

'Mum'. The small word carries a big meaning for most of us. That meaning partly depends on how we feel about our own mothers and grandmothers and also what our communities expect of mothers. We each have different pictures in our heads about how we should be, or want to be, as a mother.

Most mothers learn as they go, influenced by the way they were brought up or by what they have read or watched others do. The job that mothers do of shaping and influencing the life of another human being must surely be the most important thing that anyone can do.

Being a mum

Mothering changes over the life of your child and each stage of your child's development brings different knowledge, understanding, satisfaction and challenges. Mothering can also change with each new child in your family. Once you are a mother, the needs of your children will probably take priority over many other things in your life.

Becoming a mother brings a golden opportunity to improve family patterns or strengthen patterns from your own childhood. You can choose the kind of mum you want to be and the kind of childhood your child has.

As your baby grows you may find that at certain ages her experiences will bring memories of what happened for you at that age. Sometimes if these are particularly sad or painful, happy or joyful, the memories of your own childhood experiences might affect how you respond to your own child.

First time mums

- If you have just become a mum you will be coming to terms with some big changes in your life. Becoming a mum for the first time can be difficult and very different from what you expected.
- Your relationship with your partner/baby's father will be different now that there is another person sharing your lives.
- Many women give up a lot to become mothers—career opportunities, active social lives, a sense of freedom.
- New mothers can feel grief over the loss of their 'old life' as well as joy about their 'new life'—even when they thought they were prepared for it.
- Many mothers who don't work outside the home can sometimes feel isolated and under-valued in communities where most people go out to work.
- Many mothers who continue to work outside the home find they have a lot of demands on their time and energy.

- Caring for a tiny baby 24 hours a day can be exhausting and sometimes it can feel like you have lost control over everything. You may feel overwhelmed and have a sense of not coping. Ask for help, and say 'Yes' to offers of support.
- Be prepared for people to offer a great deal of well-meaning and conflicting advice. You know your baby best but be open to suggestions. If they seem helpful try them and choose what works for you and your baby.

What you can do

- Talk with your partner about your feelings and hopes for your new baby as well as any sadness you may feel for the loss of your life as a two-some. Partners often feel many of the same things.
- Encourage your partner to care for your child's physical and emotional needs from babyhood. It will help their relationship and help your child to learn that others love and care for him too.
- Learn to know what your baby is saying to you and respond to his needs.
- Find other mothers you feel comfortable with to talk to about the changes that are happening in your life. It is helpful and comforting to know that other women are going through similar adjustments and you can share ideas.
- Remind yourself that you are doing a most important job where every step is new and has to be learnt.
- Don't set yourself unrealistic goals or expect to be competent and coping all the time.
- Don't worry too much about the housework. There is no way you will keep your house the way it was before—right now it's not the most important thing. Choose a few things to keep under control and let the rest go for a while.
- Protect yourself from doing too much. Lots of people want to see a new baby, but you can only afford to see those who are helpful and energy giving.



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Community Services

THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

- Say 'Yes' to offers of help. Every new mother needs support.
- Take a break when you are at the end of your tether—this will help you to care better for your baby. Talk to someone supportive if this happens a lot.
- Don't feel bad if you have to put your crying baby in the cot and walk outside because you are both frazzled and overtired and you can't cope any longer. Make sure your baby is safe first.
- Ask for help. If the pain of adjusting to your new role is far greater than the pleasure, or if you feel that you and your baby are not getting on together in the way you would like, something is not working right for you. Don't think it is your fault, it happens often. Find someone—friend, family or health professional—who will take your concerns seriously. Don't be 'fobbed off' by someone telling you it's normal to be hassled by motherhood sometimes. It is normal, but if you are unhappy, both you and your baby deserve help. That starts with someone listening carefully and seriously to your worries and feelings.

The role of being a mother is something you grow into, just as your baby grows into being a person. Don't panic if you don't feel like a 'mum' as soon as your baby is born. You are a person and your baby is a person and the two of you are getting to know one another—this takes time and is the start of a relationship that lasts a lifetime.

