

BABYWEARING
REVISITED

SHOES
FOR SPRING

ECO-FRIENDLY
HOME TIPS

SUMMER CAMP
DISCOVERIES

New York family

April 2009
Established 1986

The Lowdown
On Child Care,
Baby Safety,
Strollers,
Life Insurance,
And More

SEEDS OF JOY

The Two Families
Behind apple seeds
Kick Off Our Annual
Guide For New
Parents In The City

apple seeds
founders Craig
Schlanger (top),
Allison Schlanger
(right), Bobby
Berna (bottom),
and Alison Quarter
Berna (left), with
their children.

editor's NOTE

NEW PARENTS FOREVER



Magazines for parents face a challenge that never goes away. Readers often start with us when they are new parents hungry for information and support. But they don't stay new parents for long. So in creating a menu of stories, a parenting editor always needs to be thinking about new parents as well as parents whose children are making their way through childhood.

Personally, I like the challenge of creating a magazine every month that welcomes new parents while trying to keep everyone else with you for a good long ride. If we do our job well, you should be able to find yummy staples and delicious surprises in every issue regardless of your child's age. And it's the same with our popular weekly e-newsletter (which you can register for at newyorkfamily.com), and our live events division. We try to be there when you need a New Parents Expo or a Camp Fair.

But in much the same way that a school or religious group holds special events to welcome new members, it's also a good idea for a family magazine to have special sections once or twice a year just for new parents, to welcome them to the neighborhood of the magazine. And this is one of those issues.

If you're an NYC parent with young children, I hope you'll come on in. The door is open, and we've put out a grand spread of articles on child care, strollers, life insurance, fertility, child safety, family real estate, baby wearing (though that one is a humor piece; see the "On Second Thought" column),

and a rollicking, truth-telling personal essay about one mom's embrace of her inner bitch.

At the same time, I couldn't ask for four better ambassadors for an issue devoted to new parents than the founding families of apple seeds, the impressive children's activity center located on the Chelsea side of Madison Square Park.

They were new parents themselves—each family with a set of twins—when, three years ago, they mapped out the huge challenge of creating a large-scale children's center, and then opened it only a year later. Their success is a reflection of their high standards, hard work,

creativity, and, most of all, I think, their true love for their enterprise. To know them is to know that. And I hope you'll enjoy getting to know them.

New parents would also do well to acquaint themselves with two other family pioneers featured in this issue, two women who have been enriching the lives of city parents for decades. They are Wendy Levey of Epiphany Community Nursery School and 74th Street Magic, and Gail Ionescu of Poppyseed Pre-Nursery. The enduring popularity of their organizations is a testament to their professionalism,

wisdom, and big hearts. I suppose we can think of them as apple trees!

Call me crazy but aren't we all new parents at heart? Does the wonder part of being a parent ever go away?

Have a happy April,

Eric Messinger

"If you're an NYC parent with young children, I hope you'll come on in. The door is open, and we've put out a grand spread of articles on child care, strollers, life insurance, and much else."

DOUBLE THE FUN

BY STACEY PFEFFER AND ERIC MESSINGER

*Take Two Families, Each With A Set Of Young Twins. Add A Common Vision, A Passion For Parenthood, And A Fabulous Friendship. **The Result? apple seeds!** One Of The City's Leading Children's Activity Centers*

Three years ago a friendship was forged in a freight elevator. Chelsea moms **Alison Qualter Berna** and **Allison Schlanger**, both mothers of twins, were taking a parent/child music class in an office building that was about as kid-unfriendly as it got. There wasn't even a place to change or feed their children. But that experience, stressful as it was, planted a seed. Though more and more families were settling in their neighborhood, there was a scarcity of children's play spaces and programs to support them. So Alison and Allison, feeling the need themselves, decided to try to remedy the situation. Joined by their husbands, **Bobby Berna** and **Craig Schlanger**, they started with the idea of an indoor playground and ended up with **apple seeds**, a flourishing children's enrichment and activity center that, in two quick years, has become a pillar of family life in the Flatiron-Chelsea-Murray Hill area.

Prior to **apple seeds**, each of the four had thriving but separate careers: **Alison Qualter Berna** managed a UNICEF development program focused on sports and play; **Allison Schlanger** was an executive producer at MTV; **Bobby Berna** was a business development executive working with start-up companies; and **Craig Schlanger** was a NASDAQ trader. Today, the two career-driven couples work full-time on raising their "third baby," which includes an award-winning indoor play space for the 5-and-under set; children's classes in music, science, yoga, cooking, soccer, art and dance, among other subjects; a children's boutique and bookstore; and a small hair salon and snack bar. "May 2006 was our first meeting, and we opened up March 1, 2007—it was like the length of a pregnancy. It was like giving birth," says Qualter Berna.

