

Beyond “I’m just a mum”



rich stories of motherhood

MOTHERS' STORIES GROUP



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*Eighteen women speak of their experiences, feelings and thoughts,
and the knowledge they gained from becoming mothers.*

These are their stories of motherhood.

MOTHERS' STORIES GROUP

A Majura Women's Group Inc. publication arising from two project gatherings held in August and September 2007 in Canberra, ACT.

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FOREWORD

*“... giving
voice to the
wisdom of
motherhood.”*

Beyond “I’m just a mum”: rich stories of motherhood is a collection of knowledge honouring the experience of being a mother. This publication is the end result of a project funded through the ACT Women’s Grants Program to research the rich stories of motherhood.

The Majura Women’s Group, with support from other community organisations, used a ‘gathering process’ to bring together 18 mothers to share and document their unique experiences and knowledge of mothering. Narrative therapy practices informed the ‘gathering process’ which occurred over a period of time using a listening team to facilitate discussion and draw out emerging themes. The process empowered the community to give voice to important experiences which would otherwise go unheard. This publication is a testament to the effectiveness of applying narrative therapy ideas to community work.

As a mother of three young children, these stories resonate strongly with my own experiences. They capture the reality and complexity of stay-at-home parenting within the context of contemporary society.

This is much more than a collection of stories about women nurturing their children. The women’s diverse experiences provide profound insights into the extraordinarily important work of motherhood. Together their stories honour the wisdom of motherhood in all its diversity.

Congratulations to all involved in giving voice to the wisdom of motherhood.

Katy Gallagher

Katy Gallagher MLA
Deputy Chief Minister
Minister for Women

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project which led to this publication would not have proceeded without the enthusiasm and commitment of the project participants. Thank you to all participants for their unique and heartfelt contributions, which together provide a rich source of stories and experiences — a far cry from the thinking and self-talk of “I’m just a mum”. We have also appreciated participants’ enthusiastic engagement in the editing, design and photography for this publication.

We express our heartfelt gratitude to the members of the listening team for their generous and vital contributions to the project. Without their guidance and hard work this project would not have happened. In this context we particularly acknowledge the generous contributions of Relationships Australia (Canberra and Region), the YWCA of Canberra, and Inanna Inc.

Our appreciation is extended to the ACT Government for funding under the ACT Women’s Grants Program, without which this project would not have been possible.

Sue Hoffmann, Jules Tarrant and Ruth Ragless
Project Co-ordination Committee
Majura Women’s Group



INTRODUCTION

When I became a mother in 2001, I was in my mid forties. I came to fulltime mothering with a sense of myself which was strongly associated with my life of paid work and community involvement over many years. I was somewhat shocked to find myself in the first year or two of my boy's life, thinking in a self-deprecating way — and even saying at times — “I’m just a mum.” Somehow I had lost my connection with my ‘old’ self. I was aware that this was not helpful, and that it dramatically discounted not only the contribution that I was making as a mother but also what I could still contribute more broadly. But that didn’t stop me from succumbing to the idea, which reflects pervasive societal attitudes and can take hold so damagingly.

Then I became aware that it wasn’t only me who was vulnerable to this idea of being *just* a mum. It was a fairly common experience for fulltime mothers. When I subsequently learned of developments using narrative therapy ideas in community work, it seemed that a community project to redress the hoary old chestnut “I’m just a mum” might be productive. The idea struck a chord with other members of the Majura Women’s Group. And so, with tremendous support from other ACT community services — Relationships Australia, YWCA and Inanna — and with funding from the ACT Women’s Grants Program, we embarked on the project. This publication draws together much of what the 18 participants of the project said about their experiences, feelings, thoughts and knowledge of being mothers. These are their stories of motherhood.

Sue Hoffmann

HOW THE PROJECT WAS CONDUCTED

The core events of the project were two gatherings. Gathering processes have been used in many communities to share and document stories of unique experiences, hopes and commitments, skills and knowledge, held by a community that otherwise would be silenced, invisible or not heard. Gathering processes are staged processes that occur over a period of time and where a listening team facilitates the process. Ideas and practices drawn from narrative therapy and community work informed the gathering processes we used in this project.

Before the gathering days, the listening team consulted some of the project participants about their particular interests and concerns about the topic for the project. Themes drawn from those consultations formed the framework for telling the stories at the gatherings. After the gatherings the stories were documented, resulting in this publication.

The project was undertaken in 2007. The participants were members of Majura and Brindabella Women's Groups, and clients of the agencies from which members of the listening team came. The listening team comprised staff of the three community agencies supporting the project. Three themes provided the framework for the gatherings. For the first gathering the theme was *Weaving strong families and caring communities*. For the second gathering, the themes were *Our relationship with motherhood* and *Linking to community*.



THEME I

Weaving strong families and caring communities

This text was read aloud at the gathering to introduce the theme.

The title of this gathering is ‘Beyond “I’m just a mum”’, because all of us have witnessed, or had some experience of, the ways in which mothers are devalued in our community. In this project we want to focus on going beyond the belittling stories and to join our voices together to tell strong, rich stories about mothering.

We want to honour motherhood in all its diversity — stay-at-home mothers, working mothers, stay-at-home mothers who also work, working mothers who stay at home, student mothers, step-mothers, older mothers, younger mothers, mothers of children with disabilities, mothers with disabilities, surrogate mothers, mothers raising children without partners, mothers raising children with partners, pregnant mothers, adopting mothers, foster mothers, grandmothers, mothers who have lost children, mothers who have had one child, mothers who have had many children ...


And while we honour these many varieties of mother, it’s the stay-at-home mothers, and the special qualities, experiences and skills of stay-at-home mothers that we are focusing on, honouring and celebrating here today. Women spoke in the initial consultations about the particular ways that stay-at-home mothers get devalued. There are differences between the ways the community talked the talk about valuing mothers, and the way they walked the talk — the ways that in fact the community devalues stay-at-home mothers. Individually, people in the community can express the importance of motherhood — mothers have strong connections with community, in fact they weave the very fabric of our community. They protect and nurture our future. Mothers have immeasurable value — they create life!

From the collective voice of the community though, women hear different messages. We can have a sense of becoming invisible, being experienced as ‘boring’, or lacking value, and having no professional identity ... once we identified ourselves as stay-at-home mothers.

Women speak about the hard things that go with being a mother: putting others first all the time; balancing the needs of so many people; losing our social lives; the impact on our primary relationship; losing our identity, as motherhood is one role and women have many roles in life; the scariness of having all the responsibility; the sheer hard work; the unpredictability of our days ...

Being a mother can be accompanied by other roles that can be invisible: for example, contributing to the community or supporting others in a host of different ways.

All of these sacrifices, losses and challenges, are the hard parts of very precious work: seeing our children develop and learn; receiving their unconditional love; influencing their lives; having responsibility for their growth; protecting them; committing ourselves to others; and experiencing the joy and preciousness of this time.



JEN'S STORY

Becoming a mother has shown me how to understand people. My first birth was a great birth — I was a bit smug when I heard other women talking about how hard it had been for them. My second birth was much harder ... I think it was the universe telling me I didn't understand. Motherhood has made me much more connected to compassion.