Mums in two parent homes

Children grow up to understand about relationships from what they see from the people around them, and especially what they experience in their family. They will also expect to treat and be treated the way you and your partner behave towards each other.

The way that you both model respect and honesty will help your children to value and practise those qualities in their relationships. In the same way, the way you handle conflict and differences will show your children how to behave.

What you can do

- Plan and share the details of daily life. A balance in the routine of who does the dishes, the washing, the shopping and who picks the children up from childcare or school etc, can make or break the way families work.
- Make time to be together. All relationships are built on special time spent together.
- Make time for yourself to do what you like to do. Refilling your own pot of energy and enjoyment helps you to go on giving to others.
- Try to agree on ways of dealing with issues around your children. Children feel safest when their parents agree on what the rules are. If you don't always agree it is important not to criticise each other in front of your children.
- Manage your anger. We all lose our temper sometimes and all families have quarrels, particularly at times of change. If important issues remain unresolved for any length of time, they rarely go away of their own accord and can get worse if not dealt with. If you can't sort it out, get help.

Single mums

You may be a single mum from choice or through divorce, separation or death. You may sometimes feel it is hard to have sole responsibility for your household. On the other hand you may enjoy being able to do things in your own way without having to work them out with another adult. You may experience both feelings at different times. It will make a big difference if you have the support of others—family or friends.

What you can do

- Work at building a circle of support. If you don't have a supportive family nearby, share tasks, childcare and babysitting with other women.
- Take time out for yourself with other adults. It is also important for your children to see you considering your own interests and activities. Being 'a mum' is only part of who you are. When you have a break you come back refreshed and can parent better.
- Don't discuss big worries with your children. If you live with your children without another adult in the house, it is natural to discuss everyday things with them. This can be satisfying for both. However, protect your children from carrying 'adult problems'. Money and adult relationship problems can be too worrying for children.
- Be firm about setting limits but know that it is normal for children to challenge the rules. Traditionally fathers did a lot of the limit setting and mothers were more involved in caring for the feelings in the family, but this pattern is changing.
- Try to make sure your sons have at least one man in their lives (grandfather, uncle, trusted friend) who can show and teach them about being male.

Visiting dad

Your children may live only with you, only with their dad, or you may have some other arrangement involving being without them for some of the time. These comings and goings can be unsettling but this depends a lot on your attitude and how you get on with your children's father.

- Plan some enjoyable activity for yourself while your children are away.
- Have a routine for when your children return from their dad. Try to develop one that works for everyone and one that doesn't involve too many demands on your children.
- It is often hard for children to manage their feelings when they are moving between two houses. Difficult behaviour is to be expected for a short time after their return. Talk to your kids about that.
- Try not to get involved in what happens at their dad's place, unless you have good reason to be seriously worried for their safety. All households run differently and their dad may have very different values and a different parenting style. Children are quite capable of learning what to do in different places. It is good for them to know they can't set you against each other.

- Send their toys or comforters with them if they are very young.
- Keep to your side of the plans, such as drop-off and pick-up times.
- Don't send messages through your child. Communicate directly with their dad or, if this is not possible, through another person. If there is likely to be any conflict or difficulty, avoid making any arrangements with your children's dad in front of the children.
- Let your child enjoy time with their dad. Allow your child the freedom to love him without being made to feel guilty.

Stepmums

Families in a second family are now so common there are a variety of ways of being a stepmum. The role you take with your stepchildren will depend on how young they are and also the strength and nature of their relationship with their father and with their birth mother.

If children are older and have a strong relationship with their mother you are more likely to become an important adult in their life. On the other hand if they are young and need more mothering and caring, the lines between 'step' and 'mother' are likely to be more blurred.

Just because you have been given the title of 'step-mother' you don't have to be anyone other than who you are.

When stepfamilies come together, everyone has to make changes and this often makes children angry. Be patient, accepting and understanding, while remembering you are a person with rights too. If there are any concerns to sort out with your partner regarding his children, discuss this with him when the children are not there.

