

## Generations

# New approach to taking a toddler to dinner

I'm not sure if other baby boomers like yours truly were accustomed to eating in shifts when dining out with toddlers, but one gal in New York is taking the helm to lighten the load by incorporating an innovative idea to transform nerves-on-edge parents into a two-some that can relax at dinner in the company of their 2-year-old.

That's a relief because the few attempts I made with my last toddler (around 35 years ago) at a restaurant was timed to the second the final morsel of food on my plate was gone and right before a hasty exit, carrying my son like a sack of potatoes, before an unhappy scream let loose. We had exhausted offering favorite toys, making faces, and playing "Peek-a-Boo" behind a stack of packets of Sweet and Low (no Smartphones back then) in our quest to grab an extra five minutes for dessert.

According to an article by Elizabeth Segran on [www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com), a new community of "parents with pipsqueaks" who love to eat have formed "Nibble and Squeak," a new kind of resource center for restaurant dining that allows everyone the benefit of relaxing and enjoying a meal in a "worry-free" environment with toddlers.

Nibble and Squeak calls itself "a dining club" that began in New York City about two years ago. It plans meals at of-the-moment restaurants for groups of parents and their children. Kids eat at the adults' table and are not banished to another room to eat overpriced chicken nuggets and watch cartoons or remain home with a babysitter who raids the fridge and talks to every friend on quick dial.

Parents need not worry about disturbing other diners because

Nibble and Squeak takes over the entire dining room or rents a private room for the event. The organization, headed by



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Melissa Elders, a former book editor from New York City who founded the company, uses city "hosts" that work with restaurants to create an accessible, comfortable and accommodating haven for families with children of all ages by gathering "like-minded, empathetic and food-loving parents to share a no-stress meal around the table, together."

And for those who think Nibble and Squeak is just a fad, not so. They already have around 25 hosts in major cities working hard to convince restaurants to set aside a portion of the restaurant for a kid-friendly family dining experience and create a section where kids can be ... kids. Those cities include: Philadelphia; New York City; Atlanta; Denver; Chicago; Miami; Houston; Boston; Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; San Francisco and Austin. There are even quite a few participating restaurants in London, including an interesting bill of fare called "The Drunken Butler."

This upcoming year it will be adding Orlando, Hong Kong and other cities in the Far East to the network.

According to Segran's article, its ultimate goal, aside from hosting meals, is to help change the culture around bringing children out to restaurants. The company is currently compiling a directory of child-friendly restaurants in different neighborhoods so parents don't

have to keep going back to the rare restaurants and chains that are known to tolerate children.

Elders insists that this cultural change is something other countries appear to be adapting easily to. In some European countries, there is more awareness about how to make eating out more comfortable for families. When Elders was living in London, for instance, the local pub was seen as a family-friendly space, open all day, and at 5 p.m., a good place to have dinner with your toddler. Adults can order alcohol, and there is usually a child-friendly menu. Many restaurants in Prague take it a step further: Some come equipped with children's playrooms, kid-sized utensils, and the rare but important diaper-changing station. Outside of McDonald's playlands or Nibble and Squeak events, there isn't really a similar concept in the U.S.

In the parenting book "Bringing Up Bébé," author Pamela Druckerman points out that many French toddlers are able to sit quietly through a meal at a restaurant and part of this has to do with the fact that children are socialized to eat in public from a young age, which is in part because many French restaurants expect children to eat with their parents.

The meal, of course, is a little more expensive than paying a babysitter, but it's part of the new generation's parameters of including children in events many of us did without them.

I like it. Anything that brings the family together as a single unit is a good thing.

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