookies, candy canes, and snowmen! Cozy up in comfy armchairs and grab some hot chocolates before grabbing one of these books for quality family time.



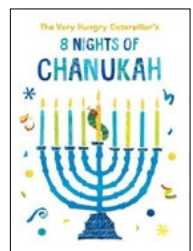
## All You Need for a Snowman

Written by Alice Schertle, illustrated by Barbara Lavallee

One small snowflake fluttering down, that's all you need for a snowman. Or is it? Illustrated by the iconic Barbara Lavallee, one of the most prominent watercolor artists in Alaska, this

beautiful book invites bedtime reading when the world outside is cold and dark. It's comforting, warm, and celebrates the joys of winter for young ones and their families. You might even try to make a snowman this winter and see what you really need for a snowman.

**Ages: 0 to 3 years**



## The Very Hungry Caterpillar's 8 Nights of Chanukah

Written and illustrated by Eric Carle

Celebrate Chanukah with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*! This festive counting story makes for a fine holiday gift for fans of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, all while

introducing young readers to the wonderful traditions of Chanukah. Whether it's lighting the menorah, spinning the dreidel, or singing songs, babies and toddlers will enjoy this brightly illustrated book. **Ages: 2 to 5 years**



## Fritz the Farting Reindeer: A Story About a Reindeer Who Farts

Written and illustrated by Humor Heals Us

When Cupid has a broken leg and Comet is away, Santa needs to select the other reindeer who will be part of

his crew for the Big Day. Fritz the reindeer has a serious gas issue and he worries that his regular farting will prevent him from ever making the Christmas team. With a little irreverent humor and lighthearted reindeer games, this book will come as a refreshing story for the holidays. It might even make those of us who channel our inner Fritz feel less awkward after involuntary farts. Who knows? **Ages: 3 to 6 years**



## The Gingerbread Pup (Step into Reading)

Written by Maribeth Boelts, illustrated by Hollie Hibbert

Who knows the story of the gingerbread pup who was baked in a kitchen and sprang to life in a small town? As you may guess, like regular pups, a gingerbread pup loves to play and more generally, loves to have fun.

The Step into Reading series helps build independence and confidence for early readers, pictures serving as cues for kids to follow the story. **Ages: 3 to 8 years**



## Snow Globe Wishes

Written by Erin Dealey, illustrated by Claire Shorrock

As a fierce snowstorm blows into town, it knocks out power and sends people rushing home. In her bedroom, a little girl makes wishes on

a snow globe. Her family enjoys an evening of down time with a candlelit dinner of Chinese takeout in front of the Christmas tree, and the next morning, the little girl wakes up to a world of snow and sun. This heartwarming book shows how a community enjoys the simple joys of winter together in their neighborhood, sending a wonderful message of peace and hope. **Ages: 5 to 8 years**



## The Way Past Winter

Written by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

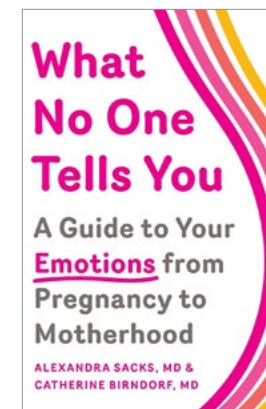
In a world where winter hasn't ended for the past five years, young Mila and her siblings survive in a cabin in the woods. One day, a man and a group of boys arrive, requesting permission to camp next to their cabin. Mila's young brother,

Oskar, accepts. They spend the night, but the next morning, Oskar is gone. Weaving wintry adventures and fairytales, shapeshifters and stolen children, this book is a perfect excuse to curl up on a sofa on a cold winter day to read while sipping a cup of hot chocolate. **Ages: 11+ years**

Laure is the author of the mommy blog Frog Mom ([frogmom.com](http://frogmom.com)), as well as the book Best Hikes with Kids: San Francisco Bay Area. She writes for several parenting websites and lives in London, where she peppers adventures with her husband and two daughters with compulsory cream tea stops. You can find her on social media @frogmomblog.

# Uniting Your Mental State

By Gail Cornwall



## What No One Tells You: A Guide to Your Emotions from Pregnancy to Motherhood

Alexandra Sacks and Catherine Birndorf are reproductive psychiatrists: medical doctors who specialize in using therapy to help women navigate pregnancy and its aftermath. "Even if motherhood has been a lifelong desire," they report, "once it arrives, many women find themselves feeling lost somewhere between who they were before and who they think they should be now." In *What No One Tells You*, Sacks and Birndorf try to help women reconcile those two people by pushing back against what they call the "bliss myth," the idea that motherhood should be pure joy:

"[T]his wasn't the last time in her pregnancy or motherhood that she would be troubled by mixed feelings—about her son, about herself, about her choice to become a mother. And for Julie, as for many mothers, these ambivalent feelings sent up red flags. Anything less than joy and contentment, Julie thought, must mean there was something wrong. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

The expectation that babies bring ultimate happiness is not only unrealistic, it's dangerous. Our culture reinforces a story of motherhood that has left out doubt, uncertainty, and the bittersweet, and this myth has become hazardous to women's mental health. It's time to rebirth pregnancy and bring parenting down to earth... Everyone understands that adolescence is an awkward phase. But during matrescence, people expect you to be happy while you're losing control over the way you look, feel, and relate to everyone around you.

The bulk of the book isn't this philosophic, however. Rather, it explains how the concept of the "good enough mother" can prevail in various scenarios. Traveling for work. Stopping breastfeeding. Interacting with childcare providers. Sleep deprivation. In-laws. Sacks and Birndorf have helpful, practical tips for each of these contexts and more. "If you're feeling extra-sensitive," when it comes to financial woes, for example, "try to find a way to explain your fears to your partner so she can understand that it's anxiety, not anger or manipulation, behind your strong feelings about spending."

Throughout, there was plenty that didn't apply to my life now, or to past-me either. And yet, I felt that they just got the struggles I experienced upon becoming a mother. "With so much out of your control, it can be tempting to become extremely strict about what you can control, but this can lead to an unhealthy all-or-nothing mentality—as if a normal level of being good isn't good enough," they write. Guilty as charged. I also count myself among the mothers who "find themselves feeling like their mind is never in one place." Sacks and Birndorf say they hear this so often in their clinical practices they came up with a term for it, "the divided mind."

