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Apple Dumpling Club

5 year old Tara carefully measures a cup full of sugar, while 3 year old Talia holds the mixing bowl steady. 2 year old Tonya, wooden spoons in each hand, announces the sugar transfer with a shriek of "Bam! Bam! Bam!"

It's not Emeril Live. It's the Apple Dumpling Club -- a bi-monthly, Saturday morning lovefest between 5 single moms and their 9 daughters. Today's adventure: baking cupcakes from scratch.

"Last month we built rockets," a little one informs me. "But cupcakes taste better."

Other projects have included scrapbook making, hiking, fishing, ice skating, museum tours, children's plays, and even an attempt at learning the hula dance. Of course, there are plenty of Saturdays when they do nothing more complicated than roasting hot dogs on the grill, turning the sprinkler on for the kids and sampling frozen margarita recipes.

So how did 5 career women -- including a social worker, a librarian, and a self-employed caterer -- end up around a kitchen table, drinking coffee and licking chocolate frosting off of their well-manicured nails? Don't they have errands to run, chores to catch up on, calls to make?

"No cell phones in the Clubhouse," smiles one mom, and the others nod. This is family time, connecting time, mother-daughter-sister time.

They found each other almost 3 years ago at a preschool playgroup run by a community center. Between toddler finger games and peek-a-boo, they discovered they were all newly divorced and trying to adjust.

Even when some of the older children started school, the moms continued to come to playgroup to socialize. But the playgroup leaders, understandably focused on preschool activities, asked them to leave the older children at home.

"What was the point of family interaction if you couldn't bring the whole family?" a club mom explains. They kept meeting on their own time, and eventually, the Apple Dumpling Club was born. It evolved into a mother-daughter circle that meets twice monthly to nurture dreams, set goals and learn new skills.

Tara's mom, the caterer, credits the Club with giving her the courage and confidence to quit her restaurant job and go out on her own. "They've always encouraged me," she

says. "They've helped me advertise my business, they've eaten millions of menu samples. They've gained weight for me -- the ultimate sacrifice!"

Another mom notes how much more self-confident her daughter is after spending time with her friends. "They learn to how to share, and also how to stand up for themselves, in an environment filled with love."

One of the biggest problems facing any single parent is isolation. With families living in different states, and jobs requiring moves or frequent traveling, single moms can often feel overwhelmed and left out the loop.

"Mothers are always givers," one mom explained. "In this club, you have to learn how to receive -- how to let others help you." She glanced around the crowded kitchen. "I used to be an only child. Now I have sisters."

And that's the beauty of the Apple Dumpling Club. They have leaned on the support of the group through good times and bad. They have celebrated Christmas in each others' homes, taken vacations together, and nurtured each other through breastfeeding, potty training, chicken pox, surgery, miscarriage, custody fights, child support problems, and all kinds of crises, large and small.

As for the unusual group name, 6 year old Alyssa is happy to explain: "We kids are the apples, little and sweet. The moms are the dumplings -- they hold everything together."

Well said.