

Who's Your Safety Net?

Why Busy Moms Need Backup and How to Find It

By Elaine Rogers

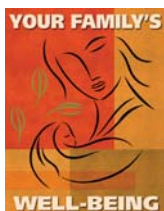
Lindsay Townsend often drives “like a bat out of hell,” commuting from a job 40 minutes away to try to get home before her young son is dismissed from school. On those anxious days when neither she nor her husband can get to the school, Townsend relies on a small network of friends and neighbors.

Whether single, married or somewhere in-between, most working moms are well acquainted with the stress of juggling career and home-life demands. Especially intense are those times when a child wakes up sick

on a day of deadlines and must-attend meetings, or when a student unexpectedly needs to be picked up early from school.

Stay-at-home moms can relate to another kind of scheduling stress – the nerve-wracking kind that results when dropping children off at piano lessons and soccer practice, making a short trip to the grocery store, and then getting caught in traffic en route to retrieve the kids.

Young mothers today are trying to juggle so many things, says sociologist Susan Short, the associate director of the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University. “They’re raising young children and they usually have a lot of other demands on their time. Their lives get pretty complicated. Figuring out who else can help out or pick up the



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pieces when they're away – that's the million dollar question, isn't it?"

On Our Own

A generation ago, mothers could rely on extended family and neighbors when they were caught in this kind of bind. But today, more mothers are in the workforce, neighborhoods are often empty during the day, and extended family no longer lives nearby.

Last fall, Short and her Brown University colleagues published a study noting the significant decline in the presence and availability of other women in the household over the last 120 years.

"A century ago, young mothers who were raising young children were often living in households with their mothers or mothers-in-law," she explains. "So they often had someone to rely on for help with the child-rearing duties."

Today, many young mothers live with only their immediate families. They're also busier than previous generations, either going to school or working, Short says, "so they're not always that available to the children anyway. ... It's a significant change in our society."

The trouble with this independence is that many parents are now struggling with problems that have resulted: They have no backup support for life's little crises, like getting kids safely from one place to another or emergency childcare.

A recent study of Americans' social connectedness sounds an alarm that experts have hinted at for years: Our circle of trusted friends and confidantes is shrinking.

The 2006 report, published in the *American Sociological Review*, by researchers from Duke University and the University of Arizona, found that the average size of Americans' social networks decreased by almost one-third between 1985 and 2004, from an average of 2.94 to 2.08 people. That translates to the loss of one trusted friend or confidante for each of us. In 1985, 80 percent of us had at least one non-related confidante – someone outside of our family whom we could trust to step in when help was needed.

By 2004, the study found that:

- 57 percent of us had at least one non-related confidante,
- 43 percent had either no confidantes or just one, and
- 53 percent had only family members as confidantes.

Where are we losing ground the most? The

Duke/Arizona study observed the biggest decline in neighborhood or voluntary association relationships – the very contacts parents need for backup support when they're living apart from their own parents and extended families.

Fortunately, this is an easy problem to address. Moms and sociologists alike report that putting yourself out there – becoming a joiner – and establishing new community connections is the key to building safety nets. And there are plenty of opportunities for this. Social networking – the face-to-face kind – goes a long way toward restoring that sense of community we all need.

Weaving New Nets

Townsend paints a stark picture of her own busy family's needs: "Planning the daily rounds requires the intricate

maneuvering and strategic skill of a drill sergeant,” she says. Neither she nor her husband have extended family living nearby to help out. And since taking on a full-time job, Townsend says the stress of scheduling school pick-ups and staying on top of carpool arrangements is intense.

“I have been juggling pick-ups and drop-offs for the last year between two neighbors, two good friends and the occasional emergency pick-up from a friend of a friend or husband,” she says. Despite having a husband who is willing to help with carpooling, Townsend still has plenty of horror stories about miscommunication and pick-up mishaps, even with just their one child.

Creating a safety net certainly sounds simple enough: Meet more people. Forge relationships with parents and oth-



If your safety net is lacking, get more involved in your neighborhood, your child's school or your community. You'll find other parents with similar interests (and problems!) to connect with and, ultimately, help each other out.

ers who can be trusted to help out when your own commitments interfere with parenting duties. But how do you do it? Where do you begin?

“It takes some work, but if you're looking, you can find places to meet other parents who need help and are willing to reciprocate to get it,” says Rebekah Brown, a clinical therapist and single mom who is well-versed in the art of creating her own parenting safety nets.

Beyond resources like this magazine, civic sources, such as chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, or town and city halls, often centralize information on local clubs and organizations geared toward local parents. It's just a matter of doing some research to locate networking options, Brown says, adding that she hasn't had much trouble filling in the gaps.