Before I was a mother I had quick and ready judgments about people. When I worked in an office, before I had kids, one of the other women used to arrive at 10am each morning. I feel bad now that I was quick to judge that behaviour — I just didn't get it. That woman was making choices to drop her kids off at school and be with them ... and I didn't get it. Now, if I were going to work — that would be me!

Being a stay-at-home mum is not just about staying at home with my kids; it's just as much about connecting with other mums and weaving a fabric of community: sharing, caring, nurturing, giving and receiving, giving back to the broader community. Mothers can be great bridge builders across communities, capable of creating links across any and all differences — age, education, class and culture. What you did before you had your kids is irrelevant when you begin the birthing process and the tasks of motherhood that follow it. It is a deep and profound experience for developing compassion and tolerance for others.

Being a mother has helped me to feel connected to all women, including the women who have come before us, because of something that we all share. Women have been giving birth, breastfeeding and mothering forever! Mothers before us have done it hard ... we don't have to wash with a washboard, for instance. I am filled with compassion and respect for the mothers that have come before me.



FROM OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Accepting the job offer: mother

Some of us actively chose to be stay-at-home mothers, even in the face of the low status that such a choice has amongst our peers, whereas others would describe motherhood, and the ways we do it as something that's happened ... not consciously chosen.

The choices our parents made influence our decisions.

- “I remember my mother standing in the kitchen, mixing things while I was talking. I look forward to that: me standing by the stove with the kids talking to me and me saying “uh-huh, mmm.”
- “I chose to be a stay-at-home mum because my partner and I were raised by working parents and we didn't want to continue that tradition.”

Factors such as childcare, financial considerations, gender and culture affect our choices to be stay-at-home mothers.

- “After one year, mums go back to work in Denmark where I come from. Only fulltime childcare is available. I know that when I go back to Denmark, I will be studying. Knowing this means that I can enjoy the opportunity of being a stay-at-home mum while I am here in Australia.”
- “I think that in our culture — western, heterosexual, middle-class, partnered — women have more choices than men about how they want to do parenthood.”
- “My husband just earns more, so I stay at home.”
- “At first we got locked into positions ... but my husband is not wanting the burden of being [the] fulltime provider.”

*“... though I am
happy with my
stay-at-home
role, I wish we
could both live
more in both
worlds”*

“I am still coming to terms with the fact that I am at home — and I am not sharing this role more with my husband. We were determined to rebel against doing things the traditional way, so I am amazed we are running this model. But it made sense that I stayed at home because he isn't in a position in which he can work part-time easily. And though I am happy with my stay-at-home role, I wish we could both live more in both worlds — home with the kids and out doing paid work. I feel he misses out, he has little time with the kids. That makes him sad too. At times, I can't quite relax into my fulltime mother role. But I guess it is hard to get it all right, and we have got a lot of other things 'right' at the moment. At times I feel I have to justify our choices to the outside world, but the real thing is how we make our own little family work.”

“Everyone happily accepted me taking leave from my job when my baby was born, but when the six month mark arrived, my family and friends began asking me when I was going to be returning to work, as if that was the right, normal or best thing to do. For me, staying at home was the right choice.”

Valuing our work

Women spoke about the unfairness of describing their life at home with children as “not working.” Not many people appreciate the sheer hard work that being a mother involves. Yet working at home does not equate to working at the office!

“It is so unfair that our home work has no dollar value, yet the value of being a mum is immeasurable in mere dollar terms.”

“My partner and I challenged the assumption, held by most of our family and friends, that because I was a stay-at-home mum I would be expected to do all the housework. We value the job of the stay-at-home mum as much as the job of anyone who goes out of the home to work. Both are hard, fulltime tasks! This means that the domestic chores are shared equally between us, especially in that busy 'after-work, getting dinner' time of day.”

“If you are at home with your children you are involved with birth, death, sickness — the really profound things of life. These are the things that you are supposed to take time off work for? As if you can put a time frame around those major events, limiting them somehow?”

“I get paid to work in a home for older people, I get paid to bathe them and feed them. Why is it seen as more valuable to bathe and feed older people than it is to bathe and feed my own babies?”



- “We are growing the next generation. I feel much more that I am shaping the world around me [than if I were in a high powered job].”
- “Now I am comfortable in my own skin, a lot of my identity comes from being a mum. I take pride in this job. I have working friends who say they wish they could afford to stay at home but we don’t have heaps of money. My mum stayed at home and my sisters and I were raised to know that we were unconditionally loved. That is the gift I want to give my kids, even though they won’t have the newest things.”
- “Most people in our community say how wonderful and important mothers are, but then when I attended a fundraiser at my local pre-school, a parent who was also a university professor started up a conversation with me, only to turn away and start talking to someone else, once he found out I was a stay-at-home mum.”
- “I constantly hear, ‘We need to get mothers back into the workforce’ in the media. I feel disappointed when I hear this, as I feel that society doesn’t place either economic or social value on women who choose to stay at home with their children. The best childcare worker will never love my kids as much as I do. I know that I add to social capital by helping out through community groups — and will eventually in schools too when my kids are old enough. But because this doesn’t have an economic value, I’m not sure that society values the contribution made by stay-at-home parents.”
- “I still feel uncomfortable at times being financially dependent on someone else. I grew up as a feminist and knew I would earn my own way. Being a stay-at-home mother was not what we aspired to. But I know it is the right place for me at the moment, and experience it as a great privilege to have this time at home with my children especially while they are young.”



*“We don’t
actually stay
at home ... we
do everything.”*

The invisible Supermum

We know well the expectations in western culture for achievement, individualism and autonomy, to succeed in multiple domains of life. The effect of this for many of us as women who are mothers, is a sense of additional pressure, to attempt to do everything: to perfect being a mother, wife, daughter, friend, and to keep the house spotless! But we have learned that then the whole of life becomes a grind, and there’s always a sense of falling behind. Some of us call it “the supermum thing” ... and it can be a hard habit to break.

- “I felt very unsure of what I was supposed to be doing — so I tried to do everything ... I had such a strong feeling of having to prove myself. I knew I had made the right choice to be a fulltime mother ... but no-one said to me it was ok — you are doing the right thing — I had to hit the wall first.”
- “In the last three years of mothering, there have only been a couple of instances when somebody directly complimented my daily work: ‘You must be doing a great job, your kids are lovely.’ It is sooo nice hearing it! When you have a paid job you get feedback all day long, but not as a mother when you face much more self doubt about whether you are doing the right thing or not.”
- “At times it can feel onerous when society puts excessive responsibility for things that go wrong on our shoulders, as if we are solely responsible for how children turn out.”
- “Parenting is the only arena where complete strangers can tell you what to do.”
- “I still feel the pressure to do everything perfectly — I know I am not perfect — I find that a burden. But I am in a worthy occupation, I have a great role. I don’t want to make excuses for what I am. But I am yearning for recognition that this is important.”

