

Family-
Friendly



Meetings

A Resource for Meetings

Articles published in *Spark*, March 2016

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When All God's Children Are Together

Gabrielle Savory Bailey,
Chatham-Summit Meeting

Last June, my four-year-old, who prefers to be in worship or with the adults instead of childcare, actually wanted to go to a Quaker youth program. We were at Quaker Spring. She came bubbling up to me holding up a brightly decorated picture frame. She told me that she was looking for God, and that when she saw God, she would hold up the picture frame and frame it. She pulled out a lantern with a flameless candle in it, explaining how she holds people in the light. She then said with great importance that she was going to help lead Bible study for the adults the next morning.

In my fantasy meeting . . .

Word spread among the adults that the kids were joining them for Bible study. There were some of the normal concerns. A few wanted to know how long they would be there, and how it would impact their normal Bible study. I think they were expecting a “kids” Bible study through which they would sit, admiring the kids, and then finally get down to real Bible study when they left. What happened was divinely



The parable of the mustard seed

led. Melinda told us a Godly Play story, the parable of the mustard seed. The children helped her. Then we all sank into worship together, and the whole group was participating on the same level. We were all equally engaged in spiritual inquiry together. Reluctant to let the kids go, the adults continued with their extended Bible study and worship, brought to a deeper place for having been together.

My 8-month-old son was there, too. I was really struggling with postpartum depression. I needed worship. He needed me. Childcare wasn't optimal. Not knowing this particular group of Friends, I worried. Would we be a burden? How would we be received? What was their tolerance level for noise? It turns out we were not tolerated. We were not

told that they “didn't mind his noises.” No one told us about the child-care options for him. No, I found myself in a divine space. They didn't just tolerate us; they embraced us. They moved to sit near us. They said that they were glad that we were there, and worship was better for us being there, as messy as we were. Amazingly, the more a mess we were, the more it felt like they wanted us there, to hold us in prayer, support us in our tough places. They did not want us to leave in order to make their worship easier, more silent. It felt like they wanted us to stay, to hold us in prayer so that we could also worship. They wanted us there. Let's be clear. This was not one hour of worship. This was extended worship.

. . . kids know the adults and adults know the kids.

Maddie still asks when we will go back to Quaker Spring. She keeps her picture frame and lantern out and at the ready. She loved the youth program, because she “learned a lot about God.” I think about it, too.

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Welcome—and It's Okay to Feed the Baby During Worship

Spee Braun & Mike Clark, Old Chatham Meeting

When a new family with children or teenagers arrives at Old Chatham Meeting, the first thing they tend to notice is the Yellow Room. This is a warm, welcoming space for our children and youth located right by our meetinghouse's main entrance. It's a central space, not a removed one.

One reason we left our rented space was that our Children and Youth Program had to be held in a dark and cramped room in the basement, and more than one child had refused to go "down there." We were able to rectify this problem when we designed and built our own meetinghouse.

We tend to have no problem getting families with children in the door, but it's much harder to keep them coming back. Here are four things we think may help:

- When welcoming newcomers with young children, we advise the parents that we expect the littlest ones will make noise and move around when in worship. We share with them a common experience: It's likely your own kid's noises and actions will disturb you far more than they will disturb the rest of us. We also tell the parents that we



work with toddlers in First Day School to learn about worship and how to sit (relatively) still and listen deeply. If an adult arrives with an infant, we tell them right away that it's okay to feed the baby during worship.

- We have a general rule that parents do not have responsibility for child-care or programming for children and youth and we inform parents of this understanding early on.
- Meeting members of all ages talk to parents and engage with them not just as parents. We try to explore parents' gifts in a way that elucidates where they might best contribute to meeting life, not confining them to our Children and Youth Committee or other parent-related roles.