We think of the divided mind as a cognitive and emotional state that is a consequence of the changes in how you spend your time and attention when growing and then caring for a totally dependent human being. Your mind is literally divided, as you're dealing with your own life while tending to another's.

I also felt seen by their recognition and normalization of competing interests: "[Y]our friends and family, and even your spouse or partner, will be competing with your baby for your attention. Motherhood will also compete for the time, energy, and resources you're used to investing into your own life: eating, exercise, recreation, organization, sexuality, and work." Some tensions, some unpleasant feelings, they assure, aren't fixable. The goal is learning to process and tolerate—not eliminate—the push and pull, the contradictions, the impossibilities, and the resentments.

"Motherhood, like all complex experiences in life, is a mix of both positive and negative," they conclude: "Loving your child doesn't change the fact that sometimes the work of caretaking is not fun. Yet for many moms, admitting that there are moments, days, or even weeks when you want a break from your [child] is scary because it can make you ask yourself: *Am I trapped with this feeling forever? ...Does this mean I don't love [them]?*"

Spoiler alert: The answers are no and no. I figured that out eventually, but it sure would have been nice to read *What No One Tells You* twelve years ago.

**"Your mind is literally divided, as you're dealing with your own life while tending to another's."**

Gail works as a mom and writer in San Francisco. Read about parenting and education from the perspective of a former teacher and lawyer at [gailcornwall.com/articles](http://gailcornwall.com/articles) or by finding her on Facebook and Twitter



# Hello, Sugar

By Neha Masson

**T**here it was. That bottle of cloying, fake orange-flavored sludge. This seemed less like prenatal screening and more like a torture technique: Drink this, then give a blood sample with a giant needle every hour in a basement-level laboratory with fluorescent lighting and dull '80s furniture.

Okay, okay enough procrastination, here it goes. I choked down the drink, starting the clock on my one hour glucose test. I had put it off and was already outside the 24- to 28-week window during which most women are screened. But here I was, 29 weeks pregnant, in said non-descript lab on the eastside of Manhattan, willing the hour to go faster before so I could resume a day of meetings.

A few days later, I got a call from my doctor. "I'm afraid your numbers came back high," she said. "Your fasting blood sugar was on the edge, but the one hour value came back very high. You'll have to come back for a three hour test."

Spoiler alert: I failed that test too. I officially had gestational diabetes. Immediately, I started blaming myself—is this because of the peanut M&Ms I grab from the snack room every afternoon? Why have I not been exercising more? On and on it went—mom guilt even before the baby was here.

What happened next is familiar to many women. There's a consultation with a lovely nutritionist. Carbohydrates, sugars, even some fruit become the enemy. You're given instructions to prick yourself multiple times a day to check and log sugar levels. As someone who hates needles, the prospect of this made me cry. Take walks after every meal, they said. I stared at my work calendar...when was I going to take walks? I had so much to wrap up before maternity leave. If I couldn't control my blood sugar with these measures, I'd need insulin shots.

My doctor explained that the risks included the baby growing to be very large or being born with low blood sugar. Not to mention according to the CDC, 50 percent of women with gestational diabetes go on to develop Type 2 Diabetes later in life. I felt low. After wallowing for a bit, it was the consequences for my baby that spurred me into action, to get organized and figure this out. And so I started where I often do, with a spreadsheet.

Spreadsheet Tab #1: Nutritional Guidelines. I listed all the



things I should and shouldn't eat. Yes to lean proteins and vegetables. Yes to low glycemic fruit. Berries are low glycemic? That seemed like a win. Goodbye to large portions of pasta and rice, salty french fries, indulgent meals. I don't usually even eat much of these things, but the fact that I now couldn't made me inexplicably desperate for it all. I did give myself a daily five peanut M&M allowance, however.

Spreadsheet Tab #2: Daily Blood Sugar Log. In this space, I could record blood sugar levels after each dreaded finger prick (which honestly wasn't *that* bad) and log the corresponding meal I had. I got fancy, setting it up so that high blood sugar levels and foods on the "moderation" list from Tab #1 would automatically highlight in red. An Excel-generated moment of truth to keep me on my toes.

Spreadsheet Tab #3: All the things I wanted to consume immediately after the baby was born. Adding to this list made me happy: pepperoni pizza, a giant goblet of wine, chocolate chip cookies, and the everything bagel with extra cream cheese from Murray's ranked high on the list. Slowly but surely, I saw the roller coaster of blood sugar levels even out. I was doing it. I was understanding my triggers and

controlling my numbers. I shared my diagnosis with work teammates who were incredibly supportive and welcomed walking around Bryant Park for meetings whenever possible. I felt empowered, taking control of my health, taking crucial steps for the health of my son, and taking back the time that kept getting lost to focus on *me*. Was I nailing this first test of parenthood? Hell yes.

I've learned that gestational diabetes is not a consequence of something you've done. Hormonal changes and genetic factors play huge roles, and blaming yourself just makes it harder. Instead, delve into the science and understand the actionable things you can do, and then get to it and remember it's (mostly) temporary. In the years since, I've had friends diagnosed with gestational diabetes and my advice to them always starts with four simple words: Be kind to yourself.

*Neha is a mom of two energetic kids who make sure she's staying active. You can find her sneaking Nutter Butters out of their snack drawer.*



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# The Education Challenge

Education during a pandemic highlights the need for more support, supplementation, and intervention.

By Jennifer Kuhr Butterfoss

For new parents, the decisions concerning infant care can be daunting. Co-sleeping? Sleep training? Breastfeeding? Formula? Day care? This constant deliberation continues through preschool, elementary school, the teenage years, and beyond. Decisions surrounding education are particularly more fraught and involved in a city like San Francisco. From the myriad options available, to the complex and unique public

school lottery system, city families are saddled with a game of chance that would rattle the most risk-tolerant gamblers. With school closures continuing for months on end, families are more pressed than ever to piece together childcare and academic support to achieve a level of comfort with the educational experience their child receives. However, finding that “sweet spot” in their child’s education has been a persistent challenge for most families raising children in a big city even before COVID-19 complicated these efforts.