Motherhood and our identity

Women spoke about the impact of becoming stay-at-home mothers on their identity – their sense of who they are, where they fit in, how they talk about themselves and how others relate to them.

- “Before becoming a mother, I didn’t think I mattered ... motherhood has given me relevance and gives me purpose.”
- “I was brought up by a stay-at-home mum, she was brought up by a stay-at-home mum. My mum was a nurse, her mum was a teacher. We have a history of caring in our family.”
- “I learned a lot about myself when I became a mother. Having children felt like I was being filled up ... it gave me joy and calmness, it made me self-less. It made me a better person. It taught me about the difference between being self-absorbed, focused on me as an individual, and being absorbed by the children, centering them. Instead of thinking what is best for me — I think what is best for my children, the community ... ”
- “I can’t get over how much love I can give. It’s like a quote I heard by Elizabeth Stone: ‘Making the decision to have a child — it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.’”
- “I am a stay-at-home mother — I am a mum — and happy about it. I am not “just a mum”. I am responsible for giving children the best start in life — for giving them a base of love and support ... core values. I am helping them to stand up for themselves. We need to show our passion for what we are doing — we are doing something really important.”
- “You could call it a project manager, going to the university of compassion. I hold my family together, I ensure my children have the best future, I am a life builder, an expert in change management, a negotiator, I am giving children a strong foundation, I am a peace-broker ... but why do we have to use workplace language so that people understand what we are doing?”
- “I was with a friend once when she was asked her occupation at a government counter. Instead of the usual ‘home duties’ she said ‘Minister for Domestic Affairs’, and the young woman at the counter was suitably impressed — asking, ‘Is that state or federal?’”



Some of us talked about the ways that people often relate to you differently when they know you are a mother at home with children. They forget that you had a life before motherhood.

“I had always been academically inclined and worked ... I felt a sense of inadequacy with my first child ... I had to reinvent my identity with only a tenuous link to my prior identity.”

“I needed to rediscover who I was when so many people related to me just as my daughter’s mother. I felt I let myself disappear into motherhood and got a bit lost. I haven’t been a priority.”

“As a mother of teenage children, I find that I have more time and loneliness is setting in on me. I may have lost my identity. I feel very empty. Who the hell am I? I’m not in the workforce, I don’t have a career, this makes a big void, emptiness. I need to rediscover who I am and who I want to be. Perhaps there is something about needing to retire soon from motherhood. Or from this way of stay-at-home motherhood.”

Being a mother: an ongoing discovery

Dominant ways of knowing in western culture use generalised theories, scientific research and evaluations of what is normal. Success is measured by money or status. Many of us have felt subjected to unsolicited judgments from others — it’s as if parenting is an arena where complete strangers can tell you what to do. There’s lots of information on the ‘right’ way to do things and many poorly formed judgments by others about what mothering involves.

Yet many of us have learned by experience that there are other ways of knowing, and other values that are very important that we want to pass on to our children. This learning and knowledge comes from diverse and unique sources:

“Children are great teachers. We learn from our children that everything is ever changing — and that we need to be prepared to not know and be open to change. I thought I had figured out how to help them sleep — then the next night they had a terrible night. There is no right way ... nothing is set in the world. As a mother, you may think you know but then realise you don’t. Being a mum is an ongoing discovery ... When you become a mother, you develop flexibility, compassion, respect, understanding ... you realise that you are not in control ... you have to let go of control ... things are not the way you thought they were.”

“We are our own sources of knowledge. It is important to go back to our own knowledge, to trust ourselves, our instincts and inner strengths. Then, because we have knowledge as mothers, we as

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mothers and parents are a great resource of knowing for other mothers. We hear some people say, 'I feel like I'm not using my mind' when parenting young children. However for many of us there is so much knowledge to gain from parenting and we use our hearts and minds to build on this knowledge, and this is hard won knowledge and wisdom that is worthy of respect."

“Some of us choose and cobble together ideas from different sources — we have learned that we have a knowing that helps us evaluate what might be helpful. I ask myself what's important for me and my children? What is best for children and the community?”

“I came to appreciate that we never really know what we will do until we are in that position, at that time, with those particular people. Even then we don't know what will happen.”

“When I had my daughter, I tried to follow what other people said to do. So many people tell you what you should be doing. I found that didn't work for me or my daughter. I realised that I needed to do things my own way. I'm finally accepting of me for who I am.”

“I am the eldest of five girls. I didn't romanticise babies at all. Mum was always there for us and my friends wanted a mum like I had. From the moment I became pregnant I knew that she would be my role model. I put a lot of pressure on myself by trying to be so much like her and it wasn't until she sat me down that I was able to put things in perspective. She told me that you grow into motherhood — it doesn't happen all at once. Those words helped so much. My knowledge of being a mother is now up to the age of my daughter — three and a half years old. We continue to work each other out.”



Creating safe havens ... being at home with children

Many of us place great value on creating safe havens for our children and we know that this takes time and effort. We want our homes to be places where children can download or ‘dump’ — where they can talk about their day, places for giving and receiving, and for learning.

“Being at home provides a sense of security, love and safety.”

“Creating safe havens is how we create whole families. It’s crucial . . . Everyone needs a safe place to fall. Creating safe havens for the kids has been my fulltime job, my vocation. Those few minutes when you pick them up after school — they chatter away — they are downloading . . . they can say to me whatever they want to. I ask them what are the three best things that happened and the three worst things that happened during the day.”

“A safe haven gives children a sense that mum is a safe person even though my responses might be short grunts and some brief words while I listen and stir a saucepan on the stove.”

As well as the efforts involved, for many of us these spaces of nurturing and safety have brought us pleasure and satisfaction as well.

“Just kicking around with my kids and watching them grow . . . that’s why I’m a stay-at-home mum.”

“I stay at home for me, as much as for the children. I have a friendship with them. Becoming a mum meant becoming more attuned to notice the minutiae of life, walking with my child and noticing the ants, or noticing my daughter learning how to grasp things.”

Sustaining ourselves

The women spoke about the various ways they manage the hard times.

- “When my children are sick — at times this has been difficult and scary. Despite how hard it is you have to hang on because they’re taking their cue from you.”
- “How do I protect my children? At times using ‘The Mum’s Voice’ is one way to do this. It’s not scary. It can stop things escalating.”
- “I realised that I am much more like my grandmother than my own mum in temperament. The discovery of this connection was important in sustaining me. Being a mum has taught me so much about myself, who I am as a person.”
- “Something that helps me to get through the hard times is to write ‘ta da!’ lists, rather than ‘to do’ lists.”

Women spoke about the importance of groups like the Majura and Brindabella Women’s Groups, in the absence of a community that voices its appreciation of what mothers do. Support networks like these provide forums for women to share experiences, to discover and build communities which do voice appreciation, and to acknowledge the hopes and dreams that women have when they become mums.

