



Episode 367: Creating Your Tribe:
Micro-Communities for School, Activities and
Social Support

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

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This podcast is brought to you by Cacao Bliss, a delicious superfood drink created by previous podcast guest, Danette May. Many of us like chocolate, and certainly nothing feels better than being able to enjoy rich creamy chocolate and knowing that you're doing something good for your body. But that isn't the case with every type of chocolate. When it's sourced well, chocolate and especially cacao can have many health benefits. It's a great source of magnesium, can be very anti-inflammatory and even help balance hormones. In fact, some experts speculate that this is why we crave chocolate at certain times of the month. Cacao Bliss is one of the best sources of this that I have found. They start with 100% organic cacao beans that are naturally dried in the sun, maintaining their miraculous health benefits. And then they blend this with turmeric, MCT oil, coconut, sea salt, cinnamon, and black pepper. So not only does it taste delicious, but it makes you feel incredible as well. The result is this truly decadent healthy, but guilt-free chocolate that helps with cravings, it can be great for weight loss, for boosting energy, reducing inflammation, all in one simple drink that has become a relatively regular part of my life. And for those who are wondering it is paleo, gluten-free, keto, vegan and vegetarian safe. They have been making this for eight years. I'm a big fan. And as a listener of this podcast, you get an automatic 15% discount by going to earthechofoods.com/wellnessmama and you will have an automatic 15% discount.

Katie: Hello, welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com and wellnesse.com. That's wellnesse with an E on the end, my new line of personal care products that benefit your body from the outside in, including haircare, hand sanitizer, and toothpaste.

This shorter episode is a question and answers solo episode that will hopefully answer some follow-up questions from you guys related to a couple of past episodes about community and about homeschooling. In

this episode, I'm talking about creating your tribe and building micro-communities this year for school, for extracurricular activities, and for social support. Because this is a recurring theme that seems to keep coming up, and one that I hope I can encourage you to consider for your family this year.

It is not a secret that school looks different for many of us this year. Certainly, in fact, everything looks different for many of us this year. In a recent podcast episode with our managing editor, Carrie, she and I walked through some of our best homeschool systems and tips, hopefully to offer encouragement to any other homeschool families or virtual schooling families, especially if you're just jumping in this year, and it's the first time that you are attempting it. Like I said, I got a lot of follow up questions on this. So, I decided it deserved its own short episode that would address some of these questions. And the reason that I think this micro-community idea is so important is that for many families, we are removing the element of kids actually going to school, where they had a lot of their central groups. This also is removing the possibility of a lot of extracurricular activities that were facilitated through the school or even in conjunction with the school.

And families are finding they're spending a lot more time at home, which certainly has many, many benefits, but that they might be missing out on some of these elements of community that were easier in a school or extracurricular environment. And I think a lot of us would admit that our social groups have changed quite a bit in as a result of everything going on this year. I know in our family, a lot of the extracurricular activities my kids were enrolled in have been canceled or drastically changed this year. And this led to us adapting and I figured out a few methods that seemed to be really beneficial, and I wanted to share them with you.

So, when we started finally getting what this ball was gonna look like, a lot of the extracurriculars were completely canceled or moved to Zoom. And I wasn't interested in them doing, for instance, art virtually via Zoom, because then I would actually just be having them on a computer where I was still facilitating the art. And things like gymnastics class involves a whole bunch of other layers of temperature taking and masks and, you know, very drop off times and all this complexity, and were moved to less convenient times.

I'm also realizing that there is at least a decent chance that a lot of things get completely shut down again, including a school. And I think the first round of this was so tough on a lot of families, that I wanted to be proactive this time and have some things in place. So, if that happens, again, it's not as difficult as it was in the beginning. And you've heard me talk about community most likely on this podcast before. You might have also heard the idea that it takes a village and I disagree. I think it takes a tribe. And I think right now all of us need a tribe more than we ever have before. And then it's more difficult to find and create a tribe than it ever has been before. And the reason I make that distinction is that a village is simply a group of people who live in the same area. But a tribe is a group that's connected by some common interest or cultural reason or social structure. And I think what we all need right now in various areas, not just one is that element of support.

We're also finding there's likely going to be logistical limits on large group activities, and many extracurricular activities in a lot of places. So, a lot of the areas we would have found, those tribes and social support are changing or going away. But if anything, our need for support and interaction has actually increased with all of the additional stress of this year. So, while thankfully, we do have technology and virtual interaction can work

for some aspects of education, and for team communication, it can't ever psychologically replace in-person interaction or the need for it. And so, as many families jump into homeschooling for the first time, or use virtual options for school through a school system, my encouragement is to consider and cultivate these small groups or micro-communities, tribes that are so vital for social interaction. And also, I would say, as a mom for my sanity, even I'm finding homeschool co-ops and homeschool extracurriculars are canceled. And so, creating these groups may be our only source of interaction for both parents and kids.