## Seeking intervention

No one knows these challenges more than Sarah Shenkan-Rich, mother of two and long-time former educator and school leader. Over the course of her career, she’s come

to specialize in bringing strong literacy programs and interventions in schools. When Shenkan-Rich’s own child started struggling with reading, she immediately began implementing the same interventions and supports she used to put into place at school sites with her daughter, Izzie. She brought home books at Izzie’s level, created goals, and tracked progress.

**“More families than ever are struggling to address things like boredom, depression, loneliness, learning gaps, and even trauma when it comes to their child’s educational experience.”**

Now Shenkan-Rich is making this kind of literacy support and enrichment available to families at home with her company, Just Right Reader. She has seen an explosion in demand in recent months, as more families are seeking to supplement their child’s current educational experience with a service specific to their needs. Families can get one-on-one assessments and receive a monthly subscription box filled with books at their child’s reading level, word cards, and other tips, strategies, and resources for literacy development. They can sign up to receive small group reading and writing classes as well.

“I think schools have a hard challenge. When there are 20 to 25 kids in a class, it’s really hard to personalize. It’s not from lack of trying and everything they’re doing, it’s just really hard. That’s what we’re offering. We get kids that are really high and kids who are struggling. Our goal is to move everyone because it’s personalized to his or her needs.”

## Adding enrichment

Shenkan-Rich’s concern stemmed from watching her kid struggle and fall farther and farther behind. However, many parents have also experienced the opposite problem, in which their child may be more advanced and ready to move up in a subject area, and yet the sometimes one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t meet their child’s need and desire to advance. This was the impetus for Inessa Rifkin to co-found the Russian School of Math (RSM). Rifkin started teaching her own son and his friends around her dining room table after

noticing what she perceived as laziness from her child specifically around math. She soon realized that he would rise to the challenge with more complex problems she brought before him from her own math experience in the Soviet Union.

“We do notice that traditional school students aren’t always challenged in math and there is not always a way to keep them

engaged in the subject,” states Kate Ortiz, principal of the Russian School of Math (RSM) in the Burlingame, California branch. “While we are by no means a replacement for a child’s day school, we are an enrichment program that helps build a child’s confidence and interest in the subject. We introduce complex topics in ways students can easily understand and we work with abstract problems in order to help build critical thinking skills, logical reasoning skills, and mental flexibility that will help our students not just in math but in their everyday lives,” explains Ortiz.

Retired elementary teacher Nancy Hawkins, who has a private practice conducting individual and small group literacy circles for advanced readers,

agrees. “I have kids who come to me with enormous adult vocabularies and the parents really believe in traditional schools, but they are looking to keep them stimulated so they are getting instruction on their level and diving deeper.”

Parents are often driven by a feeling that “something isn’t quite right” to seek out academic intervention and enrichment programs like Just Right Reader, RSM, and private practitioners like Hawkins. Although Shenkan-Rich was able to draw on her years of literacy instructional experience and expertise to pinpoint her own child’s issues almost immediately, she believes any parent can empower themselves to drill down the way she did simply by asking themselves some key questions and then taking advantage of the free consultations and assessments programs like hers and RSM often offer.

“Parents need to ask themselves, ‘Is your child having a hard time? Do they not want to go online or go to school? Do you see gaps?’ At the end of the day, parents are the first educators. Sometimes it’s okay to follow your gut,” she advises.

## Finding socio-emotional wellbeing

For parents Greg Peters, co-host of Dadding Black Kids, and his partner Gary Cruz, following their gut has been key in the ongoing search for a nurturing school environment that could effectively meet the





needs of their adopted son, “D.” Their journey to find the best possible environment for their child, who is African American, has had a particular level of urgency all too familiar to families who share similar demographics, due to the long-lasting and damaging effects implicit bias and institutional racism in schools can have on young children of color. In addition to addressing potential academic gaps like Shenkan-Rich or seeking advanced instruction like the families Hawkins serves, many families struggle to find the best school placement for their child that can meet their socio-emotional needs.

According to Peters, families who share a similar demographic to his own have to ask themselves if their child’s school is the right fit year after year.

“Knowing what to do and knowing how to do it are two different things,” insists Peters with respect to educating Black boys. “Saying we accept students who come from a certain demographic is one thing, but then saying we know how to hold them and ensure an excellent and rigorous education is another. Pretty quickly [my husband and I] learned there was a difference.”

According to Peters, there are three types of schools when it comes to addressing the unique needs of children of color and specifically boys like his son D: “Schools that love your kid but don’t know how to educate him properly, schools that can educate but may not love your kid, and schools who do both.”

Peters and Cruz had to go through three different schools before finding their sweet spot for D, and they are keenly aware that this comfortable place is one they will be forever seeking and recalibrating around on an annual basis. As an education consultant and founder of the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (SFCESS), an organization that specializes in training school leaders and teacher leaders in addressing equity issues in schools, Peters is more uniquely positioned to discern this as a parent than most. However, a lot of what Peters described in his own sort of “homecoming” for D reflects the same visceral and emotional gut feelings and questioning shared by parents who haven’t made careers specializing in education and who



don’t even share the same demographics or needs for their children.

After three different placements, D wound up in a classroom taught by a seasoned African American teacher. “We knew it was the right place from day one,” recounts Peters. At their first meeting, they were quick to bring up the myriad of supports they already had in place for their son.

The teacher looked at them both and said, “You and your supports can stay out of our class. You take all those and use them at home. You don’t need to worry about D when he’s in my class.”

“She said that with such conviction,” recalls Peters. “We almost cried. We felt such a relief. All she did was see our child as her child. It ended up being such a flourishing and wonderful year.”

Peters remembers D’s first week of school with his new teacher fondly. “He came home and said how much he loved his class and we asked why. He said to me, ‘She’s got my back.’ That wasn’t just a quote from him. She literally had his back. There were zero conflicts when he was in her class. Zero. It was amazing. The afterschool program was crappy, lunch wasn’t well supervised, but she was his advocate without reservation.”

