It’s Early Days: how the NCT is responding to the needs of new mothers

Becoming a mother changes a woman fundamentally: physically, emotionally and psychologically. In a society where becoming a mother is a matter of choice however, and therefore no longer perhaps as central to women’s identity, the sense of upheaval that becoming a mother brings may be felt more keenly. In previous generations, having a baby was the next expected step after getting married, and motherhood was a central aspiration for most women. In recent times though, contraception, the opening up of careers, greater economic independence and relaxation of sexual mores has changed all of that. Motherhood is now seen as more of a free, informed decision. The more women see motherhood as just one of a variety of life course choices they could have taken, the more they seem to blame themselves for the negative feelings they have as they adjust.1

Stern highlights many ways in which a woman’s ‘mindset’ is altered when she becomes a mother.2 The powerful realisation of the huge responsibility of looking after a baby and the vulnerability felt are two examples of this shift. As well as new responsibilities, many new mothers experience a sense of loss, including loss of their old identity and freedoms that they once took for granted. It is impossible to fully appreciate until after your baby has been born what the impact will be.3

As well as understanding and responding to women’s needs, it is important to consider the needs of babies. There is growing evidence that the psychological and emotional availability of carers affects babies from the very beginning of their life. Research based on attachment theory suggests that patterns formed during early childhood usually remain largely unchanged through life and are a good predictor of how well children function when they are older, and can influence the quality of relationship, emotional stability and self-esteem.4 Support for new mothers therefore has an important role to play in promoting children’s well-being.5

The transition to motherhood can be understood in terms of the theory of life course transitions. Schumacher6 talks about a healthy transition being one that is characterised by three factors:

- a subjective assessment of well-being;
- a feeling of able to cope, to control emotions;
- having a sense of competency and confidence in a new role.

These factors are highly pertinent in the context of the adjustment to early motherhood. It is common for women to feel exhausted, stressed, isolated, doubtful of their competence or worried about others’ assessment of their performance as a mother. In order to promote a healthy transition, new mothers can benefit from having access to a service that understands theories on the transition to motherhood and provides a safe space where the upheaval is acknowledged and normalised, and where facilitated discussion is used to help women adapting to this new mindset.

Health professional support for new mothers has diminished in recent years except for families identified as being most in need;3 midwives’ home visits have been cut back and health visitors are fewer in number and are expected to focus on the most vulnerable families. This leaves a big gap between what new mothers need and what statutory services are able to provide. Some new mothers attend health visitor-led group sessions but these often focus on practical topics such as weaning, first-aid and safety, rather than providing space as a priority for discussion of feelings about becoming a mother. There is also growing provision of parenting courses based on behavioural theory and focusing on avoiding or addressing behavioural problems. While there may be short-term changes with these kinds of approaches, there are good arguments for providing supportive services much earlier, starting during pregnancy or very soon after a baby’s birth, and for a more flexible and responsive way of working based more on active listening, reflection and non-directed group learning. As family well-being is so important, investing in early preventative work seems to make sense.3

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have the opportunity to meet other local families during the postnatal period in an informal and welcoming setting. Support needs to be parent-focused and its aim should be to build confidence through self-empowerment. NCT Early Days courses are offered to provide this opportunity with a trained facilitator. At present they are mostly used by new mothers. This article addresses new mothers’ experiences and needs (a future article will explore the transition to parenthood from the perspective of fathers).

Early Days courses and drop-ins are discussion groups run by NCT postnatal leaders who hold a Higher National Diploma in Postnatal Group Facilitation from the University of Bedfordshire. Typically, a group consists of up to 10 first-time mums who meet for two hours a week over six weeks, though more flexible drop-in formats and sessions for couples are also available. The Diploma is underpinned by theoretical and practical knowledge. Modules include group dynamic theory and an opportunity to gain awareness of how experiences in a group setting can influence a mother’s experience, facilitation skills, understanding of the sociological and psychological pressures on new mothers, and vital, personal reflection. Theory-based learning is balanced with assessment of practical work with parents. NCT postnatal leaders are currently all women who are mothers themselves. They identify with parents and are committed to providing parent-centred services. Their professional training provides extended knowledge, self-awareness and skills but builds on the foundation of personal experiences of motherhood. After qualifying, continuous professional development is required of all NCT postnatal leaders in order for them to remain licenced to practice.