- “It’s so important to be with like-minded mums at playgroup, or being part of a women’s group.”
- “Talking to other mums, like the mums in the Brindabella and Majura Women’s Groups, has helped me to find and value myself more as a mother and a person. They value me for being a mum more than the rest of the community [does]. This has helped me to find ways to value myself more as a mother.”
- “It can take time to find and join communities that are meaningful. In playgroup, I wanted conversations other than nappies and children. I wanted other sorts of connection.”

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*“Now I do more
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Talking the same language

Women talked about how they felt a strong connection to other mothers.

- “I can be at the plaza and other mums come to the rescue [if I am in trouble with my kids]. It’s mothers who are more likely to come forward. I don’t know, but there is a connection. We have a similar life experience. You just know you can’t be a passenger anymore — you can’t be a bystander.”
- “When I get some time off without the kids and I am cycling around and see a mother with her kids and I smile at her, I realise that she can’t recognise me as a mum and that feels strange. I feel like stopping and saying: ‘I have kids too, I’m one of you.’”
- “Now I do more ‘reaching out’ than just judging — some people see a mother with a screaming child in the supermarket and get quickly into judging her and the child ... after being a mother you are filled with compassion, you go right up to her and tell her that it’s ok... I don’t see a screaming child as a nuisance. With other mothers I am less subject to judgment.”

Women who have gone before us

Some women spoke about the importance of what they learned from their mothers and grandmothers in guiding them now — the support they can find from their histories.

“Held within you is a string of previous experiences, generations before you.”

“Being a mum has given me a new found respect for my own mother.”

“My world opened up after having children through my connection with other women . . . Before children I was connected to women in a different way, a one-dimensional way — it was about self-esteem, power, feminism. After having children I felt connected to that history, the wisdom. I am more connected to my mother, my grandmother. I joined a club of motherhood and belong to a world that didn't exist for me before.”

“My husband's grandmother is like a guiding light for me. She is 82 years old now — she says you don't need much money. She has always lived in the one house with lots of kids, she has a strong will, she has created a community around her that supports her. She knows that she has an important role. I think of her when I feel the pressure to get a job, or be perfect.”

One woman discovered that both she and her partner had been raised by stay-at-home mums and that part of what had attracted them to each other was their shared commitment to continuing this tradition with their own children.

“Being a mother makes me appreciate not only all those mothers who have come before me, but also the millions and millions of mothers around the world raising their children with so much less. It's very hard to even start to understand how it would be to raise children in the midst of poverty, famine, war or as a refugee — just contending with daily survival, with little social recognition and possibly abuse — and with no safe haven in sight. We are so privileged.”

“Being a mother makes me appreciate . . . the millions and millions of mothers around the world raising their children with so much less.”





REFLECTIONS FROM THE LISTENING TEAM

“Our group talked about their realisations that after you become a mother you have so much more understanding and acceptance of other people. There is an opening up, a connecting with other women. I started to think that being a stay-at-home mum allows us to connect to this constant flow that has gone on for thousands of years . . . My mother is now living with me — she is 86 years old. We go out together and she grabs hold of my hand, because she is frail and afraid she will fall. She says then that we have come full circle. She says that life is so beautiful.”

“There was an intensity to the conversations in our group — motherhood brings out the best of us with your heart getting bigger and fuller. The women said that sometimes this can feel like a stretching — a challenging place to be, full of fear and questioning. It took me to wishing that my mother who is now 78 years old could hear these women. Her stories, and what she meant to us in our lives, never got articulated in this way. Mum never got to sit with other women and articulate her stories. She would have had a full heart listening to these women. I will make sure she reads these stories.”

“Women talked about how the experience of being a mother was so different to the theory of being a mother. I wish we could speak more loudly into the public space about the value of everyone being involved in parenting — fathers, brothers, uncles and aunties. Family life and community life is something precious that we are participating in . . . birth, death, sickness, life. Our western culture is missing out on these profound experiences if these understandings and stories are not told into the public space.”

“Listening to the women today made me appreciate the value of the connections we have with our mothers and grandmothers. My mother died very soon after our children were born. Her mother — my grandmother — lived for 20 more years after my mother died. My grandmother and I were connected through my children, and I think now I was a conduit for my grandmother to my mother. I wouldn’t have valued that connection if I had not heard the women talking today about the connections they felt over the history of women and the history of their own families.”

“It was really lovely to experience the support that the women gave each other, how they held each other and honoured each other’s stories. It linked me back to my mum and her group of friends when I was growing up. We are Italian. Mum and her friends would meet each day while they walked us kids to school — my mum’s community of friends. As a child of a woman who belonged to a community of women — they are still my community of mum’s friends — they are still really interested in me and what I am doing.”

“The women were talking about their connections with the women who have come before them — having a real respect for the women before us and how hard it could be for them. It took me back to my grandmother who died about 30 years ago — she had a tough time — and I did too in my own way. Today, listening to these women, I got a sense of a new emotional connection with her. She is part of me — and it helps. I feel less isolated. She was put in the ‘sick’ category previously — I can now put her somewhere else . . . Feeling more connected to her, the categories don’t separate us in the same way. What seems to matter is what we share — and we are part of something much bigger.”







THEME 2

Our relationship with motherhood

This text was read aloud at the second gathering to introduce the theme.

Our identity as mothers is a central part of our lives, a place of great learning, a place of great value and importance in our lives and in the lives of our families and our communities.

Motherhood sometimes brings great joy into our lives, a feeling of relevance, a sense of purpose. For some of us it feels like our heart is getting bigger, we are being filled with compassion and love. Motherhood brings great learning — about ourselves, our children and our communities. Motherhood helps some of us develop a sense of confidence in ourselves.

Our relationship with motherhood is a complex one. As well as the strong and wonderful connections we make with motherhood, sometimes we can also connect to a sense of loneliness or emptiness in our identity as mothers. We can connect with a sense of inadequacy. We might experience a sense of losing our identity, of losing sight of who we are if we disappear entirely into the experience of motherhood.

We have learned that our relationship with motherhood changes and shifts. On a day-to-day basis, and on a long-term basis, we are rediscovering our identity when we change from being women without children to becoming mothers. Some of us have an experience of renegotiating our relationship with motherhood as our children grow older, of needing to rediscover who we are as our children leave home. One of us, whose children are teenagers and growing more independent, found that she had more time and needed to rediscover who she was and who she wants to be: “Once the kids were more independent, loneliness was setting in on me.” She wondered if there was something about needing to retire soon from this stage of motherhood.

At our first meeting we started to get an idea that our relationship with motherhood is multi-storied. We heard stories that were both beautiful, joy-filled and creative ... and stories that spoke of challenges, dilemmas and pain. Stories that changed over time. Stories that were about never-ending discovery.



JESS'S STORY

My relationship with motherhood has been a love/hate one. I'd come from a family of high achievers and was the first of my friendship group to get pregnant. I went from a position of responsibility in my workplace to suddenly having no control and being completely isolated at home with a little baby that I couldn't connect with, and having very little sleep.

