

Being a mum

‘Mum’. This small word carries a lot of meaning and emotion for most of us. It comes from how we feel about our own mothers and grandmothers, what our community expects of mothers and how we think we should be, or want to be as a mum.

Becoming a mother is the start of a journey that can bring great joy, pride and happiness as well as worries and challenges. Most mums work things out as they go along and grown into their role over time. The most important thing mothers can do is make sure children feel loved, safe and secure.

ParentLink

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Your role as a mum

We each have a different picture in our mind about what it means to be a mum. Our ideas come from:

- how we were brought up
- our culture or religion
- what we read, see in the media or on the internet
- what we see others doing.

Mothering is also influenced by whether you are in a two-parent home, a single mum, separated from your child's father, a step-mum or a same-sex parent.

Mums have often been seen as the parent who provides most of the love and nurturing, while dads are the bread winner or disciplinarian.

This is changing and there is now more sharing of the parenting role. Evidence shows that loving care from dad benefits children's development.

It works best when mums and dads work together and support each other in their parenting, whether they live together or not.

Your role as a mum *continued*

About you

- Many mums can feel pressure to live up to images of the 'perfect mum' they see on TV, advertisements and other media. It is important to remember there is no such thing as being perfect. All families face problems no matter how they appear on the outside.
- Becoming a mother can change you as a person. You may think of yourself in a new way and find there is more meaning and purpose to life. You can come to understand more about yourself, and what helps you be your best as a parent.
- You can feel many strong emotions as a mum — joy and pride as well as negative emotions such as anger, despair or worry. Be aware of your feelings and talk things through with someone you trust when you need to.
- It is important to remember you are a person as well as a mum. Make time to look after yourself and your own needs. Keep up your interests and do things you enjoy. You will have more energy to focus on your family. Remember to:
 - value yourself and the important job you are doing
 - feel confident in yourself and your parenting
 - build a network of supportive people around you
 - seek help when you need it.

Don't worry if you don't feel like a mum right from the start. It is a role mums grow into with experience.

Being a mum is one of the most rewarding and important roles you can have in life. The greatest gift you can give children is your love.

Information and advice

Mums can feel overwhelmed by the amount of information and advice that comes from many different sources — family, friends, the internet, the media and professionals.

- If you find information on the internet make sure it is from a reliable source.
- Mums often like to share their experiences with family and friends on social media. This can be great fun and a source of support and encouragement. It can also be where mums feel judged and criticised. If this happens think about whether you want to be involved.
- Family and friends often offer mums advice from their own experience. Listen and be open to ideas, but feel confident to make your own choices.

Trust yourself

It is important to trust and believe in yourself. Feel confident you can work out what's best for your children and family. Remember, you know your children best.



Work together

Parenting is easier when mums and dads/partners work together. Set a pattern of sharing ideas and working things out together right from the start. Decide how you will share the load and balance work and family responsibilities. Each of you needs to feel the balance is fair. Talk about what is important to you individually and for your family. You might decide that you value:

- love and kindness
- listening and respecting difference
- no yelling or hitting.

If you can't come to an understanding remember children can cope with parents doing things differently, but they can't cope with parents fighting or putting each other down.

First time mums

When a baby comes along there are big changes to get used to. Your baby's needs now take priority over other things in your life.

Remember:

- respond warmly and gently to baby's needs
- feel proud of what you achieve each day, even small things
- don't set yourself unrealistic goals or expect to be perfect
- say 'Yes' to offers of help and seek help when you need it. Every new mother needs support
- encourage and support dad's hands-on care of baby from the start. The involvement of a loving dad is good for baby's

development. Just like you, he will gain confidence and skills with practice (see ParentLink Guide 'Being a Dad')

- don't feel bad if you have to put your crying baby in their cot and walk outside for a while. Make sure baby is safe first. Ask for help if something is not going right for you. Talk to someone supportive, your doctor or other health professional.

Your relationship with your partner/child's father can change when you have a baby. Talk about your feelings, hopes and worries. Make special time to spend together.



Childcare

Returning to work after a baby is often when you need childcare for the first time. You might continue to need care for older children to help you juggle work and family life. When choosing childcare it is important to check the credentials of the service or carer. Choose care where your child feels comfortable and has an enjoyable time. If their needs are being met, you are less likely to feel anxious or guilty about leaving them.

Mums in two-parent families

Children learn about relationships and getting along with others from what they see people around them doing, especially in their own family.

- The way you and your partner show respect and care for each other shows children how to treat people and what to expect from others.
- Sharing daily tasks such as the dishes, washing, shopping and picking up children from childcare, school or activities shows children how to cooperate and helps families work well.
- Talking through differences calmly shows children how to handle disagreements.
- Agree on how you will resolve parenting differences. It is important not to criticise each other in front of children.