### What to look for

As the global pandemic rages on and children everywhere are forced to learn remotely, families are more uniquely positioned to tune into the kind of academic and socio-emotional experience their children are getting simply by listening in on a synchronous lesson over Zoom, talking about school, and paying close attention to certain cues. More families than ever are struggling to address

things like boredom, depression, loneliness, learning gaps, and even trauma when it comes to their child’s educational experience. So how can parents discern whether they’ve hit their sweet spot in educating their own child? By and large, experts agree the key to figuring this out is your child’s overall happiness factor. But this can take on different forms, and drilling down to determine whether or not your child has found his or her groove with learning, especially distance learning, takes a bit more probing.

“I think a parent can tell they’ve hit their sweet spot when their child is looking forward to reading, asking for a book to read, or bringing up things they’ve learned at school with their parents,” says Hawkins.

What if a parent has that sinking sensation that something isn’t quite right? “Talk to the school first,” advises Ortiz. “Talk to your child’s teacher and principal in order to see if there is anything that you can do to help your child. However, research is also important. Not every school is the best fit for each child. Children learn at different paces and in different ways.

Perspective is also key. “No school can do everything,” says Shenkan-Rich. “You’re going to have to supplement. Supplements are okay. We shouldn’t beat ourselves up or get mad at schools if it’s not all there. Happiness factor is about embracing the positive of what you’re getting and figuring out where and how you’re going to get the rest.”

*Jennifer is a mother of two and a school leadership coach with New Leaders. She has found her own sweet spot with her children’s education and passionately believes this is a fundamental right for all kids. Find out more at [jenniferkuhrbutterfoss.com](http://jenniferkuhrbutterfoss.com).*

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# Finding Our Sweet Spot for Preschool

One family's journey to finding the right fit for their toddler.

By Lindsay Schauer

At 18 months, our son, Jude, was living the dream life—daily visits to his favorite playgrounds, walks in Golden Gate Park, and quiet mornings spent digging at the beach with Dad. It was the life we'd imagined for him a year earlier when we left our childcare center and my husband decided to become a full-time stay-at-home dad.

As new parents, we had tried both a neighborhood home daycare and then a large center downtown. Neither was the right fit for us or for Jude, and both styles of care felt like a black box; we didn't really know how Jude spent his days and felt like we were missing out on too many milestones and memories. My days at the office hurt back then, knowing my little boy was a few blocks away in a small room with seven other infants and caregivers I didn't know that well.

My husband and I sat down when our son was seven months old and dared to design a different reality for ourselves. "What if I look after Jude!?" he proposed. We'd save money, our schedule would get a whole lot simpler, and our son would get the life we

wanted for him—lots of sunshine, quiet naps at home, and tons of time with Dad.

But as toddlerhood arrived a year later, we had to rethink things. Jude was clearly an extrovert and increasingly interested in other kids, and his energy levels were through the roof. When the word "friends" entered his vocabulary, we realized he didn't have very many. Being with an adult all day simply wasn't enough—our kid needed a consistent circle of peers and socialization we simply couldn't provide. "I think it's time to find Jude a school," I told my husband one day.

Our previous experiences with daycare made us dread the search ahead. We feared the type of school we imagined for Jude—one where we'd get to be involved in his days while also giving him the freedom to form his own world—would be impossible to find, too expensive, or guarded by an interminable waitlist. We looked and looked. One school we liked did have a years-long waitlist, another only took kids ages 3 and up. It was hard to find many places for a 2-year-old outside the realm of full-time



daycares. "I just want a place where we can go with Jude a few days a week to be around other kids his age and play," my husband said one evening. "There must be other parents who want this too. Where are they?"

There were other families who wanted that too, it turned out. When we stumbled upon the concept of co-operative nursery schools, we realized we had found them. I attended an orientation for a co-op in the Mission called Puddle Jumpers Workshop and knew right away it was the style of school for us. With rolling enrollment year-round, a community of involved parents who ran the school, and a small class of kids 18-months to 3-years-old with options for part-time, it ticked all the boxes. We'd found our sweet spot for Jude.

## A unique kind of preschool

Cooperative schools differ in one major way from other care centers in that they are entirely parent-run. The families who make up the school are highly involved in their child's education and take on a variety of roles, including volunteering in the classroom for a portion of the time their child attends. Activities are teacher-led by a trained educator with a few parents in the background to guide the children. Families whose kids attend co-op schools relish the opportunity to stay close to their child's education and social circle. "Joining a

co-op has provided a really unusual window for me into my little girl's growth and development," says Puddle Jumpers parent Johanna Hartwig. "I witness what

**"I hadn't realized that letting our son spend his days away from home could feel so right, but when you find that sweet spot for your child to grow and learn, it just does."**

lights her up and grabs her interest in an environment where she has many new inputs that differ from those at home."

This model of childcare isn't unique to

San Francisco and isn't a new concept either. According to Parent Cooperative Preschools International, the first co-op nursery school was founded in 1916 by a group of moms at the University of Chicago. The original idea was to provide social development opportunities to young children, parenting education for their parents, and part-time childcare assistance. It provided an organized community for families, with the added benefit of a trained educator in the mix to guide learning.

San Francisco is officially home to 15 of these co-op schools, according to the San Francisco Council of Parent Participation Nursery Schools, some of which have been around for generations. Each local co-op boasts a slightly different flavor and community. Centro Las Olas in the Mission is entirely in Spanish, for example, and both Rocky Mountain and Glenridge co-ops focus on activities outdoors.

But a nearly universal feature of co-ops is their play-based approach to education. There's a generally shared belief that children can learn skills like resilience, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and sharing through play. As local TelHi Co-op says on their website,







“We believe that play is the key to the social, physical, emotional and intellectual development of a child. If children have the freedom to choose what they want to play with, they will find the activity that meets their developmental needs at that time.” Puddle Jumpers educator Michele Menard, who has been an educator for over two decades, echoes this sentiment. “A play-based approach allows the child’s self-directed interests to be in collaboration with the teacher or parent so we can help expand on those interests and deepen them,” she explains.