I developed severe postnatal depression, and felt nothing. I was numb and felt like an observer, I was so disconnected. I put on 25 kilos through comfort eating. I wondered, why have I had this baby? None of my friends had babies so I had no-one to ask; I was desperate for resources. My mum tried to help but I think motherhood had been hard for her too — I realised that she'd been doing her best; she'd also had ambitions that had been interrupted by becoming a mother unexpectedly. It turned out that my son is mildly autistic, and gradually we got some help — and it began through my connecting with my mothers' group. It was this that got us through the week.

Another turning point was when I met another mother once in a park when my son was two; we were watching our kids play. She was the first person who acknowledged that there can be an element of grieving for your past life when you become a mother — she gave me permission to grieve the fact that my expectations had not become reality.

And now my second baby is in my life and this experience has been like a medicine. What I see my daughter do now and think is so beautiful — I realise that I was not able to see this initially with my son whom I love so much. I am sad that he and I missed out on so much. So much I cannot remember, didn't document, can never get back as I was so sick. For me the journey of motherhood has been like becoming a butterfly — or the story of the ugly duckling who became the swan. Because it's not that my situation has changed, but I have changed about being a mother. My attitude is more in tune with the reality. Now just this morning I was awake early with my husband listening to the kids going crazy in the lounge room, and we were laughing hysterically about here we are at 7am, having cleaned up vomit, done twelve things already ... excellent ... we're almost ready for lunch. It was so funny and so different to how things began.



FROM OTHER PARTICIPANTS

- “It’s like being carried along on a current of your own making — sometimes you are going through a field of flowers, sometimes over boulders. Mothering is about the journey — not the final product.”
- “Initially I struggled with the sense of being overwhelmed — I grew up with some really negative images of motherhood — devaluing images, ideas of neediness and dependency were everywhere. What I discovered was that it was exciting and scary to have that opportunity to shape someone — a little person. I got full of hope that I could do things differently to provide a more nurturing relationship with my boys. I have moved from feeling overwhelmed to having more fun and joy. I think that it slowly dawned on me that there are no answers. I use the guiding principle of doing what nurtures them and what nurtures me. That feels like the most sensible thing to do. I have stepped away from a rule-bound notion of life.”
- “I felt I could focus much more when I just had one child — now having two I have to juggle much more, and I am sad that I can focus less on each one individually . . . At times I can feel myself so much more on edge . . . especially when I don’t get a break during the day to lie down for ten minutes myself. This is not the mum I want to be. I don’t want to struggle, and they are great kids. I am surprised feeling like that because I am in a good situation. I have a supportive partner and a good network of friends and family around me. It makes me appreciate people who are doing it alone or who have more kids. It just makes you less judgmental.”
- “After the birth of my first baby, life changed hugely, and I embraced motherhood, although I remember feeling shocked by the level of self-sacrifice that is part of nurturing. Later I felt I wanted to have another child and the desire got stronger and stronger. After a stressful pregnancy and difficult birth I experienced a lot of anxiety, and felt I had lost my old self. It took some time to recover. Sometimes motherhood feels like being torn in lots of directions — being ripped apart trying to meet everyone else’s needs and expectations as well as my own.”

*“Mothering
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product.”*

*“I finally knew
what I was sent
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my career.”*

“When I think about what motherhood means to me, I get a picture of a warrior figure — but softer, more nurturing. Like Ruth, in the Bible. Ruth ran the family business, she raised the children, she did everything, but she was nurturing and soft. It’s a work in progress. I intend to counter those images of motherhood being a worthless thing to do.”

“There is a lot of romanticising that goes on about mothers — about everything in fact — life, partners, work. Women at work might romanticise what it is like for women at home, and vice versa. But romanticising does get your juices flowing. Maybe the romanticising brings hope and excitement, an injection or charge that helps you not fall too far down when the reality sets in. I did a lot of romanticising about becoming a mother. The only fulltime job I have ever had is being a mother. As soon as I gave birth — I thought I am going to do this again, and again, and again . . . I finally knew what I was sent here to do. This is my career. I get this picture of an American pioneer woman when I think of motherhood. I am motherhood. It is not separate from me. That’s the pioneer bit — I am comfortable staying home.”

“The pregnancy, babies, washing dishes and nappies — that was my apprenticeship. Now I feel like I have climbed the corporate ladder. With teenagers I am starting to head towards retiring from this stage of motherhood, or winding down. They need you more emotionally — you become a counsellor. You have to listen harder because fewer things are said — you have to listen to the body language.”

“The idea of having a love/hate relationship with motherhood resonated for me. Motherhood opened up opportunities for connection with other women, away from the isolation I felt before I was pregnant. But then I was sick during the pregnancy, and my father died suddenly. My family was in so much shock, there was not much support. All of these things meant that I could not be the mother I dreamed of being. In the hard times it felt as if I was a caged, wild animal . . . and if I was let loose I would wreak havoc!”



“You get to a point and realise you are managing better — then there is another hurdle — then you cruise for a while. Then along comes another hurdle. You have to have families and networks to go to for support, to help you get over those hurdles.”

“I think of a lioness when I think of mothering — nurturing, teaching the cubs to be independent, and protection — god help anyone who messes with this lioness!”

“I have been trying to find the ‘me’ in motherhood — but motherhood gets into everything ... like the bag of sugar that my son spilt on the floor in the kitchen. It gets into everything ... six months later you are still finding bits of sugar in the cracks. It is hard to separate me from mother.”

“It reminds me of a movie I saw where the grandmother was talking about parenthood. She said that some people preferred the merry-go-round at a carnival. She’d always preferred the roller-coaster ... you never know what’s going to happen next. You get on and think uh-ohhhh ... you’re not so sure ... and then later on you think that it was fantastic ... you want more.”

“For me it is like a big, bumpy, slippery slide — sometimes it is fast, sometimes it is really scary, sometimes it is pure joy, and sometimes it is just bumpy and not enjoyable at all. Generally I love it, but I get frightened about whether I can do parenting well. My mum was very abusive when I was a child. Motherhood has brought me a lot of growth, but a fair bit of pain and grief as well. It is important to me that my daughter knows that I love her.”

“Motherhood has been changing all the time for me — like a path. At times it is messy and overgrown, and at other times it is pretty and neat. It changes all the time, but it is always there. Motherhood was thrust upon me, my boyfriend was not ready for fatherhood. Then my second pregnancy was joyous and planned. Becoming a step-mother, then a third pregnancy where I was very sick, brought more challenges. I’m nearly 40 now and feel like I haven’t finished growing up myself yet ... but I am still on that motherhood path.”

*“motherhood gets
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REFLECTIONS FROM THE LISTENING TEAM

“Listening to the women, a song came to mind — my favourite version of ‘Hallelujah’, sung by the Choir of Hard Knocks. That song is like a hymn of response to our gathering: ‘... *the baffled king composing ... Hallelujah.*’ I had a sense of awe as the precious moments unfurled in front of us: the speaking up, the laughter, the teary eyes, the spontaneous applause at the ‘Mothers can do anything’ song, the jiggling up and down walk of one woman while she was cuddling another mother’s baby, while she still listened to the large group reflections, and periodically piped up from the sidelines:

‘And even when it all went wrong/ I come before the Lord in song/ With nothing on my lips but Hallelujah ...’

