

Supporting parents' mental health:

the role of postnatal groups

Richard Meier talks to postnatal tutor, Juliet Goddard, about how postnatal groups can help women develop a more reflective attitude towards their own experiences and those of their babies

As I open my copy of *The Independent* on the train to interview Juliet, it seems fitting to alight on Victoria Summerley's article about the impact the NCT has had on her: 'For the past 18 years', she writes, 'I've been having an extra-marital relationship. It's a very intimate association and it involves a group and, sometimes, other people's husbands. But before you get too excited, I ought to point out that it's not at all improper. The relationship is with my NCT group.'

Underlying the intensity of the group experience, of course, is the profound experience of mothering a baby. Although this is something which women know, or come to realise, 'we live in an era', Juliet suggests, 'when the intensity of the feelings that parents have for their children is generally kept in the private domain and not acknowledged much in popular culture, so that it often takes new parents by surprise - in both a good and bad way'. And indeed, as the NCT continues to place greater emphasis on its support for parenthood and the early years, NCT Early Days postnatal courses and drop-ins are increasingly offering mothers a space and an opportunity to come together, talk and help each other negotiate this uniquely demanding period of their lives.

These days it is not uncommon for new mothers, especially middle-class, university-educated ones, to live at some distance from their own parents and other family members; because of this, Juliet finds, they may find themselves without the day to day emotional and practical

support that, as new parents, they could benefit from. Also, having become accustomed to living largely independently rather than in the sphere of influence of their extended family may make it difficult to seek out and accept help from family members.

Ideas on baby care and child-rearing have changed since the 70s and 80s, partly as a result of the explosion of

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research since then demonstrating that the way we interact with and care for babies can affect the security of babies' attachment, and their emotional and social development. As the first generation to have to make sense of the implications of this research, it is no wonder that some women can succumb to the anxiety it can engender. This can undermine their capacity to trust their own instincts and to learn to get to know their baby (research

highlights this aspect of baby care as being particularly important to emotional development).^{1,2}

One outcome of all this anxiety and self-questioning is for mothers increasingly to turn to someone who 'knows' how to parent, a notion which commonly finds expression in the plethora of books and television programmes in which 'experts' set out their own particular philosophy on child-rearing and baby care.

'The current focus on 'doing it 'right'', Juliet believes, 'simply creates anxiety in parents who are already doing a good job, while ignoring the needs of those who really need help and support.' 'However', she continues, 'it is this anxiety that postnatal work in the group is really all about. It's about sitting with parental anxiety, learning to tolerate uncertainty, the anxiety of not knowing what the best thing to do is, the best way to help your baby'.

Juliet explains how one of the main functions of postnatal work is providing a space where women can feel safe to acknowledge how difficult it is to parent a baby, and can learn that it is OK, and perfectly natural, to find it a struggle. Recognising this fundamental truth, and equally being able to recognise when things are going well, Juliet says are keys aspect of developing a more reflective attitude to oneself as a mother. This attitude, which can help mothers make connections between their past experiences, current conditions and their emotional lives is important so that they can take steps to safe guard their own emotional well-being.

Another function of these groups is to help people understand what they may need from someone else. For women who have been successful in the workplace, who have been encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient, this can be particularly testing. One of the most striking realisations for Juliet during her work in Early Days groups has been to understand just how alone some people are; whilst for some women postnatal groups can become a support network in their own right, others find that they need more help. A PhD student in one of her groups, for example, studying in Cambridge and struggling with a lack of support in a foreign country, was able, through the group experience, to get more in touch with her needs and as a consequence realise that the best thing for her was to return home to Italy, to her own mother and her family, rather than struggle on in isolation in the UK.

Running groups, where issues of vulnerability, competence and uncertainty abound, is demanding work which draws on leaders' own capacity to be resilient. 'It is hard, for example', explains Juliet, 'when you have a group being disturbed by one inconsolable baby, and are yourself struggling with the needs of the mother and also of the group, to try to resist the urge to try to soothe the baby yourself, an action which you know would only further undermine the confidence of an already vulnerable mother'. Tolerating difficult feelings such as these, as opposed to acting on them, is key to the group being able to perform its core function of encouraging a reflective attitude in mothers. And it is this attitude, Juliet believes, that 'we as postnatal leaders need to encourage, so as to help parents to see their babies as sensitive, sentient individuals and to treat them accordingly'. 'They also need 'permission' to take care of themselves', Juliet adds finally, 'and even to make mistakes.'

References

- 1 <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/house-and-home/property/victoria-summerley-city-life-775514.html>
- 2 Meier R. The development of secure attachment in babies and young children: a review of research. *New Digest* 2008;(41):23-6.

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