So, to get practical for a few minutes. This is the reason that in our local area, our family, and people in our neighborhood and our local community have been working on a new approach to building these kind of micro tribes of support this year. Like I said, with the possibility of another round of shutdowns, our goal was to create and have built in small groups that would still be able to meet and support each other, and that could center around common interest and help each other with various aspects of life or education. And the great news is that if we focus on the positive, the events of the past few months have created an opportunity for us to intentionally really nurture these mutually supportive communities. And often to provide activities for our kids that might even be better than the ones that were canceled in the first place. So, I'll share some practical ways that I'm doing this with our family in a little while. I've found already that this has been a huge time saver and stress reliever and has actually really cultivated family time and close friendships.

So, as examples, we used to drive our kids to gymnastics or to tumbling once a week, and the time that was available for their skill level was right before dinnertime. So, you've heard me talk about how family dinner is a non-negotiable, and having time at night was a non-negotiable. This was right before that, we were able to do it, but that night always felt a little bit rushed and a little bit more hectic than normal. With all the layers that came with the changes to their gymnastics program we decided to take an alternative approach. And now we have a gymnastics, we hired a friend as a group of families. Several families got together and hired a friend of ours who taught tumbling at the college level. And she now teaches in our neighborhood using some basic equipment that we bought. And we collectively spent less money now have the equipment that the kids can practice on all the time, and the teacher comes to us on our schedule. So, that completely removed the stress aspect of that activity and improved the experience of that activity, both for me in the logistics and for the kids, because they now have a space to practice that non-stop.

I will say as a caveat, I now have a think over 20-foot gymnastics track down the hallway of my house and it gets loud sometimes, but my kids are having an opportunity to be active even when it rains. So, that's just one example. But the idea being that as we move into this fall, and we still have this need for social interaction, we think through intentionally creating communities centered on a variety of needs and reasons. So, some of these communities might be social, which could be as simple as a group of several families that regularly get together for interaction and letting the kids play. Some of the ways we do this is organizing a dinner group once a week with a couple of other families from our neighborhood or an outdoor playgroup, for our kids, etc., just didn't have people that we regularly interact with and have exposure to. They could also be activity-based. So, that would be like the gymnastics example I just gave. This could be organized around a specific activity like a sport or like gardening, it could be anything that can be learned in a group setting that may be used to be learned in school, or along those same lines.

It could be an education-based micro-community to support homeschool or local virtual school. This term has been on the rise right now, micro-communities. And this can range from the idea of I've heard of families hiring a teacher together to teach all of their kids. So, several families actually hiring a teacher as a full-time teacher just tutors as part of small homeschool groups or to teach certain subjects of homeschooling. Or on a less formal method, moms alternating teaching certain activities between families so that kids are getting exposure to more teachers than just mom and learning from other kind of skills. So, those are just some of the ideas to get you thinking of how micro-communities can be created and where you can start with for these kind of things. I think just like homeschooling and just like health, the answers to these are going to be different for everyone and very personalized. I just would encourage you to think of how these can be incorporated in your life.

Even if you're not homeschooling how can you build your tribes of support for this year when things still seem a little unusual. Another practical way that we helped to figure out the direction for these little tribes was by a yearly exercise we do with our kids. Which is by having them choose their goals and activities for the year and then figuring out how we could build on or combine these goals that they have with other people in our local area. So, for example, several of my kids wanted to learn the same instruments, and a couple of other kids in the neighborhood did as well. So, we can combine our music teachers have them come to us versus as all drive to the same place to them. Several families in our area, we're all driving to the same extracurriculars like music and like gymnastics and now those things can happen in our home instead. So, we encourage each of our children to pick kind of a new physical activity or pursuit or one that they want to improve on. A language or mental activity or skill, and then something involving music to focus on each year.

And this year, we're building little micro-communities around ones that they have in common. So, they also are getting the social interaction built in. So, from examples from our own life, here are a few of the micro-communities that I'm working on building. The first one is just basic homeschool community. We saw a big shift in our neighborhood, we have a pretty small neighborhood but well over half of the children now homeschool. In fact, it's probably closer to two thirds, many of them for the first time this year. So, we have combined with several other families in our neighborhood and are working together for our kids to be able to do activities that would be traditionally done in a school setting like debate, art, science projects, and hands-on activities. But to do them together so we can share resources and minimize the work and expense for each of the families. And the unusual one that we have as well is pole vaulting. I know this isn't gonna be one maybe that applies to a lot of families, but for our family as an example.

