Books about becoming a mother

Most books targeted at new mothers focus on babies. However, postnatal leader Alex Bollen has carefully selected four that are explicitly about motherhood, including one that is aimed at fathers too. Practitioners may wish to share them with parents.

What mothers do

*What mothers do* draws upon Naomi Stadlen’s many years of work with new mothers, including running weekly ‘Mothers Talking’ discussion groups. It covers a range of issues such as adjusting to life with a new baby, difficulties in getting anything done with a newborn and changes to relationships.

This book is a personal favourite as it helped me when I was struggling with new motherhood. Reading about the experiences of other mothers – Stadlen makes liberal use of quotes from women she has worked with – helped me realise that my feelings and experiences were normal.

Stadlen is wonderfully supportive of new mothers. However the flipside is that her positive (idealistic, even) views of motherhood could make the book difficult reading for women who are struggling with negative emotions. Her implicit support of attachment-style parenting (which she made explicit in a subsequent book) may also prove a challenge for women who prefer a more parent-led approach, although Stadlen has worked with – helped me realise that my feelings and experiences were normal.

The book is full of pearls of wisdom and shrewd insights on the challenges of new motherhood. For instance, Stadlen makes explicit in a subsequent book) for portraying their babies’ needs as insatiable rather than understandable. Cusk’s rich prose, illuminating for some, may irritate others. Nevertheless, I believe that Cusk’s letter to new mothers should be shared to help women appreciate that they are not alone if they are experiencing the challenging emotions new motherhood often involves.

Available at NCT shop at £8.99. Order online at www.nctshop.co.uk/A-Lifes-Work-On-Becoming-a-Mother-Rachel-Cusk/productinfo/1833/, email contactus@nctshop.co.uk or call 0845 8100 100.

A life’s work

This is a beautifully written and brutally honest account of early motherhood by the novelist Rachel Cusk. A *life’s work* is intended, as Cusk puts it, to be a letter ‘addressed to those women who care to read it, in the hope that they find some companionship in my experiences’.

Cusk brings her considerable skills as a writer to describing these experiences. She articulates her deep sense of loss at the passing of her old life. In one particularly vivid metaphor, she compares her non-mothering self to an abandoned building.

There are moments of humour. For instance, Cusk writes of an unnamed childcare manual’s frequent exclamation marks: ‘They swim before me, mad as eyebrows, embarrassing as politicians’ jokes’.

But the tone is mostly serious, and often bleak. It may perhaps be too gloomy for some tastes. Naomi Stadlen, for instance, criticises Cusk (and other writers on motherhood) for portraying their babies’ needs as insatiable rather than understandable. Cusk’s rich prose, illuminating for some, may irritate others.

Nevertheless, I believe that Cusk’s letter to new mothers should be shared to help women appreciate that they are not alone if they are experiencing the challenging emotions new motherhood often involves.

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The journey to parenthood

Although *The journey to parenthood* is an American book, its focus on the psychological transition to motherhood (and fatherhood) means it is suitable for UK readers.

Succinct and clearly written, the book covers pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period, as well as the psychological experience of motherhood and fatherhood, changing relationships and emotional well-being.

The tone is gentle and reassuring. For instance, authors Diana Lynn Barnes and Leigh G Balber remind new parents that it can take time to get to know a baby, and that their bond with them is not necessarily instantaneous or automatic.

There is a strong emphasis on the importance of new mothers and fathers looking after themselves (Barnes is a psychotherapist with particular expertise in women’s mental health).

The book would be particularly suitable to read in the antenatal period. Barnes and Balber argue that pregnancy is an opportunity ‘to run through a psychological dress rehearsal of what life may be like after the baby is born’.

The book ends with a list of exploration questions for expectant mothers and fathers to consider.

Book Club

Book Club aims to provide NCT practitioners and branch volunteers with an opportunity to read and discuss key texts relating to pregnancy, birth and parenting. For a chapter from Naomi Stadlen’s *What mothers do*, to discuss in your next Book Club session, go to: www.babble.nct.org.uk/info-resources/library-services/research-resources/book-club
This book employs the familiar format of covering the baby's first year on a month-by-month basis. However, Baby's first year from Netmums is much more mother-focused than most books of this genre. For instance, it covers physical recovery after childbirth, sex and returning to work. It stresses the importance of social support and seeking out other new mothers. The book also encourages new mothers to think about their needs, using the analogy of a car service to make the point that a little care and attention over time should help prevent major breakdowns.

It provides a balanced account of the options open to parents, putting forward the pros and cons of each, while supporting current NHS guidelines. There is a broad overview of current evidence, while quotes from mothers give more personal insights into the various approaches available. These help bring the book to life. They highlight that different styles work for different families, as well as conveying the challenges that can be involved in early mothering.

### A book in a quote

**What mothers do**

"Would it not be much more realistic to expect new mothers to be unprepared, anxious, confused and very emotional for at least the first six months? If we could accept that this beginning is the norm for most new mothers, we would be in a better position to be supportive and respectful." (p39)

**A life’s work**

"To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other." (p37)

**The journey to parenthood**

"Things do eventually fall into place, whether it takes six weeks or six months. There is no hard and fast deadline. The only thing that is predictable about parenthood is that it is unpredictable." (p69)

**Baby’s first year**

"Congratulations – you’re a mum! The long, difficult haul of pregnancy and birth is over and your reward for sticking it out is a wonderful new baby, and the precious gift of motherhood. To say it takes time adapting to such a challenging new role is an understatement. For many new parents, this early period can be as bewildering, scary and exhausting as it is joyous." (p9)

Turn to p16 to read Alex Bollen’s research overview on supporting women in the transition to motherhood.

### Teaching resources for healthcare professionals

Natal hypnotherapy programmes designed to help with relaxation, visualisation, self-hypnosis and breathing techniques during pregnancy, birth and after birth.

**Natal Hypnotherapy Range**

Website: [www.nctprofessional.co.uk](http://www.nctprofessional.co.uk)

**08458 100 100**

Further available titles for just £11.99 each.

**The Labour Companion CD** Code 1959 -

**Effective Home Birth Preparation CD** Code 1944 -

**The Breastfeeding Companion CD** Code 1958 -

**Effective Birth Preparation CD - For hospitals or Birth Centres** Code 1943 -

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To listen to short clips of our most popular programmes, please visit [www.nctshop.co.uk/natalhypnotherapy.asp](http://www.nctshop.co.uk/natalhypnotherapy.asp)

A free sample CD is available for all NCT Practitioners to help you answer any questions that parents may have about hypnotherapy. Please visit: [www.natalhypnotherapy.co.uk/acatalog/Birth_professionals.html](http://www.natalhypnotherapy.co.uk/acatalog/Birth_professionals.html)

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### References