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Out of Sync

The toddlers in our playgroup rushed eagerly to their mothers and fathers, hands in the air, fingers at the ready. They bounced with anticipation; would it be Itsy-Bitsy Spider this time? Or the Pooh game?

Only I sat alone; the 2-parent families shared nudges and smiles and whispers. I could only watch in isolated fascination as my 20-month old toddler jammed compact discs into the CD player, one at a time. I waited, resigned to what would surely happen next.

"Well, he knows what he wants," one young mother said, smiling nervously. "Is it the Barney song?"

You wish, I wanted to say, but time had run out. The sudden thunder of synthesizers and metal guitars jolted everyone. One boy burst into tears. Others clung to their mothers in confusion. My son, of course, danced with delight.

I would have run from the house in embarrassment. Except that it was my house.

"What is that?" a few parents tried to be polite.

"We don't allow Danielle to listen to MTV music," another said.

"It's just 'NSync," I said weakly. Thank God he didn't load his brother's Snoop Doggy Dog songs.

The culprit, my son Cameron, bobbed his head to his favorite line. "Baby, ain't no lie, baby bye bye bye ..."

"Maybe you should turn it off," someone offered.

When little Anibel started clapping her hands to the catchy lyrics, I closed my eyes and prayed. Cross-contamination. This could be real trouble. Angelic-looking Michael dropped his book and jiggled. Danielle -- Miss Appropriate -- let out a boisterous whoop.

This time, I knew, the parents would take action. I removed the batteries from the CD player and begged my baby to look remorseful.

Cameron and I -- dangerously close to expulsion since the remote control incident, in which he quickly mastered the parental code at Cody's house and forced the other

babies to watch "The Simpsons" -- needed to find a playgroup more in sync with our lifestyle.

"Too much television," I heard someone say.

Well, maybe. Unfortunately, I can't blame the media for the toddler's taste in music or popular culture. I have to lay the blame squarely where it belongs: on his siblings. They are -- all three of them -- teenagers of the worst stripe. Honor students. Dirty laundry hidiers. Pathetically bad liars. Lovers of bathroom jokes. Secret "South Park" watcher. Athletes and student council members and computer hogs.

His sister -- a shoo-in for the title of Last Baby in This Family just 13 short years ago -- turns into Zena the Crazy Warrior Girl at the first sign of a debate. She passionately believes that eighth graders are excellent drivers and that the next Pope should be a woman. She taught my sweet, innocent baby to scream "Why?" and "So what?"

I see law school in her future.

Cameron's 14-year-old brother -- original owner of the notorious 'NSync cd -- fills his vocabulary with Dragonball Z names and his room with plastic creatures that have exchangeable heads. He taught Cameron that water in a sippy cup is bad, but water in a \$2 sports bottle is good. Apple juice is bad, but Sprite is good. Graham crackers are bad, but Skittles are good.

With my 16-year-old, Cameron discovered the deep end of the swimming pool and how high a basketball rim really is. He learned not to eat raw potatoes and how to spit for distance. Useful skills for the millennium, I'm sure.

With these mini-adults around, I can't always filter out the sights and sounds of popular culture. Does Cameron need to know the difference between Nike and Fila? No. But he does need to stroll the mall on his big brother's shoulders, pretending to be king of the world.

He could live without Nintendo and virtual racetracks. But he shouldn't miss those silly, giggly moments in his sister's lap, her hands guiding his.

As the playgroup dads gathered up their toddlers and their toys, I knew it was our last play date; their lives and ours were hopelessly out of sync. Their babies lived a purified existence, controlled by 2 adults; my baby had an army ready to sneak him Oreos or dunk him in the fish tank.

Waving bye-bye reminded Cameron of his 'NSync song, and he ran back to the CD player. I took his hand and pulled him away.

"Mommy is older than the other mommies," I told him, using my serious, stay-on-the-sidewalk voice. "Mommy needs some quiet time. Tomorrow, Mommy is going to find some moms her own age to play with."

He smiled, a little too quickly, and scampered off. A few moments later, I heard teenage laughter.

I think that kid knows where the batteries are.