- Meeting members talk to the kids and engage directly with them as people. We are fortunate to have adults of all ages interested in interacting with the children and youth, and we encourage this through occasional reminders of a query in NYYM's *Faith & Practice*:

Query 6: Do our children receive the loving care of the meeting? Does the influence of the meeting promote their religious life and give them an understanding of the principles and practices of Friends? Do we offer our young people opportunities for fellowship, for service, for religious instruction, and for participation in the life of the meeting?

We will continue seeking to respond fully to this query, learning from our experience here at Old Chatham Meeting and also through sharing with other meetings. 

Family-Friendly Meetings

Beth Collea,
Religious Education & Outreach Coordinator, NEYM

At the Intersection of Religious Education and Outreach

My Quaker outreach mantra is “Meet newcomers where they are, but don’t leave them where you found them.” It’s easy to reduce outreach to an attractive website, an eye-catching sign, or a thoughtfully gathered and displayed set of pamphlets. But if we want to attain what I consider the Gold Standard of Quaker Outreach—having newcomers experience their own encounter with the divine—we’ll need to add Quaker religious education to the picture!

I’m inspired by a reimagined model for faith formation by Diana Butler Bass. Let’s use it to explore where the particular needs of families fit in the whole arc of outreach work (*Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*).

Bass’s model illustrates the traditional understanding of how belief forms—it reads in the downward direction. First, we embrace a set of beliefs, then, our actions change to match those beliefs, and finally, we join the meeting or church.

Bass flips the model on



its head and invites us to look first to belonging as the start of the process. First, we find a meeting community in which we feel comfortable and accepted, where we belong. Then, we change the way we behave to more and more closely match that of the Friends around us. We begin to live more and more fully the Quaker Way. And, finally, we discover that we have embraced Quakerism, that our Quaker meeting “is our path to God,” as Lloyd Lee Wilson says. Now, we believe, and it is time to write our letter requesting membership. Bass calls reading of the model in the upward direction “the path of transformation.”

She underscores the key role of relationships in this process, reminding us that spiritual formation is like knitting. “If you want to knit, you find someone who knits to teach you.”

Let’s briefly explore each step in the model, lifting up questions to ask ourselves and our meetings or Friends churches. Then, I’ll offer a

few observations drawn from my outreach work in New England Yearly Meeting.

Belonging:

How do we help families feel they belong?

How do we help them quickly assess the “fit” between their journeys and what the meeting has to offer?

Remember, not everyone is on a Quaker journey! Helping newcomers discern and decide quickly benefits both of you. If this isn’t the path for them, bless them on their way.

Behaving:

How do we help new families live out the Quaker way through opportunities for witness, service, living simply, peaceful parenting, etc?

Do we have times and spaces to check in about how it is going?

Living in a Quakerly way is good as far as it goes. But it is important that we do not stop there. We have to intentionally reach beyond an external code of conduct to something deeper and living. While it’s true that what we do can change who we are, leaving spiritual formation unnamed and unsupported hinders or even truncates the process

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Beth Collea

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of opening ourselves to the divine. We need to continually remind newcomers, and ourselves, “When you’re ready, there’s more,” as Marty Grundy is fond of saying. The final step helps us deliver on that promise.

Believing:

How do we help parents and children get traction on their own Quaker journeys?

Are we giving evidence of the power at the heart of Quakerism that guides, comforts, and even corrects, challenges, or rebukes as it draws us into New Life?

Are there Friends ready and able to swim in this deep, living water with parents who may request companionship on that journey?

Diana Butler Bass hopes our Quaker meetings will become Guilds for Spiritual Practice. Imagine how our local meetings might be different if they were Guilds for Spiritual Practice! We’d have a clarity and ready acknowledgment of our purpose as the Religious Society of Friends. We’d have a shared language to communicate our experiences. We’d have well-established paths

toward proficiency. We’d have active encouragement to advance on the Quaker spiritual path. We’d celebrate milestones on the spiritual journeys of Friends in our meetings. And, lastly, we’d value and esteem the more proficient among us—their lives serving as inspiration.

Finally, I’d like to offer three observations drawn from my work in NEYM.