Due to the bootstrap nature of the co-op model, tuition is a fraction of what other schools charge, which is another major draw for families. Parents run the show, so staffing costs are limited in most cases to the formal educators who manage the classroom. Many co-ops meet in unique spaces that keep overhead down further; Puddle Jumpers operates in the rented Polish Club in the Mission, Haight Ashbury Community Nursery School is housed at the Grattan Playground in Cole Valley, and the Glenridge co-op meets in Glen Canyon Park, to name a few.

But co-ops are not for everyone, especially those without time to give to the school. Along with the parent volunteer shifts, co-op families take on roles to help administer and run things. They form the school’s board

and tackle jobs like marketing, health and safety, scheduling, and finances. Parents are expected to give time to monthly meetings and engage in other activities like fundraisers or social events.

For most families who join a co-op, these responsibilities are a welcome joy and a feature that attracts them to this kind of care. “At a non-co-op, dropping your child off with no involvement in the business operation is the norm, and their higher costs mirrors that, but your child’s day is separate to your own,” says Hinnie Murray-Chan, whose son attends Glenridge. “Being a part of our child’s most important developmental years is monumentally rewarding,” she adds.

Parental support and community is another big draw for co-op families. Murray-Chan notes that the benefit of learning from the community is priceless. “I had a whole community helping me with potty training—how fantastic is that!” she recalls.

Indeed, as a stay-at-home parent, my husband wanted a community of like-minded parents as much as we wanted friends for our son. “It’s wonderful to watch the children become friends, as well as the parents,” says Menard, reflecting on her years as a co-op educator. “We all become an extended family in support of each other. It’s a precious thing to teach children, and to model: how to be a part of a community.”

Puddle Jumpers parent Stephanie Auerbach feels the same. “We wanted our son to see a group of people working together to create a caring, stimulating environment. What I didn’t quite anticipate was the love I now feel for all the kids and the community as a whole,” she says. “It feels so right caring for others’ children.”

### Finding our community

After falling in love with Puddle Jumpers, we had hoped to join in March of this year. But as schools and daycare centers across the state shut down in the wake of the global pandemic, that hope diminished. Our social circle shrank as distancing became the norm, and gone were the few playdates and classes that floated us through the week. Making friends, it seemed, was not in the cards anytime soon for our increasingly extroverted son.

But one major benefit to the co-op model, we soon learned, is the decision-making power the parents in the group have. In July, a small group of Puddle Jumpers families decided to test out opening the school again with strict COVID-19 safety measures in place. Puddle Jumpers re-opened two days a week, and my family excitedly leapt in.

The regular conversations our co-op community have about health and safety, and the control we have over the measures



taken to keep the co-op healthy, have made it possible for us to start our son in school at a time when many families I know have had to keep kids home. With only eight children attending any given day, the families at Puddle Jumpers are our pandemic bubble, so to speak, and many other co-ops are acting the same this year. “I feel we created a bit of toddler-normality in these uncertain and crazy times,” says Janina Goletzke, whose daughter attends Puddle Jumpers. “Every day I see them run around for joy, I am so thankful for this.”

Our son spends three days a week at the co-op now. He charges in with arms outstretched to his teacher and classmates in the morning, and he comes home at the end of the afternoon happily exhausted and full of stories. I hadn’t realized that letting our son spend his days away from home could feel so right, but when you find that sweet spot for your child to grow and learn, it just does.

Best of all, after months of social distancing and longing for “friends,” he finally has them. At bedtime, we sing our “thank you” song and list the things we feel



grateful for. Usually, the list includes diggers, hot chocolate, and sometimes Mama or Dada. But tonight Jude’s thank yous are a roster of who’s who at school: Teacher Michele, Tilly, Aviva, Max, and so on. Though he can’t express it quite yet, I know his heart is full. And so is mine.

A list of San Francisco’s cooperative schools can be found at [sfcoopcouncil.org](http://sfcoopcouncil.org).

*Lindsay works full-time in the tech industry and is the mother of two boys, aged 2 years and 6 months. She and her family live car-free in San Francisco, and can often be found riding their bikes to their favorite nearby parks and beaches.*



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# The Art of Holiday Chatter

Three experts weigh in on how to keep tensions at a minimum during holiday celebrations.

By Clare Deignan

**T**here is a holiday party sweet spot. Whether virtual or in-person, that sweet spot isn't always easy to find. It's similar to walking a tightrope in heels with a glass of wine in one hand and a piece of pie in the other. Add to that an election year, a seemingly endless pandemic, people being cooped up for months on end—this holiday season could be one political remark away from a major combustion. *GGMG Magazine* spoke to an etiquette expert, a mediator, and a Nonviolent Communication trainer to learn how to maintain a drama-free celebration and find your holiday sweet spot.

**Remember your manners**  
Etiquette expert Tina Hayes insists courtesy and decorum are not only relevant in today's world—they are vital. A little grace, presence of mind, and a bit of etiquette can invite others to relax, feel comfortable, and enjoy themselves at a social event. "Etiquette is a way of letting others know that you respect them, and also respect yourself. And in this world, we need more respect," notes Hayes, author of *Getting Ahead With Etiquette—Family and Teen Editions*.

With tensions higher than usual this year, dusting off your "please and thank you's"

could curtail an awkward situation or disagreement. Hayes emphasizes that etiquette begins in the home. "Etiquette is how you present yourself or use certain mannerisms, so that it's just an easy flow for when you go outside of the home."

Hayes opened the School of Etiquette and Decorum in the East Bay after 20 years in corporate America. During her career, she recalls she didn't always know the correct etiquette for certain situations, so she attended the American School of Protocol in Georgia. After receiving her credentials, Hayes' goal was to share her knowledge with others, working with

corporate groups, professionals, college students, teens, and kids.

She notes the holidays are supposed to be fun, and we all want to have a good time. Whether it's a small gathering of your COVID-19 pod or bubble or a larger get-together on Zoom, Hayes notes the first application of etiquette should be to keep conversations light and pleasant. On a recent social distancing camping trip with friends, Hayes set clear guidelines about what topics were off the table. "I said, 'We're here for these two days. We're not going to discuss these topics.' Because once you start on a particular conversation topic, it totally changes the tone."