What you can do

- Give children time to get used to you—any relationship requires time to build.
- Discuss issues about the children as much as possible with your partner and work out together how to deal with them.
- Give children some time to be with their dad without you, so they don't need to compete with you.
- Leave most of the discipline to their dad, particularly at first.
- Have family meetings if the children are old enough, where you work out rules and consequences together.
- Encourage them to see their mother if she is available to them.
- Make sure you make special time with your own children.

Childcare

Returning to work after having a baby is often when you need childcare for the first time. This first separation can be painful and filled with doubts and difficult decisions about your career and your baby's needs.

- The decision to return to work can be a very big one. Balancing the different demands can be tiring. Some mothers can feel guilty about the choices they make.
- Make sure you talk with your partner, sympathetic friend, family member or health professional so you can think through your decision and how best to make it work.
- Some mums have extended family or friends who care for their baby or child while they work outside the home, or have a break from mothering. Others will choose from long day childcare, care in someone else's home or someone coming into their own home.
- You need to feel trusting and comfortable with your child's carer to talk freely about problems and concerns.
- Let the carer know your child's likes and dislikes.

The most important thing is not what type of care you choose but that you feel that the carer has genuine respect and warmth for your child, and that you can feel trusting of them to care for your child in your absence.

Take time to choose 'care' where your child has enjoyable experiences. If you feel your child's needs are being met, you are less likely to feel anxious and guilty about leaving your child.

As your children grow

Your time and energy is your most precious resource. Spending time with your children is a sure sign to them that they are truly valued—and it will help them to behave better!

- Say sorry when you lose your temper or treat them unfairly.
- See yourself as a teacher—teaching them about relationships and about living in society with other people. These things take a long time to learn so be prepared to repeat lessons calmly.
- Encourage your children to share in tasks around the home (in keeping with their age and ability).
- Tell them when they do helpful things—that's how they know to keep doing them. Children need to feel that they are needed.
- Set reasonable limits and stick to them.
- Do unexpected small things to make them feel special. For example, a note on their pillow to say 'I love you', or a treat in their school lunch box.
- Take time to listen to what's happening in their lives. Now the names of their friends, teachers, heroes and what their favourite books, videos or TV programs are about.

Growing into adolescence

- Remember that they need you even if everything they do and say seems to suggest they don't.
- Don't be visibly horrified at outrageous clothes or haircuts. Try to talk with them about any possible consequences their appearance may have, so they can make informed decisions.
- Talk about your own feelings and experiences. Even if the conversation seems one way, you can be sure they are listening to what it's like to be a grown-up.
- Start your sentences with 'I feel' rather than 'You are'. For example 'I feel angry when I have to do all the housework' rather than 'You are lazy'.

'Letting go'

The relationship between a mum and her children has to move on to a level of two adult friends at some stage. Often this change is quite fast and happens in your child's late teens or early twenties. It is a big step to 'let go' of being a mother in the close and protective way that you have practised for so many years—but that is what you need to do. You may feel sadness in the loss of your role and of not 'being needed' in the way you have been used to.

'Letting go' *continued*

It happens differently for every mother and child. There is a real challenge of 'letting go' of the daily intimacies as your children become increasingly able to make decisions for themselves. This is a time to make plans about how you will live your 'new life', what you will do with some free time, and how you will be involved in your children's lives.

Your job has been done extremely well if you can create an atmosphere of respect and concern that allows them to go out into the world knowing that your strength is behind them.

Reminders

- Being a mum is a juggling act—be flexible and adapt to plans changing
- Take time for yourself, forgive yourself—taking care of yourself takes practice.
- Remember what was positive and important about the way you were cared for.
- Try not to repeat the negative experiences of your childhood.
- Don't set unrealistic goals for yourself or your children.
- Hug your children a lot. Tell them they are loved.
- Take time to know what's important in their lives.
- All mothers need help—accept offers or ask for help.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Being a parent, Family break-up, Right from the start, Single parenting
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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