1. Create opportunities to increase a sense of belonging. Church growth literature tells us that the number one motivation for folks going to church on any given Sunday is the expectation of seeing a friend. Before a newcomer sees the Light, they may need to feel the warmth of our community. Here are three ideas to consider:

Parents’ Night Out—social potlucks for parents with young children, with child-care at the meetinghouse and parents at a nearby home. Here is a chance to build those connections while they bask in finished sentences and adult company!

Quaker Parent Conversations around themes like “Weaving the Testimonies into our Parenting.” At Wellesley Meeting, we hosted these early on Saturday evenings. We provided

dinner and supervised play for children.

Have children report to meeting for business in worship on anything they did as a Quaker, e.g. going to Friends Camp, special service projects, a school report on a Quaker subject or historical figure, etc. This idea was offered to the Quaker RE Collaborative (QREC) by Karen Greenler reflecting on her experience in an Iowa Conservative Meeting. This simple practice is deeply affirming for children and parents alike.

Make sure events are accessible. Offer quality child-care and plan events at days and times families can attend. Be sensitive about costs. Don’t price young families out of special events or set up systems around asking for assistance that leave them feeling embarrassed or diminished.

2. Don’t be afraid to set the bar a little higher for potential involvement, growth, and engagement in the world, in and through the meeting. This is often compelling and captivating for newcomers. People find time for something that matters and feeds their soul. Setting expectations too low leaves newcomers with the sense that they won’t be

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missed when they don't attend and that the involvement with meeting isn't worthwhile. Just to be clear, do invite newcomers into active engagement and participation in study classes, celebrations, and one-time events. Do not start by nominating a newcomer to committee service! Give them a chance to find what has Life for them.

3. Watch the Social Glue in your meeting. Social Glue is my informal term for the amount of warmth and cohesion in the circle of Friends. Too little or too much can be a problem. If there isn't enough, a family won't stick. Some signs that you need to warm up your Social Glue include: no one lingers after meeting to chat, Friends don't know what is going on in each other's lives, Friends don't get together outside of meeting for worship. If there is too much Social Glue, a new family can't break into the social circle. The telltale indicators of too much Social Glue are just the opposite of too little warmth and cohesion. Friends linger after meeting but have so much to say to each other that no one speaks to a newcomer. Or, Friends have so many additional social connections outside the meeting that they unknow-

ingly form a closed clique.

If you have too little Social Glue—warm up your meeting socially! Have more events to get to know each other. Parties are actually very important. Festive events have low social thresholds and let folks get to know each other without pressure to speak of faith and be put on the spot. This builds trust, which is one key foundation of our worshipping community. When I served as RE Coordinator for Wellesley Meeting, I always used to write a personal, hand-written note on Monday to a new family. I'd tell why the meeting has been crucial in my life and that of my family, and then invite them to the next party. We had about one occasion a month.

If you have too much Social Glue, a newcomer will always stay an "outsider." To relax too much Social Glue, try to loosen the edges of your group. Invite other Friends to worship with you to reacquaint the meeting with the experience of having folks beyond their immediate circle gathering with them. Work with Interfaith groups. Don't be too peculiar—"we're a peculiar people"—but don't bask in it to the point that others are put off. One new family at NEYM Sessions

last year asked for a study card decoding all of the Quaker acronyms. Business meeting seemed unintelligible to them! Sharing a language is a crucial part of belonging—we need to define terms like clearness, sense of the meeting, leading, and the whole alphabet soup of acronyms that Friends love.

We began by linking outreach and religious education. One final caution: ninety-five percent of Quaker religious education actually happens in the home. Rather than making those times when a family is attending Quaker meeting less important, this fact actually makes those moments more critical. We need to be ready to help children and parents to take up spiritual practices at home, to talk about what they are experiencing together, and to creatively use everyday moments like driving to a sports practice to make space for deeper reflections. A first round of such materials can be found at: neym.org/qye/faith-home. Each Sunday, we need to welcome families back and be the warm prayerful circle of Friends in which they can rest, find renewal and encouragement, and listen for God together.



