



The Mothers

Photographs and stories of motherhood



www.the-mothers.co.uk
Photographs by Rebecca Lupton

Name: Jo

Children: Lucy 9, Ava 6 and Chloe 3

Expectations of Motherhood: Si and I met when we were teenagers. We went to University and moved in together, then bought our house, got married and babies were next.... that's how it happens isn't it?

Except after all those years of trying not to get pregnant I thought it'd be so easy, you know – stop taking those little pills and hey presto 40 weeks later a gorgeous baby and so on. I imagined a lovely little boy who'd look just like his Daddy, I'd breast feed, go to playgroups, have the patience of a saint and juggle motherhood with work no problem.... hahaha.

Reality of Motherhood: Well I never expected my pregnancy to fail; to lose my precious miracle before it's had even had a chance, and then the next one too. This was a heartbreaking journey but 3rd time was lucky for us and we welcomed our gorgeous Lucy Loo into the world 9 years ago after a horrendous labour and birth, which I swore I would never ever put myself through again.

Motherhood was what I expected and more, this tiny person who I'd never thought would be here was real. I adored her, I hated it when even my husband took her out it was so intense. I tried breastfeeding and found it really hard. It hurt like hell, my nipples bled and I was so nervous about feeding her in public I timed going out around feeds, it was crazy.

I then one day was holding Luce - she was 8 weeks old - and I had this truly horrible feeling; I was petrified I'd hurt her. I had to go and put her in her cot as I just couldn't hold her. It was terrible. To love someone so much, but then be so scared of them at the same time. These intense feelings went on for 2 years until I was diagnosed with severe PND – seriously.. 2 bloody years! I was never going to have another baby...

Then we decided we needed to at least try and give Lucy a sibling. So we tried again. 2 more miscarriages followed then on the third go we conceived Ava. Ava is a determined little soul. I had bleeds throughout the pregnancy, bad ones, I remember going for the scans weekly as even the midwives thought I'd lost her numerous times, but there was her little heartbeat beating on the screen.

I was petrified about my PND returning and had CBT therapy whilst pregnant to help with my feelings. It was great! Ava arrived without any problems and the birth was a much better experience. Yes it hurt, but I was in control and was home within 6 hours. It was so different

than my experience with Lucy's birth.

I was more in control this time round, less panicked and coped a lot better, breast feeding was fantastic this time too and I have to admit I fed her until she was 2. The funny thing was as soon as I got home from the hospital that day with Ava, I knew I had to do it again. I was desperate to! It took 2 years to convince my lovely husband that it *would* be a good idea to have 3 children as 2 was far



too neat! It was fabulous. I finally got my textbook pregnancy and an amazing really enjoyable delivery. Honestly.

Taking your children home for the first time: I remember when we brought Lucy home, how tiny she looked in the car seat, how slow we drove, how we got home and showed her around the house (even though she was asleep) and then thought ok...what on earth do we do now?!

Taking Ava home was easier, I didn't feel quite as unwell and I remember going to my neighbours sons 5th birthday party in the back garden with my brand new baby. Someone asked how old she was and I suddenly realised she was 9 hours

old...think I was still high as a kite as I went on a bouncy castle and managed to not let my insides fall out.

Chloe came home to two very excited big sisters, so that again was a different experience. A busy household where the chance of having any rest was very slim. But I finally felt like my family was complete. Those first days I was shattered, but very happy.

Wondering if you and your partner are ever going to go out beyond the local neighbourhood ever again? In fact just to talk about something that isn't child related would be amazing.

Juggling my job as a remote PA with the demands of a young family. I know they feel like I'm always working sometimes, but I love that after 9 years of being a 'Mummy' first and foremost, I have built my own little career again.

The best parts of being a mother: Seeing the personalities of the little people you created emerging from the tiny bodies and screwed up faces.

The dependency on you, although scary as hell, is also truly magical.

Your children's faces when they do something new or manage something for the first time.

The unconditional love.

Seeing the relationships within your family change and grow.

Your toddler saying 'Love you Mama' and really meaning it!