How you and your partner respect and care for each other helps children value and practice these qualities in their own relationships.

Single mums

Having sole responsibility for your children and household can be hard. However, you may enjoy doing things your own way without having to consult another adult.

You can feel both of these things at different times.

- Try to build a network of supportive people around you. If you don't have family or friends nearby you could try joining a local parent group.
- Take time out to spend with other adults. You can come back refreshed and feel better about parenting.
- Don't discuss your worries with children. They need protection from the burden of 'adult problems'.
- Try to make sure your sons have at least one trusted man in their lives (grandfather, uncle, friend) who can show and teach them about being a man. Daughters also need trusted men in their lives who show they value and respect them. This helps girls know what to expect in future relationships.
- If children spend time with their dad, let them love him without guilt. Don't send messages through your children. Don't get involved in what happens at his place, unless you have good reason to be concerned about their safety (see ParentLink Guide 'Single parenting').

Blended families are now more common. You might share a home with your partner, their children and/or your own children. If children are older and have a strong bond with their birth mother you are more likely to be an important other adult in their life. If they are young the line between 'step' and 'mother' can be more blurred.

Blended families involve change for everyone and this often makes children angry. Be patient, accepting and understanding while remembering you are a person with rights too.

- Give children time to get used to you. Any relationship needs time to build.
- Discuss issues with your partner and work things out away from the children.
- Leave most of the discipline to their dad, particularly at first.
- Give children some time to be with their dad without you, so they don't need to compete with you. Encourage children to see their mother if possible.
- Spend special time with your own children (see ParentLink Guide 'Blended families').

Mothering constantly changes as children's needs change at each stage of their development. It helps to be flexible and adaptable.

Some things all mums can do

Show your love

A mother's loving and nurturing role is very important to children. They need to feel valued, safe and secure to grow and develop their best. Children equate love with the time and attention you give them.

- Respond warmly to baby's needs, e.g. for a feed, sleep, nappy change, cuddle. This builds baby's trust in you and is the start of developing your relationship (see ParentLink Guide 'About babies').
- Show you enjoy spending time with your children. Play and have fun together.
- Tell them you love them and give hugs and cuddles.
- Do unexpected small things to make children feel special, e.g. a note to say 'I love you', or a treat in their school lunch box.
- Don't stop showing your love as children get older. Teenagers need to know you love them too.

Be a positive role model

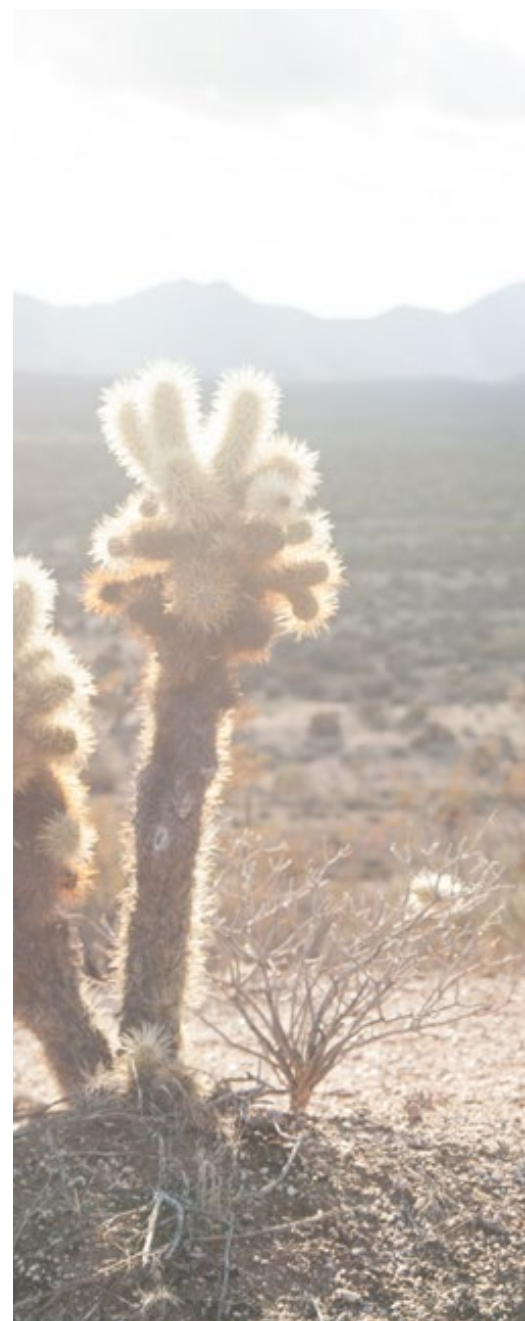
Children learn from seeing what you do. It is important to behave in ways you want your children to behave. Treat people the way you want your children to treat others. Live by your values. Regulate your own emotions so children can learn to do this too. It is an important life skill.