Yes, but to a whole community.





Alison Qualter Berna and Bobby Berna (outside the taxi), and Allison Schlanger and Craig Schlanger (driving the taxi), with their children.

Photography by Thaddeus Harden/thaddeusharden.com

Who came up with the name apple seeds?

Bobby Berna: My dad actually came up with it.

What was the runner-up?

Allison Schlanger: We had Chelsea's Playground, The Playground, Mini-City, Double Happiness.

Craig Schlanger: They all stink when you think about it.

Alison Qualter Berna: One thing that we really love about it is that kids can say it. Kids walk out of here and they are barely talking but they are saying "apple seeds, apple seeds." And it starts with an A.

CS: Which is good because let's say you are looking up birthday parties—apple seeds usually comes first.

BB: My dad was a secret marketing genius.

This is such a family affair—two families, four parents, two sets of twins—how do you all make it work? Is there room for disagreements? Power struggles?

AQB: We all respect each other's ability to make decisions, and fortunately we blend extremely well in our skill sets. Working with your husband, which I can talk about, is a little different than working with your best friend, and Allison, hands down, is my best friend. I remember when we were walking down Fifth Avenue before the business opened and Allison said to me if this doesn't work out, can we still be best friends? And I remember feeling I love this person, because I was thinking the same thing. But what's actually happened in the last two years is that our friendship has deepened. Every working mom has this impossible balancing act, but we now have this situation where work not only often means having our children nearby, it also means being there for each other when things start to go off balance.

BB: Also, we basically agree on a lot. Usually there is not a lot of

“but I feel *this* way.” We are on the same page with a vision, and because of that everything seems like a pretty obvious decision.

AS: Right, it is just fine-tuning and convincing each other on little things.

CS: And we defer on different issues. If it’s something related to classes and what’s good for the community and what moms want, Allison and Alison make those decisions. If there are business decisions or vendor deals, me and Bobby are going to make those decisions. So while there are individual decisions, we kind of all have our own roles, and we defer to each other when we need to. And no one makes unilateral decisions.

AS: Here’s the interesting part: Between building a business and raising two kids, we kind of dropped out of our social life for a while and became each other’s main source of social life. But because we enjoyed being around each other so much, it made it possible to make the business move at lightning speed.

What about complications related to working with your spouse?

CS: I think it’s not as dramatic as people might think. The only real issue that I would say is that sometimes when we are not at work but one person’s brain is still there—that’s the drama. At work, we have separate projects to work on—and it is great to have your wife next door, have your kids stop by. It’s great to have a blend of family and work.

AQB: And it can blend nicely at home too. When you do go home you aren’t talking about things in a vacuum because you both care about it and you talk about it with the kids because they care about it too. Our kids inform us half the time about what we should be doing.

Recently apple seeds celebrated its 2nd birthday, and yet it hums with so much child energy and activity it has the feel of a more established center. Is it the vision you had hoped for?

AS: Originally, our dream was an indoor playground. We lived near Madison Square Park, and when the weather wasn’t good, there were very few places to go besides other people’s apartments. And it evolved from there.

AQB: We loved the idea that you can go to a community space and your kid can run more than 100 feet away from you without you panicking, and knowing that they are safe. A place where you can spend a whole day with your kid.

BB: There were music classes there, art classes here, gym classes someplace else, but not all at one place. We’ve actually had people tell us they put off going to the suburbs

because of apple seeds.

AS: It also helped that we found this great space. We wanted a view and proximity to the park and also proximity to our homes. It is about equidistant to where Craig and I and the boys live, and Alison and Bobby live with the girls. It’s our community. It is exactly where we wanted to build something.

BB: The two-block commute also was great.

In our experience, New York City parents will speak up if they’re not happy about something. Given that you were all new to this business, has there been a big learning curve?

AQB: You can’t please everyone of course, but you can listen, and I think we all went into this feeling that we represent the parents in our community because we are those parents too. But certainly none of us had run a business before, so one of the most interesting things to learn was how many policies needed to be created. And just when you think you understand every curveball that is going to be thrown at you, you get a new curveball.

What’s an example of a necessary policy you hadn’t foreseen?

AS: We opened in March and all of a sudden we hit the summer and everyone was walking around in flip-flops and was going barefoot into the playground and we were like, that isn’t very sanitary.