“It speaks of the mystery and beauty of people being able to share safely with others, as happened today, about the various experiences since becoming mothers when *‘it all went wrong’*. There was a sense of spaciousness in this community today in which women could ‘stand before’ each other with this ... and out of this, a Hallelujah experience came forth. I want to keep connected to this messiness of life that these women have spoken of, and have such intimate knowledge of, the joys and mysteries that can be embedded within it.”

“I was drawn to the idea of the journey of motherhood — women spoke of having a sense of who they were before becoming a mother, their experiences during pregnancy, their sense of being an apprentice with their first child, and their sense that ‘now I have corporate skills’. They talked about managing hurdles, then cruising, then dealing with another hurdle. The journey was about growing into motherhood, and taking the time to grow into your own skin. I come from a workplace world — where every task tries to have a structure, a policy, a rule linked to it ... motherhood though

will never be just a job description or a list of duties. The women spoke of a never-ending journey of discovery. That feels more liberating — I will take that back to my rule-bound workplace and see what I can discover and what journeys I can go on.”

“Our group talked a lot about their ‘love/hate’ relationship to motherhood. They had striking metaphors to describe that relationship: one was that motherhood can feel like one of those slippery dips with lots of bumps — that at times can feel too fast, at times can feel fun, and at other times feels just bumpy and you are not enjoying it at all. I appreciated hearing motherhood described like that — it helps me to understand more about my journey as a mother.”

“Listening to the women made me realise that when I became a mum, I thought everyone knew more than me, I had heaps of worry. I thought I was the only person going through this, trying to do it right, thinking other people knew. I wish I had known what these women have spoken about. About giving up the struggle to try and get it right. It would have meant such a lot to me as a young mum.”

“Women spoke of their sense of having a vocation — people in paid work would love to have that experience of their jobs being a vocation — it seems so rich and blessed to have that experience from motherhood. My mother had eleven kids — her parenting was her vocation. I have one child — I felt like a failure initially in comparison to her. Having one child did not feel like a vocation. Listening to the women respond to the idea of having a ‘relationship to motherhood’ is so much richer than the ideas that either I am a mother or I am not ... or I am a failure or I am not ... I get to feel blessed by my experience — not inadequate.”





“Participating in this project has prompted me to reflect on what I appreciate about having been a stay-at-home mum — and about being there these days for my son each day after school. As an older mum I couldn’t have squeezed much more in when he was young. My energy levels were stretched as it was and the sleep deprivation was deadly. But I think there were benefits for him too. Being at home gave us time — and flexibility. We didn’t have to fit into a routine he wasn’t ready for. We didn’t have to rush out the door early in the morning — or get home just before dinner and have to cope with having to do a whole lot of things in very little time, when we were all tired and hungry. We could adapt to his changing rhythms — and change they did, repeatedly. We could pace ourselves. All this allowed him to develop at his own pace — not a pace forced by other people’s timetables. I’ve really appreciated the freedom to be able to respond to both his and my changing needs and to work it out as we go along.”



THEME 3

Linking to community

This text was read aloud at the second gathering to introduce the theme.

The experience of connecting with others is very important to many of us, and since becoming mothers, these connections have changed in unexpected ways.

Before having children some of us connected to other women through ideas about power, self-esteem and feminism. After having children, experiences of connecting with other women who have gone before us in time as mothers, have become very real. We think about how mothers, grandmothers and generations of mothers have faced childbirth, breastfeeding, washing on washboards, often in very challenging contexts ... women have done these things forever. We have a sense of the wisdom that women who have gone before us have acquired. Through our mothering, some of us have developed a strong connection to these women — a compassion and respect that is held within us — and is a source of inspiration and care to us today.

For others of us it's the community of mothers around us that has become very real. One of us said that when she had her first child she had a sense of joining a club and suddenly belonging to a world of women that hadn't existed for her before. For another there is a sense of solidarity with all mothers regardless of their ages. "Age doesn't matter, it's more about, 'How old are your kids?'" And others of us notice a skill like "a special radar for connection": "I can be at the plaza and if I am in trouble other mums have come to the rescue ..."

Being a mum has taken many of us "out of our comfort zones" — another says it's as if "you can't be a bystander any more." This has resulted in willingly extending ourselves for others, reaching out to our neighbours and communities in ways that are often unrecognised.

KAREN'S STORY



I came from a big family; Dad was one of nine, and I had 34 cousins. We had big family gatherings, in a big Catholic community. I believed in all that — I loved the rituals of the church. Now my spiritual life has evolved and I want something for our family to equal that.

I want to establish that sense of belonging, safety, and connection for my children. I want my children to know that they can have family — in any form — wherever they go. It is about making connections — supporting your local school, your local shops. If we put into our communities, it makes it better for everyone. Wherever you live, the community you're in will only be as good as your participation.

I had no idea what sort of connections I had made until my fortieth birthday party and I looked around me. Just shortly after that my husband got sick ... I am so grateful that all of those people are part of my family. My community of mothers is like family — an extension of family. You can have reassuring long distance connections — from different countries — the net of community travels so far. It stretches over time and history. It is important to me, that feeling of being part of a bigger whole.



FROM OTHER PARTICIPANTS

- “If you want your children to belong to a community, they have to see you doing it too ... otherwise how do they learn? Supporting public schools, local shops — it’s about being involved and participating. It’s about a belief in social justice and our responsibility to make things better not just for our children, but for all children. It connects us.”
- “Being involved in the community, the school, going on excursions. It communicates to your child that they’re the priority, that you care. My parents weren’t involved in my school or community. They weren’t community minded. I felt they didn’t care.”
- “There is a huge amount of unpaid work that goes on in communities. The breastfeeding association wouldn’t exist without that time from mothers. Keeping the house alive — the food, fixing things that break, chasing people up, keeping an eye out for our neighbours, paying bills, rosters at the pre-school, helping the reading groups and book clubs at school. There is a limited amount that a teacher and assistant at a pre-school can do — if parents don’t help, it falls apart. We are responsible for people other than ourselves — we are responsible for community.”
- “Stay-at-home mothers create community mindedness, they contribute to communities in immeasurable ways. Mothers create a sense of community safety. When you become a mother, you don’t nurture just your own children, you start nurturing the community as well.”
- “Community is a resource for me. Community has come to my rescue.”
- “We shouldn’t be called stay-at-home mums, we should be called out-in-the-community mums. I haven’t felt so connected to the community I live in now as a mother since my own childhood. I feel I am not only part of it, but I and many others shape this community around us through little initiatives here and there. Before I had kids, when I was busy with fulltime paid work, I didn’t realise there was a whole other world of community support and work. Or at least I took it for granted.”
- “Everyone has a place in the community — for all people there is a safe and secure place. Picking up the rubbish, supporting the library and toy library. Supporting schools and banks. Keeping resources available

*“...you don’t
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the community
as well.”*



for everyone. Making sure that everyone's voice is heard. Finding transport for people who can't walk or drive . . . Using a library is about recycling, keeping resources, keeping the community safe."