According to Hayes, holiday functions, whether virtual or in-person, are opportunities for guests to get their minds off global issues. Politics, current affairs, or serious family matters can jeopardize the day's merriment. She proposes the host prepare table topics beforehand, such as movies, music, or recent or future vacations.

But not everyone may listen to the host's guidelines. If a conversation topic starts to raise blood pressures, Hayes suggests changing the subject or excusing yourself. She shares the following polite ways to end awkward conversations gently:

- Excuse yourself to help in the kitchen or use the restroom.
- Gracefully change the topic: "Oh, I've been meaning to ask you about (fill in the blank)."
- Offer to get them something to drink or eat and when you return, reboot the conversation.
- Introduce someone new to the conversation: "There's so-and-so! Let's ask them about their recent trip to Yosemite."

Changing the topic or excusing yourself can take practice. Hayes encourages her clients to practice new social skills at events and then review the situation for successes and areas to work on. Etiquette takes practice.

If worse comes to worst—two guests start arguing over the research behind

wearing face masks, the electoral college, or the turkey's wishbone—Hayes advises calmly addressing the situation "just like you would break up two children that are arguing. 'Hey, time-out. Let's table this for now. We're all here to have a good time.'"

## Practice de-escalation

Bay Area mediator and lawyer Lucia Kanter St. Amour notes that the holidays can be a precious time for bonding and enjoying our loved ones, but they're also notorious for family contention. Her suggestion to create sweet memories? Don't take the bait. With more than 25 years of experience, St. Amour emphasizes that in mediation, just like the holidays, people aren't always

**"...[H]oliday functions, whether virtual or in-person, are opportunities for guests to get their minds off global issues. Politics, current affairs, or serious family matters can jeopardize the day's merriment."**

at their best. So, she suggests "auditing" past family events for what she calls "land mines," asking: What sets me off? What sets off others? Then, with this awareness, prepare to avoid these triggers.

"Entertainment is always good. Shared experiences and joint attention both contribute to bonding," adds St. Amour. She suggests watching a movie, sharing a video, listening to music, or playing a trivia game to keep family and friends focused

on a common task and your holiday celebration merry.

It's also okay to take a time-out. An essential aspect of mediation is the ability to take a break at any time. In a real mediation, you would need to stop and ask for a break, but at a holiday celebration, St. Amour confirms you can give yourself a "reset" whenever you need one. "One thing that sounds trite but is really important, is breathing and drinking water. It stops the panic response that stops the cortisol reaction." She notes, "People tend to drink a lot at these family gatherings, so it's actually incredibly important to stay hydrated and breathe deeply."

So, what happens if your holiday party hits a jangle rather than a jingle? Even when everyone is on their best behavior, conversations can drift to big no-nos: politics, religion, money,

or the Kardashians. Knowing how to de-escalate a conflict can save a family get-together teetering on disaster.

For a decade, St. Amour lectured on mediation and negotiation at UC Hastings College of the Law and UC Berkeley School of Law. Each semester she invited a hostage negotiator to teach de-escalation to her law students. She points to the hostage negotiating tools of "mirroring" and "labeling" to soothe any ruffled holiday sweaters.





The tool of mirroring is repeating back what you just heard during a conversation, and labeling is acknowledging what someone has just said *without* agreeing. “You’re not agreeing; you’re listening with curiosity. You’re not getting drawn in. It makes people feel heard, and they generally don’t notice that you’re not getting into an argument with them,” she notes.

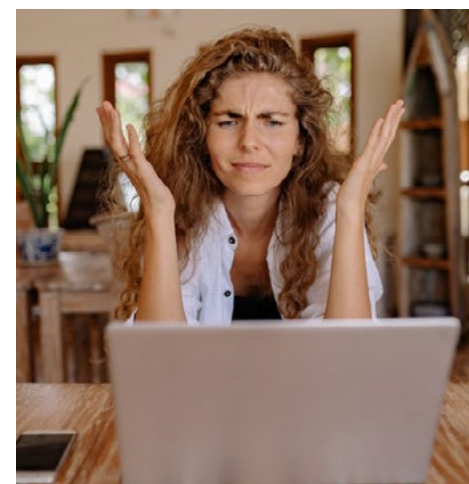
Holidays or not, when attempting to de-escalate a tense conversation, St. Amour suggests using curiosity. Although she stresses it’s imperative to stay away from “why” questions since it can put people on the defense. Instead of asking “why,” St. Amour recommends proposing a question, “How does that play out? What do you mean by that? Why do you think something like that would happen?”

This holiday season, when looking to delve into serious topics or just sharing Netflix recommendations, St. Amour quotes Plato, “Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.”

### Calling someone in

“Very few families get together over the holidays to have debates,” says Oren Jay Sofer, meditation teacher, Nonviolent Communication trainer, and author of *Say What You Mean* and *Teaching Mindfulness to Empower Adolescents*.

Nonviolent Communication isn’t about micromanaging your family and friends’ communication styles but learning to listen to others, what motivates them, and find understanding. In Sofer’s words, “The core template of the Nonviolent Communication model, founded by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg, has been used for everything



from personal healing to international mediation and can be summarized in four parts: observations, feelings, needs or values, and finally, making a request.”

To avoid contentious topics during a holiday gathering, Sofer recommends naming why your family has come together this holiday season. Then, he suggests focusing the conversation on what guests have in common. Sofer notes that it’s not about ignoring contentious issues, but that they aren’t the reason for the event, so leave them for a more appropriate time and place.

Although a family gathering isn’t likely to be the venue for a personal transformation, Sofer acknowledges that some may feel a moral obligation to address specific topics at a holiday party. He points out, “A family member or friend may state that it’s a matter of privilege to put those conversations aside, and it would be perpetuating harm by not dealing with those issues as they come up.”

Sofer emphasizes considering your goal before you leap into a debate at the holiday dinner table. If a person isn’t clear when a conversation begins where it’s headed, they are wading into murky waters, and the conversation probably won’t end up the way they’d hoped. So, he asks:

- What is your purpose?
- What are your intentions?
- How do you want to act?

