

First came the birth. Then came the isolation, fear and boredom. So journalist **Sarah Henry** convened her own mothers' group and discovered the best salve for the anxieties of new parenthood – tea and empathy.

Sharing the mother load

IF I HADN'T HAD THE MAMAS, I MIGHT have lost the plot as a new parent. For the first few years of my son's life, I lived in San Francisco, an ocean away from family and long-time friends in Australia. I worked right up until the birth (literally) and then – bam – I landed in babyland with a thud. Home, alone, without a clue. Accustomed to feeling competent, in control and independent, I suddenly found myself feeling insecure, unsure, even scared. There were no early childhood health centres where I could meet other mothers. I was desperate for a community of new mums to call my own. If I wanted a mothers' group, it was clear I was going to have to create one myself.

So I took a risk: I threw together a bunch of new mothers I barely knew. A few I'd met through a labour assistant who helped us during our births. A trio were friends of friends, sight unseen. One I'd met at an

antenatal class, another at prenatal yoga. The last I'd literally picked up in the street. Ten seemed like a solid number – and all I could cram into my small Victorian flat. Six weeks after my son was born, I invited them all over. I whipped up a couple of quiches while he slept snugly. But before they arrived I started to get anxious. Would we have anything in common besides our babies? Would we like each other? Would anyone else want to meet again?

I wasn't even exactly sure why I'd orchestrated the gathering. I simply had a growing unease about this baby-building business. Endless hours with just my newborn for company seemed daunting. After several physically uncomfortable post-birth weeks, where simply walking was painful, I'd had my fill of toughing it out alone.

I needn't have worried about how we'd get along. The group took on a life of its own. The "mamas", as we called ourselves, became like an extended family. Almost five years later,

I count several of these women among my closest friends. Some of the kids, born within a month or so of each other, are best mates, too. And once the post-labour hormone high wore off, I never made quiche for any of them again. It was obvious at the first get-together that I'd set the bar too high by playing hostess. We quickly figured out that the best spreads were thrown together when everyone brought something to share.

Still, I wasn't quite prepared for how the group evolved. On Wednesday afternoons we'd gather at a home or park for a rendezvous that was equal parts therapy session, tea party and playgroup. There would be, dressed to ward off fog in fleece vests – babes in arms in the early days, toddlers running amok later on – as we sipped tea and devoured Katherine's zucchini chocolate cake. In classic Californian style, Ellen suggested that we have a "check-in" each week, meaning we'd go around the group so

everyone got a chance to unload. There were a few rules: you weren't supposed to interrupt or comment while someone spoke; no topic was taboo; and everything was off the record – this was a safe place to talk with women you trusted not to blab your business everywhere.

I WAS UNCOMFORTABLE AT FIRST. DESPITE A reputation for being a straightshooter, the self-help support-group movement popular in the US made me squeamish. I'd never been in therapy. My sole group experience had been a short-lived membership of a book club. But the other women's raw honesty gave me the courage to express my own fears. Over several months the revelations – and the tears – came tumbling out: "I'm not a good mother"; "I'm bored out of my gourd"; "My partner will leave me". The first time I came unglued was after my mother had been to visit. We have a strained relationship at the best of times. After this visit, a deep disappointment welled up inside over what I felt was a lack of interest in her latest grandchild (No 12). And there were my new friends, a sympathetic crew who let me wallow in my unresolved parent-child issues the next time we checked in.

That said, I felt pretty content with my lot in the group's formative days. I had come through pregnancy, birth and babyhood relatively unscathed. No postnatal depression, no breastfeeding problems, no colic, no life-threatening illnesses or disabilities. My boy loved his sleep and his food. We bonded from the start; I thought he was absolutely gorgeous. He was neither a particularly easy baby nor a difficult one. But my smugness evaporated when it became evident, by

the age of 18 months, that he had more energy, determination, persistence and aggression than the average toddler.

The antics of my spirited son could flip my switch. He could clear a sandpit within minutes. His bolshie behaviour – and how to handle it without becoming a screaming banshee myself – became one of my major preoccupations. First there was the shock. What have we here? Does he have ADHD? Are we raising a psychopath? Then the shame and embarrassment. Quickly followed by guilt, bucketloads of guilt. Was he a temperamental child because I'd continued to

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work? Was his personality the result of some kind of genetic mishap caused when two type-A control freaks make a baby? Was he the way he was simply because of – gulp – inept parenting?