So what’s the policy?

AS: Socks!

Is there anything you’d like to improve upon at apple seeds?

AS: More space for strollers.

What kinds of classes do new parents in particular gravitate toward? Like during the first year? What about when the kids are between 1 and 2?

AS: New parents gravitate toward music and movement—you can truly enjoy those classes with your child, you are both involved. It’s amazing to watch your child shake an instrument for the first time, attempt to climb stairs...by the time they are 18+ months-old, they are capable of doing so much more—art, ballet, and parent/child playgroups are very popular.

Can everyone share their one favorite thing about the place?

CS: I think we would all say the same thing: our music class, Songs for Seeds [All four nod in agreement]. All four of us are music fans, and our kids love music, and they [Allison and Alison] met in a music class, and I think we’re just very proud of what Allison and Alison accomplished in overseeing the creation of Songs for Seeds.

“Every working mom has this impossible balancing act,” says Alison. “But we now have this situation where work not only often means having our children nearby, it also means being there for each other when things start to go off balance.”



So what exactly is Songs for Seeds?

AQB: First, we have to talk about Mr. Ray. He is such an incredible children’s musician and he wrote the music for the program, which offers a little bit of everything, especially interaction. We wanted to not only focus on performance for children but interaction with children with a fun, modern approach to it. With the help of the staff, Allison and I wrote the curriculum, and it was probably the most challenging thing I had ever done in my life—leaps and bounds harder than starting a business because of the fact that you have to compound everything into a 45-minute period and make it good.

AS: We have three teachers per class—a guitarist/lead vocalist, a pianist, and a drummer, and we have three sets of musicians, so nine musicians in total. We’ve got nine stars. It’s so much fun. It’s our children’s favorite class too, and they are the best judges.

Speaking of all those twins, what have been some of your greatest joys and biggest challenges as parents?

AS: We have two sons, Sam and Ari, who are 4. When we first had the twins, one of our guys, Ari, was in the hospital for the first month, and the first night we brought him home I was sitting with Sam on my lap, and Craig brought Ari over to me and literally the minute they saw each other they held hands and it was the most incredible moment. Now skip ahead four years and it’s like it’s all coming true:

They are at this age where it is incredible to see them together. They are so into pretend play and are great at incorporating each other into their games. I don’t want to say that they are the best at taking turns, but even if they both want to do Peter Pan, they say I’ll be Peter Pan first and you’ll be Peter Pan second or we can both be Peter Pan. It is such a good age to watch them be fulfilled as friends and as brothers.

And who will speak for the other family?

AQB: I went into this interview thinking you’d ask us about our kids, and I thought of three words that describe our two daughters, Madeleine and Sydney. The first is empathy, the second is hilarious, and the third is their connectedness. What I’ve noticed is that watching them is like watching fluid happen: They just move the same way. Like if I go to the dentist with one of them and they have to pick out a toy, they’ll say, well, what should I get for my sister? And when they’re together, just watching them interact is truly the biggest joy—it is a symbiosis that we probably can never fully understand, but you can see how they worry about each other and how they start to worry about others and what’s going on around them.

CS: We are all talking about how nice it is having twins but let me tell you, the first year and a half of having twins was nuts! So I like to watch people that have five or more, and go yeah, this is ridiculous. Yesterday I was watching “Jon & Kate Plus 8” with Allison and they took each child out for a day alone and Allison cried at it.

AS: You know why? It’s because of what the daughter said. They did an isolated shot of the daughter and she said, this was the best day of my life! And I was like “Oh!” and I felt so bad for this kid. She has never been alone with her parents. They took her for two hours to the zoo. It’s a challenge giving twins alone time.

Do you have a special code or bargain that you aren’t going to have another child without the other family having one?

AQB: We always kid around that if I were to have another girl and they had another boy, we’d swap.

And how about apple seeds? What’s the next step?

BB: We’ve already begun our expansion phase. We have a deal with a developer—The Brodsky Organization—and we’ve partnered with them to put three apple seeds playrooms in their buildings. Naturally, we also are looking for other locations similar to what we have here.

CS: Yes. These are scary times, but there may be opportunities here in New York City, and we will be exploring new locations in the city.

AQB: There was a time when we were getting 2 to 3 emails a week from mompreneurs to serious investors about opening apple seeds from Honolulu to Cleveland to Paris. This goes back to what we said earlier about all four of us being on the same page—when it’s right, I think we’ll know it. 🌱