



*well-being family*



“YOU MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO TALK SEX WITH YOUR CLOSEST GIRLFRIENDS, BUT YOU SURE CAN WITH MEMBERS OF YOUR MOTHERS’ GROUP.”



**W**hen I walked into my local early childhood health centre for my first mothers' group meeting, I didn't really want to

be there. Blessed with an unusually "easy" baby first time around, I secretly believed that I was somehow responsible for his clockwork rhythms. Who needs a mothers' group when you've got everything worked out?

Fast-forward two years, and I'd given birth to my second child – a delightful, communicative little being who simply refused to sleep. By the time she'd reached her first birthday – and I was pregnant with another – she could only be described as "spirited". After months of wondering what the hell I was doing wrong and why my second was so different to my first, I was almost deranged with sleep deprivation. With a husband away overseas for long stints, I turned to my mothers' group in a way I'd never had to before. I asked for their help, something I rarely did in any other aspect of my life.

And how did my mothers' group respond? With a level of generosity and kindness that still makes me teary when I think about it. For starters, they cooked for me. Hearty, home-baked meals, enough to stock my freezer. They came to my house and minded my children, allowing me to go for a jog or a swim. They sent me emails and texts of hope – "Just keep going", "You're doing a great job", "It WILL get easier". They dropped in coffees, took away my eldest for play dates, gave me maternity gear as my pregnancy progressed.

At one point in the third trimester I was hospitalised, and my mothers' group pulled out all stops, rearranging their busy lives to look after my children over a long weekend. In short, my mothers' group mothered me.

Now, I've heard of mothers' groups that don't work out. Where the spirit of competition is stronger than the spirit of friendship. Where personalities clash, or women crow about their babies' developmental achievements, or gush about the sheer perfection of their shimmering lives. Several close friends of mine exited their mothers' groups almost as soon as they arrived. One complained of boredom, unable to stomach the relentless focus on the minutiae of baby-rearing. ("We've all been to university," she protested. "Surely we can talk about something other than the consistency of Cooper's poo?") Another balked at the early philosophical allegiances – vaginal versus caesarean births, breastfeeders versus bottle-feeders – and an undercurrent of bitchiness akin to the schoolyard.

The playground analogy is interesting; the last time I felt this connected to a group, I was wearing a school uniform. But while schoolyards can be vicious and intolerant, my mothers' group has only been expansive and respectful. Superficial differences have fallen away as we've navigated the often rocky path of motherhood together.

Childbirth is a great leveller; there's nothing like scrabbling around with a nipple shield in front of eight women you've just met to fast-track the bonding process. My mothers' group has worked primarily because we've

found it within ourselves to suspend judgment, recognise the flawed beauty in all of us, and hold each other along the way.

But that's just my mothers' group. Thousands of these groups meet every week, all around Australia. It's a fascinating social phenomenon that has been gaining momentum since the 1970s, arguably at a time when society has become increasingly atomised. My own mother didn't have access to a mothers' group, yet she knew her neighbours far better than I do mine. The pace of life was so much slower when she was raising kids and fewer women were in the workforce. There was, in all likelihood, simply more time to connect with other mothers at the shops, at the park or over the fence.

Perhaps that's why mothers' groups are so important now, providing a structured space in the hectic lives of today's mothers for much-needed education and support.

Or much-needed coffee. Or wine. Or a good cry, for that matter. There's an extraordinary intimacy that's born of shared experience, and mothers' groups provide a platform for that, creating a level of emotional honesty that might surprise our menfolk. When you've workshopped the state of your pelvic floor with someone, there's precious little else you can't discuss.

You might not be able to talk about sex with your closest girlfriends, but you sure can with the members of your mothers' group.

In the five years I've been in my mothers' group, we've swapped recipes, party favours and countless phone numbers – for nannies, plumbers, relationship counsellors. We've grieved for each other's losses – of identity, work and partners – and celebrated each other's triumphs.

And we've preserved each other's sanity, too. Two years ago, my mothers' group started a tradition of what is now known as "Friday Fitness". The crew come around to my house every Friday morning – up to six women and 13 children – and half of us go for a jog, while the other half babysit in the backyard. Then we swap. It's an opportunity for all of us to get some exercise while leaving our children with women we trust implicitly. Women we know and love.

Yes, I can still remember a time when I didn't need my mothers' group at all. Now, I confess, it's my lifeline. ●

*Fiona Higgins is the author of the novel The Mothers' Group (\$30, Allen & Unwin).*

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