Best Advice: Bin the books! This came from my Mum. I was so desperate first time round to get into a routine, and failed every time. It took me a while to realise that babies kind of get themselves into a routine when they are ready, but then they also change it just as you start to get used to it!

Worst Advice: To keep breastfeeding with my first child, I endured 6 months of pain, when really I should have just admitted defeat and given her a bottle. I used to dread every feed and think this contributed to my PND. Yes breastfeeding is fab, cheap, a lovely bonding experience and I had that the next times round but if your nipples feel like they are going to fall off for 6 months, don't beat yourself up about using a bottle!

Advice for new and expectant mums: Enjoy every precious moment. It goes so fast. 3rd time round I feel like if I blink I'm going to miss it. Before I know it they'll all be at school.

Go with your instincts, you really are the best person for your baby.

Try a few different playgroups; meeting other mum's is a great way of realising you are feeling 'normal' but it took me a few goes to find some that weren't petrifying cliquey.

Be kind to yourself! You are going to be very tired for a while, so does that washing really need putting away right now? \

The hardest parts of being a mother: The continuous worry that everyone is happy, healthy and that you aren't doing something totally wrong that is going to damage your children forever.

The fact that I haven't had a proper night's sleep for more than two consecutive nights, for over 9 years. Yep 9 years.

The juggling of relationships, when your child comes home and is sad because someone's been mean... it really hurts.

Sibling rivalry is awful, the fights and the noise. The handprints up the walls and the washing too. Arrgghhh how can 3 small people make so much mess?!



Name: Nicola

Child: Douglas, almost 3 (and 16 weeks pregnant with 2nd child)

Expectations of Motherhood: My expectations were that of most people I think: that it will be easy enough, it won't change your life and you will ensure the baby fits in with you etc, etc. Haha! How silly I was!

Babies are like little whirlwinds of chaos at first! I didn't expect being a mother to be so rewarding however. I also expected that I'd be a mother who stayed at home 5 days a week with her children with no desire to work again. Again, that's not really what happened.

Reality of Motherhood: This will sound negative to start with, but it is the hardest and often most thankless task in the world. The relentless tiredness in that 1st year of Douglas' life was something no-one could ever have explained to me beforehand. While in it you cannot see the wood for the tress.

Occasionally the fear of being responsible for this little person's wellbeing and their future was overwhelming, especially in the early days. *However*, being a mother is so rewarding and the joy you feel when your child does something new and exciting, or tells you they love you, is not even remotely comparable with anything else in life. It has taught me how to have endless patience, which I didn't know I was capable of (and can only be a good thing). It has given me a love that is so overwhelming it can still make me cry now just thinking about it.

For me I could not be the stay at home mum I had hoped to be (and had put an

enormous amount of pressure on myself to be). Once my little boy was 1 I realised that I had to have something else too, and so I went back to my wedding accessories business that I had set up just prior to having him. I think this makes me a better mum as I really look forward to the days I have with him and also look forward to work (which is often a lot easier than childcare!).

I can deal with this decision now, but at the time felt a huge amount of guilt for wanting to be something other than Dougie's mum. I really believe women get a hard time these days whether they choose to go back to work, have to go back to work, or choose to stay at home. You can't win no matter what you do, someone always has an opinion on it. Usually other mums!

I also have made some amazing life-long friends since having Dougie and I think it has been really important for me to have this support network. No-one can understand motherhood like someone else going through the same thing at the same time as you.

I liken being a mother to being at university in freshers week. You meet lots of other mothers after you've had a baby and the one thing you have in common is a baby (*when at uni it is being at uni*), but understandably you won't get on with them all. Within a few weeks you work out who are your real friends.

Generally my experience of other mums has been positive, but I do know of people who have not had such a positive experience. I think it's really sad that some women can be so horrid to other women when they should be supporting each

other.

Taking your child home for the first time: For me this was a bit of a blur. I had a planned C-section with Dougie as he was breach, and so all I can really remember is slowly shuffling along endless hospital corridors and then the same into my house (1st floor flat unfortunately). I felt rather like an invalid and was constantly in a lot of pain (it went soon enough though). I remember us driving very slowly to the house and playing a song called "Douglas" by a band we like, and me mostly crying all the way home!