“It’s not controlling the conversation. It’s not demanding that the other person do what you want them to do,” adds Sofer. It’s an opportunity to gain clarity about your needs: whether it’s to be heard or acknowledged or to speak up for your principles.

Calling someone out may keep them quiet, but it doesn’t necessarily change their heart or mind, and it often causes communication to collapse. Sofer highlights the practice of “calling someone in” rather than calling them out. “I think one of the tragedies of where we are as a culture today is not that we have different views, but that there’s a level of intolerance, where there’s not even any space to have a discussion and learn from each other.” Sofer continues, “We’re so quick to assume that we know what the other person’s position is, we label each other, and then



we write each other off.”

Sofer suggests starting with acknowledging the other person’s goodness, addressing your concern with a specific comment or viewpoint. Humans often become defensive when their words or opinions are criticized, taking it personally as a character attack. Also according to Sofer, research shows that facts and debate don’t often convert someone to a different perspective. He reports, “Study after study has shown that you can present people with data, and it doesn’t change their view. But if you present someone with an emotional story, that can change their mind.”

No matter what topics arise at your holiday gathering, Sofer emphasizes this is an unusually stressful time. “Everyone is operating under duress right now. The impacts are distributed disproportionately, but no one is exempt.” He observes, “If we can try and remember that and give people a little bit of slack. It might help us have a little bit more resilience and bandwidth inside.”

Since it’s the season of generosity, sprinkling a little grace, practicing listening, and remembering why you are celebrating could keep your holiday celebration happy and bright—and maybe even in the sweet spot.

*Clare is a mother of two and a freelance journalist.*



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Due to the ongoing shelter-in-place and related COVID-19 shutdowns, we are not planning events more than 3 to 4 weeks ahead. As things slowly start to open back up, and we add more events, we will update the events calendar on the GGMG website as well as the GGMG Facebook page. Hope you are all safe and healthy.

## Toddler-Mama Virtual Group

If you have said, "What's in your mouth?," "Please nap!," or "Don't lick the slide!" recently, you may have a young toddler. Please join a group of fellow toddler mamas with kids aged 12 to 24 months, for weekly support, friendship, and advice on Zoom. We've all been there! Many of us will have our toddlers with us on/off-screen in case naps just aren't happening. We welcome the chaos.

**Date:** Every Tuesday  
**Time:** 1 p.m.  
**Place:** Zoom  
**Cost:** FREE



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- How to challenge your baby's balance
- Common mistakes to avoid when helping your baby walk
- When and how to properly use baby shoes
- What toys and products are helpful and which ones can delay walking
- When to be concerned—red flags to identify in early walkers

Please RSVP to claim your spot! Seats are limited to 20 to ensure quality. Participants will enjoy a 45-minute interactive workshop as well as a 15-minute open Q&A session.

About our host: Deana Rosaia is the founder, CEO, and mama of two behind Next Small Step Pediatric Physical Therapy & Wellness. She is obsessed with all things baby milestones while supporting confident moms and strong littles as they learn all the things in their first year of life!

**Date:** Monday, January 20  
**Time:** 1:30 to 2:30 p.m.  
**Place:** Zoom  
**Cost:** \$5 for GGMG members, \$10 for non GGMG members

## Virtual Moms Night IN Every Last Wednesday

Come hang every month at our Virtual Moms Night In via Zoom! Wine, pajamas, messy bun—all accepted. No agenda, just hanging out and connecting with each other. This will be the last Wednesday of every month.

**Date:** Wednesdays, December 30, January 27, February 24  
**Time:** 8 to 9 p.m.  
**Place:** Zoom  
**Cost:** FREE



## KIDS ACTIVITIES

### Crafting and Storytime

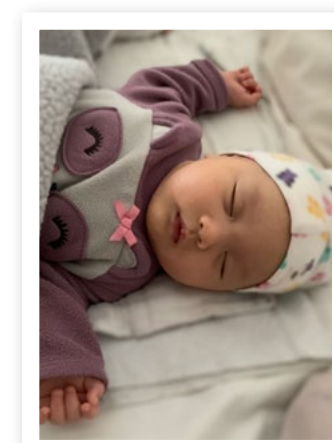
Come join the Kids Activities Committee and bust out your creative side for a fun afternoon of crafting, followed by a read-aloud storytime. GGMG members who attend are eligible for awesome raffle prizes/gift certificates to spread the cheer of the season!

Zoom link and required materials list will be sent to those who register for the event. Space is limited, so please RSVP early and make sure to update us if anything changes so we can open slots to other moms/kids. All ages are welcome but probably best for preschool to third grade. You don't want to miss this fun event!

**Date:** Thursday, December 17  
**Time:** 3 to 4 p.m.  
**Place:** Zoom  
**Cost:** FREE



## NEW ARRIVALS



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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

On October 28, the Diversity & Inclusion Committee hosted Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith for a webinar on Antiracist Parenting. A clinical psychologist by training, with a specialization in trauma and ethnic minority mental health, Dr. Briscoe-Smith has worked with GGMG in the past on workshops like “How to Talk to Your Kids About Race” and speaks nationally on how to support trauma-informed practices and cultural accountability.

She opened the webinar with a message of grace. Unmerited favor, courteous goodwill, an instance of kindness, clemency, a temporary exemption, a reprieve—any way it is framed, she posited that right now, “We can use grace, be offered grace.”



She elaborated, “What if we didn’t have to be the perfect parent to have our children be OK? If we didn’t do every single thing right, or feel that pressure, that pressure if we don’t say the right thing, our children will be harmed, or won’t grow up to be the children we want them to be?”

Instead of pressure, what if we offered grace?

- Grace to ourselves, as parents.
- Grace to other parents, with the understanding that we’re all making complicated decisions.
- Grace to our children, as they navigate more screen time and less social time.
- Grace to our children’s systems of care, knowing that there are people on the other end of those decisions.

She followed up with the important point that “grace doesn’t mean that we are boundary-less, doesn’t mean that we don’t have any accountability,” but leading with grace is a good place to start. As Dr. Briscoe-Smith shared, “We might make mistakes, but we’re going to be ok.”

If you’re curious to know more, please check out the following resources!

- Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith’s website has a range of resources: [drbriscoesmith.com](http://drbriscoesmith.com).
- Embrace Action has tons of free resources at [facebook.com/EMBRACEAction](https://facebook.com/EMBRACEAction).
- Desiree Adaway is offering a self-paced course on Whiteness at Work (there is a cost for this course): [courses.equityatwork.us/p/whiteness-at-work](https://courses.equityatwork.us/p/whiteness-at-work).

If you missed the webinar, check it out here: [ggmg.org/videos](http://ggmg.org/videos).

MEMBER SUPPORT

Celebrate Your Village This Holiday Season

Beneath the gift giving, card addressing, and cookie-baking madness, the holidays can unearth a feeling of loneliness and isolation for many of us, especially this year as we are socially distanced or separated from our friends and families. However, this time of year is also an opportunity to pause and celebrate the hands—sometimes obvious and sometimes less visible—that lift us up and keep us moving forward. If you are feeling the holiday blues, here are a few ideas for celebrating your own family’s community:

- Make a list. Who are the work wives, nannies, teachers, learning pod parents, or long-distance besties who keep you sane?

- Now, make a second list. The neighbor who always has time for a hello. Your child’s pediatrician. The delivery driver who brings online shopping deliveries.
- Without creating another to-do, think about how you can show a little extra love to the folks on your list. Dropping off a treat to the neighbor? A drawing from your child? A quick email?

Big or small, a little gesture of love can go a long way for both the giver and the recipient.

Remember that you can always reach out to [member.support@ggmg.org](mailto:member.support@ggmg.org) if you need additional moments of sanity. We’re also looking for more volunteers if you’re looking for a rewarding way to give back!

SOCIAL EVENTS

Congratulations to our First Virtual Halloween Costume Contest Winners!

And thanks to all who entered. We hope you and the kids enjoyed dressing up as much as we enjoyed seeing them. We’re excited to make this an ongoing event for all our members, and we appreciate all the entries that were sent in!

Congratulations to our winners:

- First Place: **Jee, Jane, Jamie, Sahra**
- Second Place: **Lauren, Kate, Shannon, Jessica**
- Third Place: **Jeska, Jenny, Ida, Trang**

Here are some of the photos from this year’s event!







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# Savor the Sweet

By Sandy Woo

“I’m done,” my chocolate-smearing 7-year-old declared, after eating three bites of tiramisu, the coveted delight at the end of a nippy alfresco dinner, pandemic style. My eyebrows shot up: “No way. I don’t believe you. Eat more.” My son has a tiramisu and chocolate mousse *dance*, for God’s sake. He swipes cookie dough and gets slightly tipsy from making tiramisu with his father, both from the sheer joy of it and, well, the alcohol content. His sweet tooth is not my doing. I will, however, take credit for him thinking that fruit is a worthy dessert—still, nothing compares to tiramisu.

Childhood is meant to be remembered—at least through the rearview mirror—to be full of sweetness, metaphorical and literal. I was never big on sweets, although if you saw my 6-year-old silver grill smile, you’d think otherwise. A not-so-sweet memory was of me watching the very age-appropriate, original *Incredible Hulk* while sucking on ice cubes, nursing a whole mouth ache it seems. Cavities. A word made only more horrible by the repeated numbing and eye-squinting shots to fill and silver cap all my “milk teeth.” Unfortunately, I was the poster child for baby bottle mouth “don’ts.” Perhaps these early experiences contributed to my ‘meh’ attitude towards sweets.

A phantom ache is forming in my mouth as I recount a vivid memory of biting into a thick, Betty Crocker frosted cupcake. I quickly turned it upside down and pecked at the dry cake underneath, and I have mostly avoided cupcakes until, ironically, my own wedding. Another early memory was a birthday excursion to see *Mr. Mom* and divvying out my goodie bag of chocolate chip cookies, which both upped my appeal *and* strangeness as the new girl in my classmates’ eyes. Crushing on Michael Keaton on the big screen and increasing my popularity via cookie bribes were a real treat for me. A mouth full of fillings and four root canals later, I now happily dig into a pan of brownies (my weakness) and the cheap Halloween candy of my youth.

Food, especially dessert, is so tied into our expression of joy, taking pride of place at celebrations and holidays. It feeds directly into the reward centers of our brains, which is why my



dad and grandparents everywhere pile on the treats for their little loves, disregarding all parental admonishments. Everyone comes back abundantly happy from such an occasion. Looking back, I wonder if I somehow missed out on some unadulterated joy because sweets weren’t my thing.

I want my son to look back at his childhood and remember the literal and metaphorical sweetness intertwined, partly because my memories are so muddled here. As a child, my parents warned me that good fortune was limited: that everyone had a finite supply of happiness, a “cake” of predetermined size if you will. If you ate all of this cake in one setting, you would

be left with none later in life.

With this backdrop, I started worrying, as any slightly over-analytical mama would, why my child would turn down his *favorite* dessert. I *hate* the aforementioned predestined cake size way of teaching gratitude. Thanks to Uncle Covid, delayed dental care, and giant crooked adult teeth, he recently had two fillings. Was that why? Or perhaps amidst uncertainty, it was something he *could* control. Self control and limit setting should be praised, no? (His father will polish

off a whole tin of homemade Christmas cookies even if he makes himself sick doing so). So I urged him to eat what gives him joy, convinced him it was OK, that eating dessert is part of a healthy, happy life. At some point I wondered if I was

crossing a line somewhere, usurping his choice so that I could feel better about my concerns. What parent encourages her child to have *more* dessert anyway? His reluctance crumbled into pure pleasure, and as expected, not a crumb left for me.

Life is always too short. This whole last year has only made it even more apparent. With that, I deflate the bag of bite-size Heath bars which my husband cannot comprehend anyone liking, and toss one at my surprised little love. It’ll be OK.

*Sandy now appreciates a variety of pastries and her husband’s baked goods. Her German in-laws buy her Haribo wine gums even though they cannot believe how anyone can be addicted to them.*

“Childhood is meant to be remembered—at least through the rearview mirror—to be full of sweetness, metaphorical and literal.”