

'This will make motherhood a lot easier'

It's billed as the walking, strolling and driving guide to family-friendly locations in the Lower Mainland, but to many Vancouver parents, it's more like a lifeline.

The "Mommy Map" is the brainchild of Dalit Holzman.

Three years ago, she was a newcomer to Vancouver's Commercial Drive area, alone all day with a newborn and feeling isolated. She decided to find out what she could do and where she could go to meet other mothers. As well, she was sure that during her outings there had to be better places to change her baby daughter's diaper than on a dirty washroom floor.

"I'm an information hound," Ms. Holzman said. "I knew there must be resources out there for mothers and babies, but I didn't know what or where they were. So I started searching."

The results of her research amazed her.

"There were so many wonderful programs; most of them didn't cost much money and most of them were underutilized," she recalled. She said that might have been because public relations are often the first thing to go when budget cuts hit government agencies.

Ms. Holzman, 30, an Israeli native who moved to Vancouver from the United States, began making a list of resources in her lively

neighbourhood for mothers with babies and small children. She called and e-mailed other mothers to pass on the information. Friends began sending her tips in return.

"I figured there must be an alternate way to get the word out," said Ms. Holzman, the mother of two girls, three-year-old Amalina and three-month-old Starla.

Ms. Holzman, who used to work as an information co-ordinator with the Alzheimer Society of Canada, hit on the idea of creating an information brochure. She immediately got down to business, taking a course in self-employment, founding the non-profit Society for Family-Friendliness and looking for appropriate advertising to defray the printing costs.

In October, 2004, the first Mommy Map was born: a triple-folded single sheet of paper that included 32 advertisers, one small map and a link to a website (<http://www.mommymap.com>). Twenty thousand copies of the free map were distributed to libraries, health units, stores and community centres.

One of the first advertisers to participate was Sandra Poelzer, owner of an Eastside children's consignment store.

Ms. Poelzer, who has an eight-month-old son, said she has several customers who found her store through the map, and she uses it herself to find family friendly restaurants.

"I hate it when you walk into a restaurant with the baby and they give you that look, like we don't want you here," Ms. Poelzer said.

"That look" is just one of the many things first-time parents have to deal with, Ms. Holzman said.

She points out that new mothers often feel lonely and depressed as they cope with the challenges of a new baby and changing family relationships.

"Few mothers have their parents around to help," she said. "Their friends are their extended family, and it helps so much to be able to get out and talk to other people and find that they have exactly the same feelings about all these things as you do. I think it's important to be physically involved in the community."

She said that while the Mommy Map provides her with a small income, she especially enjoys the benefits of working from home and being with her children.

Her partner, Guy Smeeth, a car salesman with a Vancouver dealership, helps her distribute the Mommy Maps and is very much a hands-on father, she said.

The latest edition of the Mommy Map was published this month, with 50,000 copies printed. It now contains five double-sided pages, with colourful maps covering six Lower Mainland areas, including Richmond and Maple Ridge, and an expanded listing of resources. These include phone numbers and addresses for health units, libraries, neighbourhood houses and community centres, and family friendly restaurants (complete with washroom changing tables).

There are also lists of new and used children's clothing stores, as well as kid-friendly grocery stores, parent-and-tot swims, local parks

programs and secluded breastfeeding areas. The free map is available at libraries, some government agencies, community centres, stores and on-line. It is also distributed by the Welcome Wagon.

Helen Moore, a resident of the Mount Pleasant area, has an 18-month-old son and she is also expecting her second child. Ms. Moore is a Mommy Map fan.

"I picked up a map at our local library -- it's a great resource. It even lists where you can get a cup of coffee in a kid-friendly environment. I checked out the website too, and there's a ton of information on anything you could possibly want to do with your kids. I had no idea there were so many activities and places to go."

Ms. Holzman said the Mommy Map is also a "daddy map" and "nanny map," because anyone who cares for children will find it helpful.

Vancouverite Martin Ivison, who is the main caregiver for his four-year-old son, agrees.

"It is awesome, truly impressive, great information," he said.

Ms. Holzman frequently receives e-mail thank-you notes from satisfied map users.

"I just wanted to tell you how amazing the Mommy Map is," one woman wrote. "I would have killed for this when I was new to the area. I just used to go to the mall. This will make motherhood a lot easier."

Which is exactly what Ms. Holzman is hoping for.

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