This is already thankfully a pretty small group activity, so it hasn't been canceled locally for very long, just in a short amount of time during the beginning of lockdown. But we are working with the local facility to create a homeschool specific class for pole vaulting and this is why I offer this as an example. Even if you don't homeschool, if you have activities that are not happening through the school system now, consider asking the local places if they would host a specific class for your small group in off-hours to keep it easier, to keep the group size. And so, your kids can keep doing these activities. That also typically makes the logistics easier if you are homeschooling or virtual schooling and have time freedom, it's often easier, less traffic, and just logistical easier with nighttime schedule, if these things can happen during the day. Another type of community we're forming is around art and creativity. So, we loved our little local homeschool art class and our kids were able to bike to this in the past.

It was nearby and it was absolutely wonderful and I loved that the kids had the autonomy of biking. Because of everything going on the teacher opted to go virtual this year. And like I mentioned, I wasn't really interested in the kids learning art via Zoom where I had to keep them on the computer and then also help them do the project. So, instead, I am drawing on my own art background to teach art classes for all of the kids in our little micro-community. And just like with gymnastics, we're actually saving money even by buying all the supplies. And I'm looking forward to actually getting to creatively interact with the kids through teaching an art program. And because of the time freedom of homeschooling or virtual schooling for a couple of families, we're able to do this during the day or on the weekends and times when it's not gonna affect normal family life for any of us.

Another example of a micro-community in our local area now is related to music. And I mentioned this a little bit on combining with instruments. This is definitely not one I am teaching. I am not a natural musician at all. I'm working on learning music myself, but I don't consider myself equipped to teach my kids any instrument, or certainly how to sing. I'm taking voice lessons myself, and it's been a lesson in frustration and small progress for me. But the kids came up with music goals for the year that included everything from piano, to guitar, ukulele, and harmonica. So, we gave them a couple of options and found some creative solutions to do that. We either found local teachers that could come in and teach small group classes, or older teenagers in some of the families in our micro-community to teach younger kids individually or in small group classes. There are also online resources for some of these things. So, if you already are looking at a virtual option, I can put some links to those in the show notes, but through websites like Udemy, or there's piano specific ones. There's creative ways to learn music. And this has been fun because we're getting to bond with other families and I'm around hearing these lessons and learning a little bit by osmosis as well.

And then I mentioned gymnastics, but a little bit more specifics on this one. So, like I said, rather than the late afternoon trek to the gymnastics facility, we bought a tumble track that I can link to in the show notes and some basic gymnastics equipment that we already had. My dad built a, what's called a stall wall, which is a gymnastics wall. We already had rings in the kids rooms and outside. And then we hired a local friend who used to teach gymnastics to teach our small group of kids. And then because of that, they're getting to focus on the part they love, which is the tumbling versus the gymnastics more performance side. And like I said, this ended up being cheaper, and the kids are getting much more personalized instruction, and they have a built-in place to practice. So, I think this is gonna stick around even after it gets easier to do these things in their more traditional facilities.

Another micro-community we're building is in relation to language learning. We've always used a mixture of things like Duolingo and different software to learn. But this need for community has kind of spurred the idea of working with local friends who are already fluent in the languages and actually learning and interacting with them directly in those languages. Current interest amongst the kids are Spanish and Japanese, which are pretty practical. Like, I think Spanish is a great language to learn right now. And they, several of them picked Japanese, in hopes that a couple of their friends are potentially on track to make it to the Olympics next year and they'd love to be able to go watch. And so, they're wanting to prepare to learn Japanese in advance of that. So, we're working with local friends to learn those languages and then to have someone to actually speak

back and forth with and just like any of these micro-communities and classes, there's a built-in benefit here as well. They're getting more personalized instruction from people they already know and trust. And also the person teaching, especially if it's not their first language they're getting reinforcement.

And they're getting better by getting to teach the skill because as Richard Feynman was famous for pointing out, "When you teach something, you actually retain it and remember it better." So, anytime we can build in the peer teaching or involving someone in a small community in teaching it benefits both people.