One of the primary functions of an Early Days course is to provide the opportunity for mothers to meet others in the same life stage situation and become part of a supportive network. By engaging in the giving and receiving of mutual support, mothers become more confident in their abilities and in the decisions they have made (and will make in the future). Gaining confidence and a sense of self-efficacy is an important aspect of a healthy transition to motherhood. Stern talks about new mothers’ need for psychological support from other mothers as the need for an ‘affirming matrix’. This leads to groups of mothers spending time together seeking assurances, learning tricks of the trade, measuring how they are doing and satisfying their need to feel that they belong to the ‘new domain of motherhood’ (p111). This enables discussions around (potentially) difficult topics such as feelings towards their partner and how they feel about being a mum. We know that often mothers prefer to discuss issues with other mothers, rather than health professionals; talking and sharing ideas can help parents see that their difficulties and feelings are normal and are manageable.

Each Early Days course is different. The sessions are planned with the mothers in the group to ensure that the issues that they want to cover are included. Encouraging the mothers’ input in setting the course outline increases their interest and motivation to attend. However, there are numerous core ways of working and key themes that tend to be covered one way or another in each course.

Ways of working
Groups can be difficult to join for the first time, and the conversation can exclude some people or add to feelings of uncertainty or isolation. A trained facilitator can work with a group to establish a positive group culture where everyone is involved. Ground rules need to be established from the first session, including respect for each others’ feelings and comments, and the importance of confidentiality within the group. Throughout the course, the facilitator role-models respectful communication and maintaining confidentiality, aiming to build trust in the group. Activities allow gradual disclosure of personal information. The aim is for participants to feel that the group is a safe place where they can talk about their experiences and feelings honestly. There are many opportunities during each session for mothers to talk in twos, and in groups of differing sizes. This varies the quality of interaction and promotes development of supportive relationships.

An important aspect of the NCT Early Days courses is that advice is not offered. Stadlen claims that new mothers need to feel ‘safe enough to risk feeling uncertain’ (p46) and that usually mothers do not need to tell what to do. Throughout the diploma training, postnatal leaders are encouraged to adopt a facilitative style that builds the mothers’ confidence, not by giving answers, but by allowing the group to discuss the options and find their own solutions. This is built into the course by using open questions and promoting group discussion. It is also important that mothers feel empowered and an important part of the Early Days course is to allow them to make their own decisions and give them the opportunity to hear and discuss others’ views.

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Key themes
The courses always cover the very real losses that new mothers may be experiencing. The facilitator’s aim is to create a safe environment where participants feel able to acknowledge difficult feelings, hear about those of other mothers and be reassured that negative thoughts do not mean that you don’t love your baby. This way of working is central to the NCT
approach to supporting new parents.

Influenced by attachment theory, facilitators create opportunities for discussion of issues around mothers’ ‘emotional availability’ to their baby. Feelings of guilt (which is a common and often strong feeling), fears that they are ‘doing it wrong’ and negative feelings about themselves or their partner can all influence emotion al availability. Babies whose carers usually respond to them sensitively and responsively are more likely to form secure attachments than those whose carers are less sensitive.4

Early Days helps by promoting a sense of self-efficacy and confidence through:
- opportunities to find out about different ways of looking after a baby, and
- underlying messages that it is important to develop your own knowledge and skills and to trust your own instincts and judgement.

A woman’s experience (or more importantly, her perception) of her baby’s birth can have a profound effect on her transition to motherhood.13 A positive experience can provide emotional optimism and resilience, whereas a woman who feels she was not treated with respect and kindness or who had her wishes overruled can feel angry, traumatised or carry a sense of failure into her early parenting. Early Days courses provide opportunities for women to share aspects of their birth whilst allowing each mother to choose how much she wishes to disclose. It is important within this discussion that other agencies and groups who can provide additional help are signposted. Many women also suffer physical problems after childbirth but do not consult a health professional.14 Within the sessions on motherhood changes you forever. London: Bloomsbury; 1998.

References
4. Available from: http://www.familyandparenting.org/item/doc ument/1719/1

Many groups have the potential to grow into a self-sufficient support network, helping to prevent isolation

In summary then, whilst there may be a smile on a new mother’s face, there is likely to be a lot going on under the surface. The pressures to enjoy motherhood and be seen to be coping are considerable and many mothers experience feelings of sadness, anxiety and self-doubt at this time. NCT Early Days groups can complement standard postnatal care by addressing social and psychological needs which are so central to the experience of becoming a mother.18

What it’s like during the first few weeks - full of useful suggestions. It covers getting organised, coping with tiredness, soothing a crying baby, basics of baby care and talks about your body, your feelings and your relationships. Code: 1616, £2.50.

See www.nctresources.co.uk or call 0845 8100 100