

Homeschool groups provide fun, friendship and support for parents and children, but many parents find the idea of approaching other parents at the park or joining a group of strangers daunting. It's okay to be cautious, but don't let shyness keep you from joining a group. Once you have found a homeschool support group to visit, here are a few ways to make the visit less intimidating.

Ask a friend to go with you. Even if she is not interested in joining the group, at least you won't feel all alone during this first visit.

If you don't know anyone else to go with you, talk to the group leader over the phone and ask questions so you will know her and the group a little better. That way, you will feel like you know someone when you arrive. You will likely feel more comfortable if someone at the meeting greets you by name even if the two of you have not actually met yet.

Perhaps ask her to meet you in advance at another location so you can follow her to the designated meeting place. This will accomplish two things: You won't have to worry about following directions to the location if you are new to the area, and you and your children will arrive at the meeting already having met at least one family. That should alleviate some of the stress.

If children are welcomed at meetings, prepare your children in advance and settle them as soon as you arrive. Specifically list your expectations on their behavior and describe as much about the meeting and the other children as you can. Also, find out what the children do during the meeting, and help your children to meet a few of them.

If it will make you feel better, prepare an excuse in advance so that you can leave early if you feel too uncomfortable. Mention when you arrive that you will be unable to stay the full time. Perhaps tell them that you are meeting someone for lunch so you can stay only an hour, or you are expecting guests this evening and you need to get home to finish cleaning, or you need to run to the store before the baby's lunchtime. Any excuse will be fine as long as it is true and you mention it early in the visit.

Try to join in the conversations. This may be difficult if they are talking about a recent field trip to the zoo or a moms' night out of which you were not a part, but surely you can find some way to contribute to the conversation. For example, you could mention how much your child likes the giraffes at the zoo or how you and your husband had celebrated your anniversary at the same restaurant where they went for the moms' night out.

You could also start a conversation with someone. You all have homeschooling in common, so ask a homeschool question! Ask how many children she homeschools, how long they have homeschooled, why they decided to homeschool, what curriculum they use, etc. The only way to make friends is to get to know them. Don't monopolize the conversation, but do volunteer some information about yourself too.

Be understanding and tolerant of the other children as well as your own children. Depending on age, your children will likely cling to you during the first visit. This is normal. Don't push young

ones to join the other children if they feel more comfortable with you.

Visit the group at least twice, preferably three times, before making a final decision on joining or not. The group will likely feel awkward the first time, so you need to give it a few tries before you know for sure that this group is not for you. After a couple of visits, you may find out that you have a few things in common with these other parents after all. Besides, your child will likely cling to you the first few visits. You need to give your child time to get comfortable in the new surroundings and for the faces to begin to look familiar. This will take at least three visits.

If you decide to join, great! You and your children are in for a lot of fun. If you decide that this group is not for you, move on and look for another one. That next homeschool support group may be just the one you will want to join.



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