Children in the Warp and Weft of Meeting Life

Karen Greenler, Madison (WI) Meeting

When our children were in elementary school, our family attended Yahara Meeting, a small meeting in Madison, Wisconsin, that was affiliated with Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative). We averaged about a dozen souls each Sunday, had a First Day School program with 3-4 children, and met at a private school that had (to the kids' delight) a playground and gym.

The children stayed in meeting for worship for half an hour. They were allowed to read, but they set their books aside and listened when someone spoke. Scott and Thomas were two very active boys, so it surprised us when, after a few months, there were occasions when they never opened their books. They just rested in the silence, sometimes leaning companionably against one of us. I think back at how rare that stillness was in our children's lives, which were otherwise filled with school, friends, lessons, toys, gadgets, and a close extended family.

In a group this small, children and adults get to know each other organically, but we also fostered that growth. Every month, on the Saturday night before meeting for business, we



Children reporting to meeting for business in worship at Yahara Meeting

met for potluck and games. If the adult conversation at dinner grew dull, the kids would go play in the gym, but before long they would come back to get the games going. Adults and children would mix and match depending on their interests, or sometimes we would play whole group games like Apples to Apples or Telephone Pictionary.

On Sunday, our business sessions were not lengthy, for we were new, small, and didn't hold large fund balances. But we strove to take seriously the concerns laid before us and treat them with respect. Part of our regular business was to hear verbal reports of those who had attended meetings or workshops in the larger Quaker world. Our clerk, as a matter of course, invited our young people to offer

reports on their experiences attending Quaker retreats and camps.

We usually heard the children's reports as the first order of business, so they could be released to go play. I was always impressed with the attentiveness of the listening and the quality of the questions asked of our children. "What new thoughts occurred to you after listening to that speaker?" Or, "It must have been very exciting to see a fox. What did it do after it saw you?" Or, "Tell us more about the friendships you made; they sound important." Then the children waited while their reports were minuted and accepted. They learned that their contributions mattered, because they did. They formed part of the warp and weft of our meeting life.

For a while we had inter-generational First Day School on fifth Sundays. We played New Games, illustrated the story of Margaret Fell, and on one hot summer day, we read about the history of Quaker splits in Jean Kinney Williams' book *The Quakers* while eating banana splits. That activity was well received by both children and adults.

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A Recipe for Welcome

John Scardina,
Purchase Meeting

When a new family walks into a meeting ...

- • • kids in tow, new to the area, and not quite sure if this is what they are looking for, what do we hope a family might find?
- A parking lot full of cars with those bumper stickers we all love (you know what I mean!) as well as car seats, bike racks hanging off the back, and windows showing the messy paraphernalia of childhood. Perhaps also lots of bikes—parked in a sturdy bike rack—and evidence of families who are active and joyful in their lifestyles.
- Welcoming signs—not just for adults—that express both the seriousness of our Quaker faith and the playfulness of the Divine in our lives. The quiet dignity of a meeting space surrounded by the latest kids’ garden projects.
- A Friendly greeter (who is also kid-friendly) at the door who has the time to help these folks feel welcome—each and all of them. Name tags for all and clear signs as to where to go.
- A First Day School room that is bright, cheerful,

and age-appropriate in different ways, with other kids already there who have been taught through specific lessons and examples how to help new Friends feel welcomed and comfortable. The “curriculum” is easily accessible and the “circle of Friends” is easily widened. Adults in the room have had some training in working with children, if only a mini-workshop by a meeting member who works with children. Lessons that are engaging and child-centered.

- A library with resources for all—books for all ages, information for new seekers, research books for in-depth study, a clear system of organization, and a simple check-out policy.
- Ah yes—meeting for worship! What to do with the kids? A loving acceptance of the distractions of childhood before they go to First Day School (or when they return from First Day School—did we explain these comings and goings to our new family?) A reminder of the “spiritual equality” of all ministry in the meeting—is it clear that we are a

“beloved community”? A seasoned and gathered meeting that embraces all. And because their kids are safe and cared for, parents can sigh and settle into worship surrounded by loving acceptance.

