

What Works

The Mother Lode: MomsRising is tapping a vast resource to improve the lives of American families.

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The Mother Lode

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At a recent protest against the use of toxic flame retardants in furniture, a group of mothers burst into a catchy song about chemicals. The tune? “Frère Jacques.” “Moms make great protestors when they can get out,” says Joan Blades, co-founder and president of MomsRising. But mothers are often too busy to demonstrate, even on behalf of issues they care about. Enter MomsRising, a grassroots group that uses the Internet to bring mothers together. MomsRising members advocate for family-friendly policies at the state and national levels, including paid maternity and paternity leave, health care for all kids, flexible work arrangements, affordable child care, and fair wages for mothers.

Blades got the idea for MomsRising after co-founding MoveOn.org, the online liberal advocacy group. Although Blades initially had no intention of starting another organization, a research finding caught her eye. “I read the data point that there was a huge wage gap between men and mothers – not between men and women,” she says. Intrigued, she explored the trend and co-authored the book *The Motherhood Manifesto* with Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner.

Next, Blades sought to partner with a group that was interested in organizing mothers online, much as MoveOn used the Internet to organize citizens frustrated with the Clinton impeachment battles in 1998. But no such group existed. “I was naive,” she laughs. “I was in denial.” So in 2006 she joined forces with Rowe-Finkbeiner once more to create MomsRising.org on Mother’s Day, with Rowe-Finkbeiner serving as executive director.

A former mediator, Blades says her preference is to unite people around their shared beliefs. There is “too much emphasis on what separates us when there is so much more we have in common,” she says. “We aren’t all mothers, but everyone has a mother. It’s very unifying.”

Ronnee Schreiber, a political science professor at San Diego State University, says MomsRising “fills an important niche.” The organization is “cyber-oriented,” she explains, “which allows busy people to feel connected and take some action” in a matter of minutes and without leaving their homes. With a visit to MomsRising.org, members can click

on “Take Action” links under such headlines as “Stop Toxic Toys” and “Help Launch MomsVote ’08!” and then sign petitions, make donations, or learn other ways to advocate for legislative change.

“Sometimes people act as though signing a petition is not a big deal,” says Blades. “But it is. Together we can amplify.” Visitors can also register as members of MomsRising and receive regular e-mails directing them to sign new petitions or to e-mail their representatives. “It’s been more powerful than I ever imagined,” says Blades.



To advocate for paid family leave, members of MomsRising flew decorated onesies (baby coveralls) on the steps of the capitol building in Harrisburg, Pa. A similar “Power of ONESies” action in Olympia, Wash., helped spark new legislation.

Get Out the Buzz

MomsRising “does a good job reaching people,” says Schreiber. The organization has “fabulous communicators” who “jazz people up,” agrees Maureen Corry, executive director of Childbirth Connection. After joining MomsRising, new members immediately receive an e-mail urging them to recruit friends and family to join. Building on this idea, a Thanksgiving e-mail encouraged members to show their gratitude for MomsRising’s efforts with a “High Five” – an appeal to five friends to become members. Issue-focused e-mails also include prompts to share information with others.

Mothers telling mothers is how MomsRising has grown to 120,000 members in a year and a half. Getting the word



out about family issues is one of MomsRising's biggest successes, says Blades. Nevertheless, Blades says that spreading the word still remains MomsRising's biggest challenge. "With women's issues, you have to educate first," she says. "These are not front-page issues." As an example, she points to a 2007 report by Jody Heymann, of Harvard and McGill universities, and her colleagues showing that of 173 countries, only four did not require paid maternity leave: Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, and the United States. "People [in the United States] are shocked to hear this," she says. "[They] just don't recognize this systematic neglect of families. It is undermining our future." With MoveOn.org, in contrast, everyone already knew about the issues, she says.

Education often starts with *The Motherhood Manifesto*, as well as a documentary of the same name. MomsRising encourages its members to hold house parties at which they screen the DVD for friends. The organization also provides tips for post-movie discussion. Hosts encourage their guests to join MomsRising and to hold house parties of their own.

Mothers are not the only audience MomsRising tries to reach with the documentary. Upon releasing the DVD, the organization sent it to legislators around the country. The DVD's official premiere was in the Senate office building in Washington, D.C., with Senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Ted Kennedy, and Chris Dodd co-sponsoring the event. "An extraordinary number of members in the Senate came and spoke," says Jodie Levin-Epstein, deputy director of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

One Mother of a Mission

CLASP is on a growing list of organizations that share MomsRising's mission: to build a family-friendly America. This list of "aligned organizations," as MomsRising calls them, includes women's organizations, child advocacy groups, health care organizations, the AFL-CIO, and others. For Levin-Epstein, becoming an aligned organization allows CLASP and MomsRising to take advantage of each other's strengths: CLASP can piggyback on MomsRising's grassroots mobilization efforts while MomsRising benefits from

CLASP's policy analysis. Likewise, by combining forces Childbirth Connection increases its reach and visibility while MomsRising members learn more about problems with maternity care quality, says Corry.

Corry believes that the growing number of aligned organizations is a good measure of MomsRising's success because it shows that "more organizations want to jump on board and enjoy the ride." The organization's growing membership base is also "testimony to the wisdom of the original vision," adds Levin-Epstein. "MomsRising's success in getting members to send e-mails regarding co-sponsorship of paid sick days legislation in Congress" was impressive, she says.

Blades is particularly proud of two MomsRising accomplishments. The first, in April 2007, was helping Washington become the second state to pass a paid family leave bill. The bill gives employees five weeks of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child. Working with numerous other organizations, MomsRising members placed hundreds of calls locally and nationally, sent thousands of e-mails, met with lawmakers, and delivered to legislators cookies and messages requesting support for the bill. In March 2007, they also held a "Power of ONESies" demonstration in Olympia, Wash., featuring hundreds of baby coveralls ("onesies") decorated in support of paid family leave. Sen. Karen Keiser, a sponsor of the family leave bill, publicly thanked MomsRising, stating that the bill would not have passed without the thousands of e-mails from the organization's members.

The second MomsRising victory was a "substantial environmental success," says Blades. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) was in the process of establishing a national furniture flammability standard. Yet this standard would require manufacturers to use flame-retardant chemicals known to be toxic to humans – especially children. MomsRising members signed petitions and set up conference calls to Senate staffers informing them of the amendment's health impacts. The CPSC eliminated the amendment in October 2007.

Despite its growth and successes, MomsRising is still a start-up. "We don't have vast resources," and there are many projects waiting to be funded, says Blades. She's looking to hire a volunteer coordinator, as well as "someone to grow our work with the faith community."

The organization is also busy with the upcoming election. "We want to make sure the candidates are talking about these issues," Blades says. "We need to make sure they know that people are out there caring about these issues and that they need to talk about them." It all comes back to getting out the buzz. And MomsRising is good at that. □

MOBILIZING MOMS

- Identify issues common to all mothers
- Make it easy for members to take action
- Use existing social networks for viral marketing
- Combine forces with like-minded nonprofits