It was my weekly meetings with the mamas that kept me sane during this extremely trying time. In our darkest hours, my partner and I would each try to pin the problem on the other parent's family make-up, like some kind of hideous inheritance. Or, worse, blame each other's personality traits for the troubles. In the end, the nature/nurture debate seemed irrelevant. As one of the mothers said to me: "Stop trying to figure out why and just accept that it is." That acceptance has been one of the hardest challenges of motherhood. All through this difficult period, the other mamas kept me focused on

Mum's the word

● **Amanda Keller** (below, with son Liam) is no fan of organised fun. So joining a mothers' group wasn't on the Triple M breakfast show host's radar screen when she first got pregnant. "I remember being in a cafe and hearing snippets of conversation from a mums' group: 'I was dilated



10 centimetres and then I tore and had 12 stitches.' I'd think, 'Please!' recalls Keller. "Now I understand the need for all that."

Luckily, she bonded with three other mums while waiting for her son's weekly weigh-in at the local early childhood health centre. The foursome, all in their 40s, have met weekly for the past two years.

Keller's new pals are women she normally wouldn't have crossed paths with. "I trust them completely, but even if they felt like telling somebody something about me, they don't know people I know." The friendships are also about putting down roots. "I like the fact that these women live nearby and the chances are

our children will go to school together."

Most new mums, says Keller, feel as if life is as topsy-turvy as living inside a tumble-dryer. Sharing the ups and downs is key. "I thought I didn't want to be in a group where all we did was crap on about our children. But that's the best thing about it. You don't want to be a complete bore to the people you work with. Friends who don't have children don't want to know. And friends who had children 10 years ago are so over it."

But she's not apologetic. "These are our war stories. This is really important, basic, primitive stuff and there's no need to pretend it isn't."

● **Penny Biggins** (right, with daughter Sarah), a founding member of the Inner-West Over-35 Mothers' Collective, felt ancient when she fell pregnant at 42 with her second child. The entertainer – think Castanet Club, Radio National's *Livewire*, *Play School* concert pianist – soon learned that several local older mums, most on baby No 2, were in the same boat.

The collective is clearly geared towards the women. "As much as anything, we almost try to ignore the children," says Biggins. "They just run rampant. And once every six weeks you know your house is going to get completely trashed."

The core of six share similar social concerns. It was tricky planning a

recent kids' party, with a peace rally one weekend and Walk Against War the next. Global matters are often the topics *du jour*. "Before the war, we never stopped talking about Iraq," she says. "We came up with solutions that made the French and German efforts look pissy."

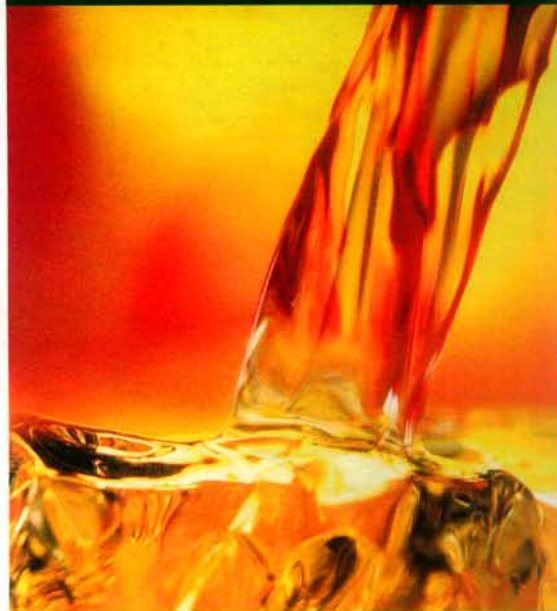
Biggins does admit to one zealous parenting phase. "Someone lent me a book called *Becoming Better Parents*, and I got all these ideas," she recalls. "I'd go on at great length and I think everyone got a little glazed. Mind you,



a couple of them asked to borrow it. With the first child, it's all, 'Oh my goodness, what are we going to do about this?' The second time around it's tragic how uncaring you are."

The group has become a guilty pleasure. The week her younger child started school, Biggins still attended. "At first I thought, 'That's a bit pathetic, turning up without a child.' But then I thought, 'Stuff it.' I can't imagine drifting apart from this group. I suspect I'll keep going." ■

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what was great about my kid – and there is much to cherish in this challenging child. One mum in particular connected with him and seemed to calm his taciturn tendencies. She just had “a thing” for him, one of those chemical connections you can’t quite explain.

Every mother in the group has had her share of joys – and obstacles to overcome. Over the past five years we’ve weathered failed relationships and personal growth, miscarriages and second babies, novel creative ventures and old jobs. Mylene returned to her native France, fleeing a disastrous marriage amid kidnapping allegations. Emily endured painful lovemaking attempts until a competent doctor corrected a botched post-birth repair job. Julie despaired over a nanny who made racial slurs about her neighbours (she later sacked her). Lisa agonised about working full-time, even though husband Tim was well-suited to the role of stay-at-home dad. I stressed out over the incompatibility of deadlines and baby schedules in a family with two journalists. Most of us struggled with the juggling act of parenting and pay packets. Each week we explored how motherhood affected us emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually, culturally, financially and sexually. And we fell in love with our children at the same time as we fretted about losing sight of ourselves, our partners and our other passions in life (be they personal or professional).