Last, in the spring, many of you may have had fitness facilities and gyms in your local area close, this was certainly the case where we are. And during that time, a lot of us turned to, you know, home fitness options, or outdoor fitness options. And I think this is one of the great silver linings of everything of this year. And I'm really excited to see this happen and hoping it sticks. It certainly is for us. So, rather than all of us returning to just a gym mentality, we decided to build micro communities around this in our own neighborhood. And these are much less formal than, for instance, the homeschool ones or the personalized kids' activities. But we realized that we had yoga teachers in our neighborhood, we had people with similar fitness goals in our very small area.

And so, we just started building these things in as opportunities to do together. So, whether it's someone in the neighborhood teaching a yoga class, or several of us just going for a walk, or a sprint, or running, or lifting weights together, we now have built-in fitness partners, and also social interaction from our small groups. Perhaps the micro-community I am most excited about this year is the one that I've already been teaching my own kids for a while, and that now I'm kind of expanding to our local community, and I will also soon hopefully be expanding to include your family if you would like. And that is the business incubator/entrepreneurship and finance course that we developed for our own family. Like I said, I'm teaching this to a local group of kids now, and I'm working on an online version for families to be able to do this together. But it's built on the idea that we created in our family, which is that when the kids are about 13, or 14, they finish up most of what would be considered traditional school, and they move into a phase that's more like a business incubator slash entrepreneurship course for them.

And our reasoning here was that we could teach many of the most important skills for adulthood in a very hands-on fashion, through the practice of running a business. So, everything from financial management, to attention to detail, consistency, problem-solving, tolerance for risk, learning from failure. So much is built into the experience of creating a business. This doesn't have to be a large business by any means. It could be something as simple as pet sitting or mowing the grass, or it could be a bigger, more involved complex business. But we set the expectation with our kids that we were gonna help them do this, and that this was something in our family that we require before they can drive and before they can have a phone. And it's been really amazing to see this start paying off with our older kids and to see how it's leading to them thinking in a problem solving way and innovating in various aspects of their lives, that I wanted to be able to offer this to other children in our community as well. And so, we're building for the first time a small group focus on that that I'll be teaching. And like I said, I'll also be working as fast as I can to get this available for your family if you want to give your kids this basis for financial management and a long term strategy for business and financial management, and wealth, and all the lessons that are so naturally built in to that.

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And lastly, another area that really works great if you're gonna organize around tribes, and micro-communities, and small groups is field trips. So, most people are familiar with field trips in the context of school where the whole class goes to any particular place for a field trip often to learn. And I found this is actually even more effective for small groups and homeschool groups. And what we've done is to get groups together. And you can actually ask almost every local place about facilitating a field trip and very rarely do any of the places we asked say no. Even in this kind of crazy world right now, very few of them are saying no and many are able to accommodate small groups. So, by having a small homeschool group together, we're able to ask them and then go learn about field trips while still maintaining all of the local guidelines.

And some examples of these fun places to tour that have built-in learning are things like bakeries, where you can learn like all the chemistry and science of baking, and also scaling and all of the math that goes into that. Manufacturing facilities if they allow children are fascinating places for kids to go watch and see how things get assembled and made. Animal rescues, veterinarians offices. Even things like restaurants that are only open for dinner are often willing to offer culinary classes or just any kind of field trip earlier in the day. It's kind of thinking outside the box and figuring out where in your local area you can utilize for field trips. And this works great whether you homeschool or your virtual schooling or even if you're not and you're in traditional school. Many of these businesses are very willing to accommodate children. So, if you have kids in a group, even on the weekend that want to go learn from these places very often they say yes.

Just some other ways that I would encourage thinking outside the box when it comes to social interaction building community, or even just parental sanity, especially if you're new to homeschooling. Some things that I found especially helpful. I mentioned, if possible, using skills from other families and from the small group to benefit each other. I found it's really awesome to hire responsible teenagers from another family to teach younger ones in your family. And I mentioned that in the context of music, it's also great for art. If you have older teenagers who are great at art, they can teach younger ones. Often, you may not even have to think of as far as hiring an official teacher for a lot of these activities if you can hire an older child who has a proficiency in this skill. I also find since we are all home a lot more than normal right now, it's really important to nurture outside, play spaces as much as possible, and to encourage outdoor play as much as possible. This can be... I'll share the post in the show notes. But things like having a fort or a treehouse, having a slackline for balance, swings, ropes, they can climb, rings. Not only are those things great for them, because they're moving and they're playing, and it's a social interaction.

In previous podcast episodes, I've talked to people like Carol from Brain Harmony, about how those types of movements are actually really vital for vestibular development. And how psychologically those things actually prime your kids for some of those same lessons like knowing their boundaries, risk tolerance, just a lot of things are built into the movements of those types of play. And if you're homeschooling for the first time or you have your kids home more, because of virtual school, you have more time freedom to facilitate those things and to also maybe learn from the lesson that some of our grandmothers, you might remember teaching us just go outside and play and come back when it gets dark.