“If I'm relocating, I go to the universities and local colleges, track down their career centers and post an ad for a nanny or sitter. You can do that for free, but I don't think most people realize that.”

Brown has had good luck finding students, often those studying early childhood education, who are willing to commit to a 20-hour-a-week schedule of nanny duties. She has also intentionally befriended other mothers at her church and now exchanges babysitting duties with them.

“I just kind of build friendships,” she says. “I liked these people anyway, but they were stay-at-home moms and I cultivated friendships with them because I knew we could help each other. I know I can count on them sometimes if something happens and [my son] needs a

Work-Family Balance? Not Quite

American companies have come a long way over the last decade in trying to offer working parents a safety net of more flexible scheduling and family-friendly policies. But a 2006 survey shows that we've still got a long way to go.

One in three working moms have sent a child to school or daycare sick because their work schedules didn't allow them to take the day off, according to the *Working Mother* magazine survey of its Working Mothers Smart Moms Council, an online panel of moms. Seventy percent of those mothers reported feeling guilty about the decision, while up to 48 percent of the respondents said they felt stressed and torn when deciding whether or not to send a sick child to school.

Carol Evans, CEO and founder of Working Mother Media which publishes *Working Mother*, says moms often serve as the “family health manager,” and notes that although some strides have been made in securing flexibility for working moms, the survey reinforces the fact that “there is still much work to be done.”

The media often focuses on high-earning professional women when discussing workplace inflexibility, says Joan Williams, head of the Center for WorkLife Law, a research and advocacy group at the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. But most professionals at least have some flexibility, she says, with work-from-home possibilities, early departures or longer lunch hours

without serious consequences.

It's the working-class that's hardest hit by workplace inflexibility.

Last spring, the Center for WorkLife Law released a report, titled “One Sick Child Away From Being Fired: When Opting Out is Not An Option.” Reviewing union arbitration cases in which workers were fired or disciplined for taking unscheduled time off or refusing mandatory overtime to care for a sick child or family member, the report found that employees are frequently forced to choose between responding to a family crisis or hanging onto that paycheck.

“Among the working class, forget about taking an hour off to see the school play,” says Williams. “You can get fired for leaving to pick up a sick child from school.”

In times of family crisis and when back-up childcare arrangements fall through, workers may be at risk of suspension without pay or even termination when they refuse mandatory overtime, and many lack the resources to hire help or seek professional care for sick or needy loved ones.

Most employers believe it's too expensive to implement flextime for nonprofessional workers – even though inflexible policies hurt the bottom line and force workers to call in sick when they have to care for family members, the report notes. Nevertheless, the center recommends designing family-responsive overtime systems and providing reduced-hour and flexible-work options.

– Elaine Rogers

pick-up and I'm at work. Basically, I sell friendship. That's my safety net."

Small Steps to Build Support

There are hundreds of small steps parents and other adults can take to meet others with shared interests or problems, according to the Saguaro Seminar, an arm of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government aimed at promoting more civic engagement in America.

Saguaro research associate Shaylyn Romney Garrett offers these tips to help increase your social capital and, in the process, weave a wider safety net for your family:

- Surprise a neighbor by making dinner or a food dish and delivering it – complete with the recipe.
- Join a gardening club or start a community garden.
- Start a monthly tea or book group.
- Get involved with kid-centered activities, such as Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts or other youth clubs.
- Volunteer at schools, libraries or charitable organizations.
- Attend P.T.A. meetings. Volunteer in your child's classroom or be a chaperone on school field trips.
- Help coach Little League or other youth sports – or volunteer at the snack bar at playing fields.
- Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor or simply to encourage neighbors on the block to connect. Host a block party, a neighborhood barbecue or a holiday open house (see Parenthood.com/blockparty.html).
- Ask neighbors for help and reciprocate. Go out of your way to ask if neighbors need anything when you're on the way to the store. Offer to watch a neighbor's house or apartment when they're away.
- Join or start a babysitting cooperative (see Parenthood.com/creativecare.html). Start or join a carpool (see Parenthood.com/carpool.html).
- Plant tree seedlings along your street with neighbors and rotate care for them.

The idea is to connect with others like you while you're all involved in a project together. Eventually, you can inquire about partnering on other, more routine duties, such as carpooling or serving as an emergency contact for each other's kids. ♦

Elaine Rogers is a freelance writer and a mother.

RESOURCES

- **BetterTogether** – www.bettertogether.org – An initiative of the Harvard University-based Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, this Web site includes hundreds of ideas for increasing your social connections.
- **The Center for WorkLife Law** – www.uchastings.edu – Based at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, this research and advocacy group works to eliminate discrimination against parents and adult children of aging parents.
- **Working Mother Media** – www.workingmothermedia.com – Includes a schedule of national conferences and events focusing on the needs of working moms.