- A slow and gentle process of invitation to join—committees, potlucks, Bible study, or madrigal singing—with the suggestion of a “host family” to keep in touch with the new Friends.
- A smattering of workshops—Quakerism 101, Quaker Parenting, Alternatives to Violence Project, Quaker service—to let our new Friends know that we do good works that go beyond our meeting.
- A sense of overall well-being—we Quakers grow our meetings by attraction rather than promotion much of the time. 

Growing in Spirit Together in All-ages RE

Liz Yeats, Austin (TX) Meeting

Friends Meeting of Austin (South Central Yearly Meeting), though a relatively large meeting, has been challenged over the years to provide religious education for all ages. As in many meetings, we've had small groups of children ranging in age from baby to teen attend each week and adults with busy schedules, particularly the parents. When several young families began attending a few years ago, most without previous experience with Quakers, they pushed the number of children in our Garden House to 12 or more some weeks. The First Day School Committee was thrilled, but challenged to meet their needs. We looked for ways, not only to welcome them, but to integrate them into our faith community. We knew that they were unlikely to stay if we didn't give them some help in understanding Friends faith and practice but recognized time would be limited for all ages.

Our Garden House, which serves the littlest among us, birth to kindergarten, is staffed by two paid child care workers from a babysitting service. They do a great job providing a Friendly play space but give the children no exposure to religious educa-

tion. So when an idea came from Wellesley Friends in New England Yearly Meeting for All-Ages Religious Education, the First Day School Committee decided to experiment.

Now in our second year, the program has worked well. We begin each First Day at 10 am with a light breakfast (granola, yogurt, fruit, cheese sticks, bagels, cream cheese, coffee, tea, juice, and sometimes tacos or homemade waffles) and conversation for all ages. This means that parents need not provide breakfast before heading to meeting. Adult conversation flows naturally around topics ranging from Quaker history, spiritual practices, raising nonviolent children and other parenting concerns. The teacher holds open the space for parent conversation by listening to and engaging with the children while they eat and play.

All ages seem to appreciate a time to wonder together.

At 10:30 everyone moves to a rug, the children each bringing a carpet square and sitting in front of their parent(s). Chairs are available for those

who don't do the floor but the teachers generally sit on the floor in front of the group. We start with a brief worship and introductions, usually with a question like, "I wonder what was one thing that happened to you last week that made you happy?" or, "I wonder what color best describes you today?" All ages are asked to respond or pass. Then we move to the lesson, usually a book, a Faith & Play story, a personal sharing/reflection by the teacher or a meditation on the focus topic for the season. This is followed by appropriate "wondering" questions and activities. We often have music, singing songs—some just fun, some relating to the theme of the lesson. Art materials are always available.

At 11 the parents leave for meeting while the children continue their activities and then have a chance for free play. The teacher is often able to come to meeting for worship for a period but returns to bring the children in to sit with their parents in meeting for worship for at least 10 minutes at the end. Sometimes, the products of the activity are shared with the community during rise of meeting announcements.

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When All God's Children Are Together

Gabrielle Savory Bailey

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I have visions of a time when we are not so worried about worship being silent, thus segregated. Focusing on having us all together instead, just as we are. In this fantasy meeting, when we walk up, First Day School is not the kids' first option. My children are personally invited into worship. We all learn about tools we can use to listen for God, and how we hold each other in prayer when we struggle publicly and privately.

In my fantasy meeting the stories that help us learn more about God are shared, and allow us to know each other more deeply. This meeting understands the time of meeting for worship to be religious education. Friends of all ages witness and practice many ways to listen for God. Important conversations come out of that worship.