“Technology has come a long way, and it seems that now we are reluctant to connect by phone. On the other hand I am part of an online parenting forum. There is strength that I get from that, it overcomes isolation — I feel like I know those people. There is strength in all forms of communities.”

“Linking with community is like being a pebble dropped into a pond, the ripples get wider and wider. You help at the school, you pick up children after school, you ring someone — then they ring you, then you have cuppas together . . . We pool our efforts together and we become part of something bigger. Our children get to belong to extended families and the community supports them, particularly when hard things happen. It's about safety. It's a buzz! I love being part of all of that. If you broaden your horizon, you get stuff back.”

“A sense of belonging, friendship and support is what we get from belonging to community. We're teaching our children that.”

“I wonder about the different impacts of being a stay-at-home mum — taking kids out to social situations, the community, making them more socially confident. This develops social skills. Dragging kids to the post office, the ATM, they are learning social and life skills. We are incorporating them into society, teaching them skills to use later on — how to be in society.”

“I am part of my family too, I have to be ok to make my contribution to community. That knowledge helped me realise that I can't do everything — I have to look after myself too. I learned to do less . . . but to do it well or to do it joyfully. You can only do these things if you slow down. I learned this when I started pushing my daughter around in a pram through the streets of my neighbourhood. You have to make the time to slow down.”

“I want my children to value and to recognise a responsibility to contribute to community, and yet I need to lead by example about ways to do this. If you overdo it, there can be a price. I've learned that I can give so much to something and I also need to know my limits, and that these limits can change. Periodically I need to do a reality check, and at times I withdraw right back in, and I'll be right here, right now with my children. My children help guide me in this. I've now learned to say 'enough'. Like the request from my son for more help with the reading group, I said, “Not today, dear.” I had to let him see that at times there is 'enough'.”



REFLECTIONS FROM THE LISTENING TEAM

“One of the women in our group spoke about being ‘blasted out of her head’ — to strong feelings, to a different perspective. Women spoke of the shift in how they connect with community — how they could end up running themselves ragged and their need to eventually pull back. They shifted to moving more slowly, noticing caterpillars with their children. I remembered my own early days with my Catholic heritage, being involved in social justice and lots of community and school groups with my kids. I went to a counsellor who used a phrase — ‘the spirituality of self-care’ ... I felt like my soul was being rained on when I heard that. That has then been a journey for me — seeking to find that balance — and it was good to be reminded of this, a journey that I want to keep on.”

“Some women spoke about how being a mum gave them an awareness of their responsibility and the power they put into communities. Supporting local shops and local libraries and local transport and our children’s safety. I am about to move my mum into a hostel — and I realise how important that community is — I am mothering my mum and I am reliant on that community to support me.”

“It felt like we were a microcosm of a community in our group — we talked about everything. People shared their own experiences, they offered a real holding — we were a community for each other for a little while. It was really energising. Mothers contribute in immeasurable ways — people know they are home, people drop in if they are feeling low or ring them if they need something. Last week I helped my mum move, all of her friends were there to help her. I appreciate them more having heard these conversations.”

“There was a strong sense for me as a listener of the joy that arose from what was created in these community efforts and links in these women’s lives — [joy] from the sense of participating



in something bigger by pooling efforts with others, the satisfaction that their children were experiencing their belonging and membership in extended families and communities, and that this web was supportive for all of them at different times, particularly when hard things happened in life. And the journeys in doing this, the skills the women had developed in participating in these webs — of recognising when it's time to say enough for now, and to withdraw, until ready again to reach out and contribute more broadly again.”

“Listening to the women speak about all the things in community that mothers nurture, another important one occurred to me. We need to nurture our primary adult relationship. It's important for our children to see us in loving relationships, and these relationships need nurturing. And then there's our children's relationships with their other parent — or other significant people in their lives, we often play a big role in nurturing those relationships too.”

“We've been hearing about the importance of self-care for mothers. While I sometimes find it hard to act on this wisdom — my mother was so flat out with her large family that there was little opportunity for her to take time for herself — I am reminded of the principle every time I catch a plane. The flight attendants doing their emergency procedures spiel always tell us that in the event of an emergency we are to put on our own oxygen masks before we assist our children. It's good to get that reminder every so often.”



Overall reflections at the end of the gatherings

We asked the question, “What’s so valuable about being a stay-at-home mum?” We found out that it’s the connections, it’s about community, the opportunity to spend time with children, mutual nurturing — mothers nurturing their children and being nurtured by their children, it’s about love.

- “This is my opportunity to hang out with my kids, and I want my kids to know they’re a priority for me, that I choose them.”
- “I was appreciating that we didn’t just romanticise motherhood — we spoke about the reality of it — the really unromantic parts, the ups and downs of motherhood, the scary bits, the fun bits.”
- “Today has been about shedding the pathological layers that surround motherhood.”
- “People were talking about being an older mother and how that made them feel inadequate — I was a younger mother and I felt really inadequate. I wish we could just pass on by osmosis all these wisdoms we are learning.”
- “The listening team’s reflections cemented the process in a moving and emotional way and provided relief that you are not alone”.
- “After the experience of today, I wouldn’t mind breaking down in a lift with all of you!”
- “I kept thinking that we are talking about mothering with such wisdom — and I wondered does mothering go beyond being a mother who has a biological relationship with children? What are the ways that people [who are not mothers] mother? How do men do it, women who haven’t had children — how do they do it? What other ways do people find to be creative and productive — as well as by being mothers?”



One woman reflected on the complexities and intricacies of the experiences of mothering. She was reading *Clancy of the Overflow* to her son in the past week and had been reading the lines:

*I am sitting in my dingy little office, where a stingy
Ray of sunlight struggles feebly down between the houses tall,
And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city
Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all.*

And she spoke of knowing that motherhood can be like this at times: dingy, stingy, foetid and gritty! Not the romantic rosy image that at times it can be cast as, though at times it can be like this too. It's not an either/or. For her it was important that the diversity of experiences of motherhood is acknowledged as she felt it had been today.

The idea of “the spirituality of self-care” was named as important and of meaning to some women, particularly given the myriad ways that their energies can be called upon endlessly within their families and broader communities. A woman spoke about realising that without practices in self-care, “our contribution is full of resentment”, and that’s not what she wants. Women reflected that they had spoken of the vitality, joy and enthusiasm that can flow from their participation in community activities, and the commitments that this expressed about responsibility to contribute to building a better life for others beyond their own personal circles. Another woman spoke of the connections for her between this vitality and spirituality — saying that she’d learned that the word ‘enthusiasm’ comes from the word ‘theo’, the ‘god within’.

“It made me think that we are getting beyond thinking just about ‘my children’ and what ‘my children need’.”

A mother who had visited other cultures spoke of how in other places the journey of motherhood “*can be a lot softer, a lot more gentle.*” Other women might live in the same house or close by, who have experience and assistance to share, and understand that it is a learning process.