Stay calm even when you are upset. Children learn to manage their own feelings from seeing what you do.

Guide and support

Mums have a strong role in helping children learn about living in the world and getting along with others. Your guidance and support can help them learn and achieve their full potential.

- See yourself as a life coach. Learning continues over many years so be prepared to repeat lessons calmly in many different ways.
- Focus on building a family that works well so children feel safe and secure. Talk and have fun together. Establish regular routines such as mealtimes and bedtimes. Share the chores and create family traditions, e.g. the way you celebrate special occasions (see ParentLink Guide 'Families that work well').
- Show you value each member of the family. Treat each other with respect. Support and encourage each other.
- Encourage children to share in tasks around the house that suit their age and ability. Tell them when they do helpful things. That's how they know to keep doing them. Children need to feel they are needed.
- Show you have confidence in children. Help them learn and develop a range of interests and skills. This builds their self-confidence. Praise and encourage their efforts.
- Take time to talk with children and listen to what's happening in their lives. Know their friends, teachers, heroes and what their favourite books, movies or TV programs are about.
- Use praise and positive encouragement rather than punishment to teach children the behaviour you expect. Set reasonable limits for a child's age and help them learn and practice what you want (see ParentLink Guides 'What is your parenting style?' and 'Discipline 0–12 years').



- Help children have friends and a network of trusted adults they can talk to. Older children can benefit from trusted mentors who can expand their interests.
- Say sorry if you lose your temper or treat children unfairly. You are not expected to be perfect but you will be modelling taking responsibility and repairing relationships. Work out how you can do things better next time.

Children benefit when families have meals together without TV or other screens. It is a chance to talk, share your day and build relationships.



Connect with teenagers

Adolescence and the teenage years bring many changes for young people. There are hormone and brain changes that affect their thinking and emotions. They can have strong feelings that change quickly and they are testing limits and boundaries. This can be a challenging time for parents, particularly single mums. It can help to:

- keep communicating with your teen. Be relaxed and easy to talk to. Be there when they are ready to talk
- try not to judge, lecture or give advice. Start your sentences with 'I feel' rather than 'You are', e.g. 'I feel angry when I have to do all the housework' rather than 'You are lazy'

- help teens have good information on things like relationships, sex, drugs, alcohol. Make sure they have other trusted adults to talk to
- seek support from others if you need it. Get help immediately if there is violence (see ParentLink Guides 'Violence towards parents' and 'Living with young people').

Remember teenagers still need you even if it doesn't seem like it at times. You are their best resource.

Looking after yourself

It is important to look after your own needs so you can be your best for your family. Make time to relax and do things you enjoy. Children learn that you are a person with your own interests as well as a mum.

Take time to pause and appreciate the good things in your day and your life. Notice the unique and wonderful things about your children. Be positive and optimistic. Refilling your own pot of energy and enjoyment helps you go on giving to others.

Looking after your relationships

Your relationships with your partner and other adults are important supports for you. Make special time to spend with your partner without the children or for catching up with family and friends. Children learn that relationships are important and need time and attention.

Being a mum

Managing your anger

All mums feel angry at times. When this happens, stop and take a deep breath. Don't act while you are upset. Take a break, go outside (make sure children are safe first), call a friend. When you feel calm, respond in a way that meets your child's needs in that situation. If you have trouble managing your anger, talk with a health professional.

If there is violence in your home, seek professional help. It rarely stops by itself.

Looking after your own needs helps you be your best as a mum. Take time to appreciate the good things in your life. It is OK to seek help and support when you need it.

Getting help

All mothers have times when they need help and support. Seeking help early is always best. For some mums, memories from your own childhood can be triggered when your child reaches particular ages. These can be happy or joyful, sad or painful. How you feel might affect how you respond to your child. If memories trouble you, or you feel low a lot of the time, talk to your doctor or other health professional.

Remember what worked well about the way you were raised. Try not to repeat any negative experiences.

Letting go

The relationship between a mother and child changes as children grow up and become independent adults. How and when this happens is different for every mother and child.

It is a big step to 'let go' and you may feel sad about not 'being needed' in the close, protective way as before. You can plan how you will live your 'new life' and how you will be involved in your children's lives. Your job has been done extremely well if there is mutual respect and care. This allows children to go out into the world knowing your strength is behind them.



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