I also would say use your micro-groups and small groups, if possible to build in days off for each other, or ways that you can support each other's bandwidth. And what I mean by this is if you're new to homeschooling or if you have your kids home for virtual school and you weren't even planning on homeschooling, there is a level of exhaustion that comes with that, especially during the transition.

So, if you're forming communities with several other families. And especially if you have young children and a very intensive day-to-day routine, figure out ways that hopefully each parent gets a little bit of time off on a regular basis. Whether that be one parent facilitating playgroup, so others can run errands or just get time off,

take a nap, go for a walk, whatever it may be. But just figure out creative ways. Even if schools are shut down, daycares are shut down, normal activities are shut down that you can still get a mental sanity break.

Another simple way that I love doing that with local moms it's just having coffee dates in the morning with other parents. Maybe we're going for a walk and drinking coffee, maybe we're sitting in the yard while the kids play and drinking coffee but just having those built-in sanity checks.

Like I mentioned, it can be outside the family or within the family. But if you are adding homeschooling to routine or even if you've already been a homeschooler, any ways that you can involve the older kids and helping teach younger kids. This can be within your own family or crossing over families that you have some in your community. And the advantage here, like I mentioned, is that by teaching, the older kids actually internalize the lesson in a more efficient way as well and they recall more. So, you can make use of your resources effectively by having the older kids be involved in helping pass on skills to the younger kids. I haven't done this yet, but someone suggested for as far as micro-communities, many local theaters are shut down right now because of all of the guidelines. So, if you can find people from those local areas that can facilitate theater coaching, public speaking, debate or acting with small groups of kids, that's another thing you can bring into your home and your local area and facilitate for your children. In the same way, a lot of coaches and teachers are not working in their normal way. And so, you may be able to hire them part-time or have them just come in and do classes with your children, especially if there are areas you are not as strong in teaching. There's so many opportunities right now to involve people and support your local community while making sure your kids still get to learn those things.

Same thing with just, like, some basic tips. I'm thinking ahead for fall as well with so much less social interaction than they would normally be. We're planning ahead for things like Halloween parties, because we're expecting probably most aspects of normal Halloween are going to get canceled. So, we're planning instead to host those things in small groups and to let the kids have time to make their own costumes. And to dress up for that. Same thing with to keep it fun themed get-togethers. Whether it be costume parties or just themed activities, Oktoberfest whatever it is to have social interactions and excuses to get together even though these things aren't being organized as much in on a wider scale in local areas. And then lastly, I would say an encouragement especially if homeschooling is new to you or virtual schooling. A small sanity tip that I give is, if you can limit the time that kids are required to sit down and maximize the time that they're able to move, and be outside, and be creative, it will keep everyone's stress levels lower.

And often this can be as simple as getting as efficient as possible at the bookwork. So, you're not just spending time on books, and I know this is why many families are opting to actually fully homeschool over during a virtual system that involves sitting on computer on Zoom for a certain number of hours per day. Because with the time freedom of homeschooling, children can move at their own pace and free up more of their time. I actually love this because it teaches the really important lesson in life, that time is your most valuable asset and not money, not education, but time. And so, when you can use these other assets to free up your time, and you have time freedom, and you can use it however you want. So, just for a sanity perspective, I recommend figuring out how to get as efficient and structured as possible with the things you actually have to

get done in school, realizing that there's probably less of that than you think there is. And then building in lots of time to nurture movement and creativity, and time outside, just as a reset and a check for all of you.

So, like I said, this is a shorter episode, focused on how your family can nurture hopefully, micro-communities that are there for your family for social support so that your kids can still do some of the activities they love, and also to help everybody in your little local group with education. I hope that this will give you some ideas to use in your own life, whether you're homeschooling or not, whether you're using virtual options or not. I think we can all benefit from these types of communities and I think they, like I said, are increasingly important in terms of I guess where normal social interaction is limited. As always, if you have questions, I'm happy to answer them. So, feel free to ask them on Instagram via direct message, or on this post on wellnessmama.fm and I can respond there or answer questions in a follow-up episode. I would love to hear from you guys, what school looks like for you this year. And if you're homeschooling, or virtual schooling or what ended up being the best option for your family. I hope that this has answered some of your questions that you guys left in the previous episode. And as always, I'm so grateful that you were part of this community that you joined me listening today and that you shared your most valuable asset your time with me today. I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of "The Wellness Mama Podcast."

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