“I remember a time when I was with my two year-old daughter . . . trying to get a bit of nice time with just the two of us together. Initially my daughter wanted to sit outside the cafe, then she wanted to sit inside . . . so I went back and forth about four times . . . I was just exhausted, trying to think was I being too sensitive, or not sensitive enough? Finally an older woman came up to me: “I just wanted to say what a lovely mothering job you are doing, trying to be sensitive to your daughter.” I could have burst into tears of relief. That was such a gentle way to approach me, not telling me how to do it, just connecting with me trying to do my best. She was just like a little guardian angel.”

“It had me thinking about the switch that gets turned on when you are a mum — you don’t just nurture your children, you nurture communities, the environment, local schools — everything around you. We also nurture ourselves — the spirituality of self-care, the god within . . . It was good to realise that others do this too, and what it makes possible for all children. I read in the school newsletter that there’s a program in which parents can contribute extra lunches. So if a child forgets their lunch, the broader school community has provided one for them. It came as a relief to me and a joy too — connecting strongly with my belief that children are everybody’s responsibility, not just mothers’.”

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MOTHERS CAN DO ANYTHING

Lyrics by
Mothers' Stories Group
Music by
Karen Eastwood

A recording of this
song is available online at
www.parentlink.act.gov.au

Chorus D A G A Repeat x 3

Mo - thers can do a - ny - thing, they can't do eve - ry - thing, But we

4 D A G D A G **Verse 1** D G

try, ah - ah - ah - ah, But we try, ah - ah - ah - ah. Who the hell am I?

9 A D G A D G

What hap - pened to my P h D? I want to go be - yond

13 A D G A Em

"just a mum", Find out what's right for me. Your heart gets big - ger

17 Asus G A **Chorus** D **Verse 2** G

and goes be - yond your bod - y. Cre - a - ting home for my

2/ A D G A D G

child - ren, what's right for my fam - i - ly. Know - ing life is with -

25 A D G A Em

in me, My moth-er's gift for me. My love gets big-ger

29 Asus G A Chorus Bridge D A

and goes be - yond my bod - y. We've got floors to mop, bums to wipe,

Detailed description: This image shows a musical score for the chorus and bridge of 'The Wipe Out'. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, the chords are indicated: Asus, G, A, Chorus, Bridge, D, and A. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are written below the staff: 'and goes be - yond my bod - y. We've got floors to mop, bums to wipe,'. The 'Chorus' and 'Bridge' sections are highlighted with boxes above the staff.

33

G A D A

socks to find, tears to dry, put on your soc-cer boots or those bal-let tights. I need to

35 G A D A



find the keys, you need your la-ces tied, hang the wash-ing up, get the din-ner on, "Check my

37 G G A Chorus

rall (slow down - spoken) *f*

home-work, Mum." Can I just go to the loo on my own?

Detailed description: This musical notation is for the chorus of the song 'Home-Work'. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody starts on a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a quarter note B-flat4. After a double bar line, the tempo and mood change to 'rall (slow down - spoken)' and the key signature changes to natural (no flats or sharps). The melody continues with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. After another double bar line, the dynamics change to 'f' (forte) and the melody continues with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics 'home-work, Mum.'" are aligned under the first three notes, and 'Can I just go to the loo on my own?' are aligned under the subsequent notes. A 'Chorus' label in a box is positioned at the end of the line.

The lyrics for this song were drafted during the gatherings for the project and are based on quotes from participants.



ABOUT THE MAJURA WOMEN'S GROUP

The Majura Women's Group is a self-run community group for women at home with young children. It supports its members by giving them the opportunity to meet, discuss issues and talk about the challenges and joys of parenting. The group also provides a creative outlet and a reminder that even though bringing up children is a fulltime job there is room for personal growth and self-expression.

The group's program of activities includes discussion sessions on parenting, health and a broad range of topical issues. The group also offers physical activity sessions, as well as an annual arts project called 'the backyard project'. In recent years the group has concentrated on creating public artworks, which can be seen around Canberra. The group provides adjunct childcare to enable members to participate fully in the sessions, but equally, women are welcome to bring their children into the sessions with them.

The Majura Women's Group was started in 1981 as the "Downer Women's Community Group" by a group of mothers seeking to overcome the isolation and lack of adult stimulation that can accompany the work of a parent. The group meets on Wednesday mornings at the Downer Community Centre.

In 2004 the Majura Women's Group started establishing a similar group in south Canberra. The resulting 'Brindabella Women's Group' is now functioning independently of the Majura Women's Group and is a thriving self-run community group based in Tuggeranong. The Majura Women's Group was delighted to join with members of its sister group in undertaking this project.

The 25th anniversary publication *Majura Women's Group: Celebrating 25 Years* provides further background information on the Majura Women's Group.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Majura Women's Group

PO Box 7123

Watson ACT 2602

02 6262 8776

www.majurawomensgroup.org.au

Meetings

Downer Community Centre, Frencham Place, Downer

Wednesday mornings during school terms

9.30am for sessions from 10am–12noon

Brindabella Women's Group

PO Box 2648

Tuggeranong ACT 2901

02 6294 6696

www.brindabellawomensgroup.org

Meetings

Chisholm Community Centre, Halley Street, Chisholm

Tuesday mornings during school terms

9.30am for sessions from 10am–12noon



PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Jess Begley | Ann-Maree Hatch |
| Cathy Blake | Jen Leheny |
| Clare Borchers | Therese Neill |
| Kristine Buccoliero | Ruth Ragless |
| Karen Cording | Ruth Sanders |
| Rachel Cunneen | Silke Speier |
| Karen Eastwood | Christine Trull |
| Kellie Edwards | Kerrie Tyrrell |
| Jacqui Etherington | Joanne Whiting |

LISTENING TEAM

| | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Janenne Hamilton | Robyn Sirr |
| Sue Hoffmann | Robyn Thomas |
| Mary Pekin | Maira Turnbull |
| Di Pratt | Manja Visschedijk |
| Linda Russell | |

NARRATIVE THERAPY AND COMMUNITY WORK

For more information see www.dulwichcentre.com.au



Beyond “I’m just a mum”

“A moving account ...The only way to combat the invisibility and contemporary dishonouring of the extraordinarily important work of being a mother, is to be visible and audible, and to honour and value it by speaking and writing and calling attention to it!”

Anne Manne—Author of *Motherhood: how should we care for our children?*

“These stories remind us of what is important in life and what we risk losing. They tell of the value of motherhood, not just to mothers and their children, but to schools, community, society and the future. They are about a vocation, about a connection to others, the continuity of generations, the flow of time. They are about joy and suffering, reward and sacrifice. They challenge the dominant messages and images of our culture, which has diminished motherhood (and fatherhood). In all these ways, they remind us that our own stories matter — not just to ourselves, but in our sharing them with each other.”

Richard Eckersley—Director, Australia 21 Ltd, social analyst and author of *Well & good: morality, meaning and happiness*

“This publication took me back to the years I spent at home with my children. I have never regretted my ‘time out’, although it certainly changed my career path. My experiences at that time continue to influence my relationships with my adult children, and have also changed the way I function as a doctor.”

Dr Sue Packer—Community paediatrician

rich stories of motherhood