

Reaching out to young parents through the media -Keeping up with the (contemporary) times

By Sandija Salaka ,

Head of Mommies Club

Sandija Salaka, who is a mother of two young children, recognized the need for more effective means to make relevant information available to young mothers and fathers. She realized that Latvia (and so many other countries) were "baby unfriendly" – having very little opportunity for young mothers to interact, to exchange information, or to establish mutual support. In most instances mothers spent their time at home in isolation with their babies. Sandija was aware of two facts about our contemporary society – a./ the frequent isolation of the new nuclear family lacking a support system, and b./ the increasing use of electronic communication and social networking by the younger generation, that has become the preferred mode of keeping in touch.

As a consequence of this, five years ago she organized the MOMMIES CLUB (Maminu Klubs). It started out as a weekly TV program in Latvia, as well as an internet website providing a parents network. It has been expanding successfully and now has TV programs in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the three separate languages and also Russian.

Mommies Club (M.C.) regularly attracts over 200,000 parents in the Baltic States and parts of Russia through the mothers' internet social network, as well as the dedicated weekly TV program about parenting, and also a radio talk show on the national channel. M.C. functions as a hub for parents to parents, parents to doctors and other specialists and caregivers who are involved in child care. It also connects parents with the government agencies that are responsible for the families' social sphere. Thus M.C. works closely with mothers and represents their needs in society. In that way it has an advocacy role and is an intermediary with other media and institutions.

The basic principle of the M.C. network and its success is Parent-Infant Oriented Thinking and Communication which has been built up through its interactive approach and constant feed-back from the parents. The club has 50,000 members at the present – mostly mothers with

children from zero to pre-school age, living in different parts of the country. This is the great advantage of the modern media of communication. Cost efficient, highly interactive and fast. M.C. is open to every parent in the country, no matter where they live. There are no membership fees. Financially this organization is able exist by allowing discreet advertising of baby products.

During the past five years Mommies Club has become the largest parents' "community" and a serious opinion leader. It is a real club where parents can participate, get support and information, and have a feeling that their voice counts. The website provides an opportunity for young mothers to share their daily lives and frustrations, to find moms near their living places, and to establish one-to-one outside contacts.

What the organizers have learned is that the parents need quick answers. This is what they can obtain through the networking with other mothers as well as answers from the specialists who are consultants to M.C. There is also a high demand for visual material such as DVDs showing mothers interacting with their infants, child specialists demonstrating phases of infant and child development, pediatricians commenting on childhood diseases, and many other themes. The following are some of the DVDs – "Playing with the Baby", "The First Edition", "Facts about Immunization", etc. Parents also need to see that parenting a baby can and should be a playful interaction and not just a complicated task to be fulfilled. M.C. uses the notion that children learn best through play with the adult.

Finally, the principles that are used in the Mommies Club media – TV, radio, internet are the following:

- M.C. media cover child development and health from pregnancy to 3 years of age;
- The focus in every material is always the child interacting;
- Presenters in the programs and chief web editors are mothers themselves. This gives a sense of validation.
- M.C. emphasizes that a problematic child is still a good and loveable child and the

approach has to be an understanding and empathic one;

- M.C. is not a place of criticism, but it is there to provide advice;
- M.C. as a media and an organization works in close cooperation with a wide range of specialists: pediatricians, child psychologists and psychotherapists, social workers, midwives, gynecologists, and representatives of state institutions for children;
- M.C. works with different cultural and ethnic groups in the Baltic States and pays attention to local child care traditions and language, and tries to integrate these into current infant and child research and recommendations;

For more information you can visit the Mommies Club website:

<http://www.maminuklubs.lv>