

'Baby Loves Disco': clubbing for the Mommy-and-me set



By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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IT'S One o'clock on a recent Saturday. Inside The Knitting Factory, a well-known local nightclub, loud music pulsates through a crowd of dancers, inviting them to "leave the nine to five up on the shelf, and just enjoy yourself." The mirror ball overhead sends light sparkles through the dimly lit room, illuminating the occasional beer bottle or cocktail in a partyer's hand.

Occasionally, though, it also lights up another kind of bottle, the kind that babies use, because this is not a late-night party. This 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. bash coincides with most children's afternoon naptime.

The event is a midday soiree specifically for the Mommy-and-me set – a nationwide phenomenon known as Baby Loves Disco. One afternoon each month, local organizers take over a nightclub – complete with a cash bar and the regular DJ spinning his normal playlist – and throw open the doors to anyone under the age of 7, accompanied by parents.

The two-year-old concept, now in 16 cities, has clearly struck a national nerve. It sells out every time it expands into a new city, just as it did this past month in Boston. But as Baby Loves Disco has outgrown its humble origins in Philadelphia, acquiring sponsors and partners along the way, the concept of combining babies and clubbing is coming under sharper scrutiny. Some child advocates call it downright dangerous while other cultural observers call it the latest sign of an ongoing fundamental shift in our attitudes toward children.

"One of the major premises revealed in [Baby Loves Disco] is that we've shifted from a child-friendly to an adult-driven lifestyle," says Lynne Griffin, an author and registered nurse who teaches in the Family Studies graduate program at Boston's Wheelock College. "What we're seeing increasingly is adults sharing a lifestyle with their children that is geared towards adult needs for everything from sleep to daily activities such as entertainment and communication."

Noting that parenting styles tend to go in cycles, many clinical experts dub this a period of permissive parenting, in which adults do not set appropriate boundaries between themselves and their offspring.

"I'm seeing parents who look at their children and say, 'He's just like me, so whatever is good for me is good for him,' " says Don MacMannis, a child psychologist who is codirector of The Family Therapy Institute of Santa Barbara, Calif.

From humble beginnings...This traveling, mixed-age homage to '70s and '80s club life began as a backyard party at founder Heather Murphy's home. A former dancer, Ms. Murphy says she and her husband wanted to share their favorite family activity with their friends.

"What we like to do is put on music, have a glass of wine and hang out with the kids," she says.

This private party quickly outgrew her home and she looked around town for a venue to rent. She picked a local nightclub because it was already set up for the kind of festive, music and dance party atmosphere she sought.

The party expanded first to New York when partner Andy Hurwitz, who was already promoting a Baby Loves Music business, came on board. It quickly began to expand beyond New York, opening in locations such as Portland, Ore. and Chicago; in the next few months, the event will expand to four more cities, including San Diego and Atlanta.

Nightclubs have been the logical choice for a daytime party looking for a home, says Murphy.

And she doesn't worry that it might be sending children the wrong idea about the virtues of nightclubbing.

"We all have these ideas about what a nightclub means in our adult minds," she argues, "but those are huge assumptions. Children don't have those ideas."

Murphy says her group carefully screens local hosts in each city to ensure they uphold the party line, offering balloons, bubbles, and child-appropriate food such as fruit and box drinks, in addition to the music and open bar. Organizers of the Los Angeles Baby Loves Disco have created a space for the crawling set to boogie the, er, afternoon away, with blankets spread on the trash-strewn, sticky floor. Ropes hang in front of off-limits areas such as multiplatformed stages. A local spa has set up an adults-zone for Pilates, yoga, and belly dancing instruction, as well as massages. In addition, says host Chip Smith, parents are supposed to keep their alcoholic beverages at least a yard above the ground to prevent them from falling into the

hands of the box-drink crowd.

A hit with parents Lawyer Lynne Smith stands on the dancefloor with her 3-year-old son, Sanders, falling asleep in her arms. "I love to dance and I can bring my son, so this is great," she says.

Dad David Levin chases his two sons across the dance floor, pausing just long enough to say, "I like that I can have a drink while the kids are having fun."

Despite its obvious appeal, this boundary blurring between what clinical psychologist Nancy O'Reilly calls one of our most adult activities – nightclubbing – and young children is worrisome. A lot can happen quickly in a darkened room with a lot of mixed-age activity, from a child picking up the wrong drink to a stranger walking out a side door with the wrong child, she suggests.

While it may have started as a well-intentioned effort at creating community, organizers have dropped the ball, she contends.

"If you leave so many things without some kind of boundaries, you're just asking for trouble," argues Ms. O'Reilly, the founder of WomenSpeak.com, whose practice is based in Springfield, Mo.

Mr. Hurwitz admits to being a deer caught in the headlights of so much national attention, and explains that the group has evolved so quickly – and reached such a wide and enthusiastic audience – that some of the details, such as low-rent venues, may have gotten away from it. When asked about trashy bathrooms and dirty floors in the Los Angeles club, he apologizes, explaining that clubs in other cities are brighter and cleaner. But he stands behind the philosophy of Baby Loves Disco. "[It's] real music, with real DJs in a real nightclub where they can dance, and have an authentic experience," says Mr. Hurwitz. "That's what we're trying to offer to parents just as another option for the whole family to enjoy."