Did we vent? Girl, did we vent!

Still, it wasn’t just a pity party for middle-class mothers. We were practical, too. We passed on tips about how to deal with blocked ducts (frozen pea packets, cabbage leaves, and expressing into a hot bath seemed to do the trick). We hiked the hills of San Francisco to get in shape, comfort our kids or just clear our heads.

AMID THE CHAOS AND CONFUSION, REGURGITATED milk and skin rashes, tantrums and tears, it was an absolute relief to know that someone else was in the trenches alongside you: another mother whose every waking hour was filled with the endless ordinariness, the miracles and frights, light moments and – let’s be honest – at times brain-numbing banality of growing babies. I’ll never forget the horror of watching my young son have his first night terror – it looks like an epileptic fit to the uninitiated. I had no idea what was happening or what to do. My husband was out of town. So I did what I’d done umpteen times before and since. I rang one of the other mums. She had no clue what to do either, but was level-headed and advised a call to the doctor pronto. And she came right over.

Of course, as in any group dynamic, it wasn’t all as smooth as a baby’s bum. Once the kids were on the move, the mothers of girls (the children were evenly split sex-wise) tended to team up. Mums like me with rambunctious boys tried to catch up and have a conversation, but we spent much of our time in playgrounds chasing after our wayward sons. It was hard not to feel envious of the mothers who could chat and relax while their child played contentedly within arm’s reach. I’d be working up a sweat trying to keep my son safe, as well as any child brave enough to try to play near him. As one ticked-off mum remarked recently: “Why did some kids just sit and watch grass grow while my child always ran away?” To get a chance to talk, we began going out for dinner every few months.

Other stuff came up. There were glazed eyes whenever one mum boasted about the amazing abilities of her youngster. The infant, apparently, could read, write and do arithmetic since being in utero. I couldn’t compete as my son seemed to excel only in teeth (getting them), talking (incessantly) and running (as in away from me and towards harm). One of the women inspired cult-like devotion: she exuded calm and

grooviness. Many of the mamas wanted to pursue her as a friend, including me. And I’ll never forget the phone call I had with another member who let me know in brutally blunt fashion how “unsupportive, unhelpful and judgemental” she thought I was. I was devastated and humiliated. I still turn red when I think about that conversation. Now, several years on, I tread gingerly around most topics whenever the two of us talk.

The kids did their own share of acting out. The fiery friendship between my son and his best mate in the gang became a source of tension. For a long time his mother and I, who are also good friends, did our best to work around it so we could keep getting together. But trouble was brewing. It reached a head when the boys started day care together at age two and my kid got kicked out after only six weeks. The caregiver complained she did too much policing and not enough playing with her four charges. My child was the main culprit, so Yuriko’s son got to stay. In hindsight, it was probably the best outcome for all concerned. But the day-care provider didn’t handle the situation very tactfully. I’d been completely upfront with her about

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my child and she’d assured me she’d only ever had to ask one family to leave. Their child, she’d told me in hushed tones, seemed severely disturbed. Great.

Yet again I was distraught about my child’s behaviour. And despairing over how I would keep my job. In the end I didn’t. I took a break from work and spent much of my time with my son. But I also took time out from Yuriko and her kid. It was just too difficult – for starters, the boys kept fighting. And, although I know it wasn’t very evolved of me, I resented that she could still work and have time to herself knowing her child was flourishing in day care. I felt betrayed, even though I knew it was unfair to expect her to pull her son out as a sign of loyalty. It was a sad day for all of us when I finally told her, after another play in the park turned ugly, that I thought the boys needed a break. Things were strained and weird and messy for a while, then slowly Yuriko and I found a way to make the boys’ passionate relationship work.

Through all the ups and downs, my mothers’ group taught me one very simple lesson. There is nothing shameful in asking for help. It is not a sign of failure. Despite my individualistic, survivalist tendencies, I have been forced, by exhaustion as much as anything else, to reach out. The concept of community child-rearing was alive and well for earlier generations of mothers. Unfortunately, the notion of the self-sufficient, all-conquering supermum is alive and well today. Every mother knows no such woman exists. My gang blew apart that dirty little myth of motherhood for me.

Right before I left the US for Australia, we had a mamas meet at my home. It was a warmly affectionate if unsettled time. September 11 had just happened. A birth was imminent. I was leaving. And around my postage-stamp-sized living room sat a group of women who had fed me – literally and figuratively – during what had been the most joyous and demanding years of my life. It was an emotional afternoon – my husband likened walking in on us to interrupting people having sex. There were tributes and tears, fears for the future, best wishes for new beginnings, and, as always, lots of laughter. And after everyone left, it struck me that during those three years that I was consumed with caring for my young son, I’d had a group of gal pals taking care of me. ■