The kids actually know the adults, not just the other kids. Conversely, the adults really know the kids, and are able to see the changes in them as they grow, just as we all hope to be changed at any time by Divine love. As they enter adulthood they are known by their journey, and

Children in the Warp and Weft of Meeting Life

Beth Collea

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It wasn't always smooth. Sometimes book pages turned too loudly, boots fell off of swinging legs and clunked to the floor, and business was interrupted by the need to settle a squabble in the gym. But our little meeting met these disruptions with magnanimity; after all, any of us could cause a disruption.

Madison has another large, established, and vibrant meeting, which is part of Northern Yearly Meeting. When our kids became middle schoolers, they both wanted to start attending that meeting, where there was a larger group of kids their age. By that time,

not how they first started out. By hearing the ways God is present in others, we learn, striving to be continually open, able to know each other, and support each other. Youth become adults who feel firmly rooted in the faith and practice of their tradition. New Friends arrive and understand how they can join in. When all God's children are together, able to witness, learn, act, lead, and be heard, they know that by belonging to a faith tradition they have the prayers and support to live into that which is eternal, and not just for an hour. NYM

they had become the only children in our meeting, so the request seemed appropriate and I took them to Madison Meeting, while my partner remained with Yahara Meeting. This lasted several years until Yahara Meeting grew too small to be sustainable and laid itself down.

Perhaps it was because Yahara Meeting was small, or because we were new and unburdened by tradition, and surely it was due in part to the chemistry of those involved, but I felt like we were a single meeting, not an adult meeting and a separate children's First Day school. Scott and Thomas are now young adults and many people and experiences have contributed to their understanding of the world and their senses of themselves. It pleases me to see the ease with which they interact with adults and children both, relating easily across generations. They know how to belong to a group and how to contribute to its success. They understand that stillness is best balanced with action. One never knows for sure, but I believe that the meeting's simple acceptance of them as full members of the community played an important part in who they are today. NYM

Family-Friendly Meetings

Melinda Wenner Bradley,
Editor

The invitation to contribute to this issue of *Spark*, focused on family-friendly meetings, asked Friends to consider the kinds of needs and gifts a family presents to our meeting communities. A family brings with them the spiritual searches of the adults, the developmental needs and spiritual journeys of the children, and the family's hopes for a spiritual home and faith community. How do we attend to these needs? How do we help everyone find their gifts and share them? How do we in particular find ways to weave the participation of children, their interests, concerns and spiritual gifts into the life of the meeting? How do we search for God together and engage with each other beyond the meeting for worship? Enjoy the inspiration and practical ideas offered here! 

For more resources on First Day School and religious education, visit nyym.org/?q=Resources.

The Quaker Religious Education Collaborative

The Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC) is living into our mission to create spaces where Friends from across the branches of Quakerism can share resources, inspiration, and support among the RE community of practice. One of the topics of interest to this group is how supporting religious education can nurture family-friendly meetings. Conversation Circles held last spring and this winter used online video conferencing for groups of 10-15 Friends from across the country to discuss “Welcoming Families” and “Supporting Parents in Meeting Life.” A participant in the latter described the discussion in part this way: “ideas about how to welcome and meet the needs of families—integrate all ages into meeting—and have more involvement in the FDS and with children in general.” Notes from Conversation Circles are on our website, quakers4re.org.

This fall, Collaborative members created a series of short RE videos for release on the website. Topics include: “Expectant Waiting: Preparing for Families” and “Hopes for a Family Coming to Worship.” Planning continues for a June 10-12, 2016 Collaboration at Quaker Hill Conference Center in Richmond, Indiana. As with the 2015 gathering, we’re planning a children’s program both to support parents attending and to live our vision of a multigenerational educational community modeling tools and resources that serve to both spread seeds and nurture the sowers of Quaker RE. For registration information:

www.quakers4re.org/2016collborative%281%29

Growing in Spiri Together in All-ages RE

Liz Yeats

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Our experiment seems to be going well. Several of the families continue to come and several parents have joined meeting committees. All ages seem to appreciate a time to wonder together, learn a

bit about Friends faith and practice, and engage with each other beyond the meeting for worship. There are still many challenges but we all seem to be growing in Spirit together. 