The best/worst advice: The best advice I was given was to, "Enjoy these moments as they pass". The worst advice comes from people interfering when you are trying to get on with your daily life - eg. when you're shopping in Sainsbury's and someone tells you, "He doesn't need a dummy," or something equally as ridiculous, and frankly it is none of their business. You become public property as soon as you are pregnant and this seems to continue into motherhood.

The hardest parts of being a mother: For me this is now a lot easier, but for a very long time I just found it so hard to trust my instincts. I was always worried about *WHY* he was doing something and *WHY* he had changed his patterns. Now I see there is no rhyme or reason and you cannot control things, so it's just best to not analyse things too much. They are just babies and they do weird things and have no manual. Oh and of course the tiredness- I am always always tired and have just accepted that I will always be now.

The best parts of being a mother: There

are a million things, I can't really put this into words. At the moment probably the fact that Dougie makes me laugh about every ten minutes! He is like a little best mate to hang out with and have chats with (usually about nonsense).

When they tell you they love you or when they do something to make you so incredibly proud, when they wake you up at a reasonable time in the morning (not 5am!) by coming to the side of your bed and stroking your face. I think having a reason to be rather than just being you is the best thing.

Has becoming a mother changed you? Without a doubt. I thought I knew who I was and I think I really have only discovered this since having Doug. Sometimes you have to change too for the good of your child. There were things I looked at in myself that I wanted to change in order to make life better for him. For example learning to be braver, as I want him to experience things in life and not be scared of stuff!

Hopes for your family: Just health and happiness. We are so excited to meet the new baby in October. We don't mind what this next baby is (Dougie is adamant it is a boy called Donald though?) and we won't find out as we both like a surprise.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Be kind to yourself. I wasn't last time and hope I will be this time! And you really do know best - it takes time to realise that, but you do. Instinct is an amazing thing. \\\



Name: Jane

Child: Benjamin, 2

Expectations of motherhood: I was 33 when I got pregnant and we'd been married for 10 years by the time Benjamin was born. We'd lived a life, I'd had a career of sorts and we were ready for a family.

I'd never really wanted children, I suppose partly because I suspected I wouldn't be able to have any and partly because I could never imagine myself holding a baby; my baby in my arms. Then my brother and his wife got pregnant and Matthew my husband suggested we try, so we did and five months later I was pregnant. It was a massive shock to both of us but we were ecstatic.

I felt quite rough during the first trimester. No sickness but just a dreadful exhaustion. I'd go to work then come home and go straight to bed. I had a grim sense of foreboding about what was to come and was very protective of the growing life inside me.

When I was 16 weeks some routine blood tests came back which showed I had a genetic blood disorder, we were sent for further tests and genetic counselling and told that there was a one in four chance of the baby dying at birth. I knew then that the rest of the pregnancy would be a battle.

By this time I'd started to attend pregnancy yoga classes which were fantastic at calming me down - looking back I was tremendously anxious about the health of my baby.

I was monitored very closely by the hospital which was in some ways comforting, but it did nothing to reduce my stress levels. I read all the NICE guidelines on my condition and took great joy in annoying the Doctors by quoting these guidelines to them when they tried to push me to do things (that were beyond the scope of the guidelines). The Doctors would say terrifying things about the high risk of Benjamin dying, but in hindsight I suspect they were said just to get me to toe the line. I was firm that I knew what was best for us both and I was right.

I eventually agreed to be induced at 38 weeks. I'd been incredibly private and protective of my pregnancy and not even my family knew the full extent of the problems I was dealing with or that I was going into hospital. I didn't need the stress of them all fretting and pacing hospital corridors.

Here is an edited version of something I wrote after the birth:

I was induced on the Wednesday morning, the midwives said they'd probably need a few goes at getting it going but true to form I proved them wrong. On the Wednesday night I stood up and my

waters broke. I was on a busy but excellent antenatal ward, but lucky enough to have my own room. The midwives on duty were brilliant and monitored me closely. The delivery unit was full to bursting so they kept me there until 10am on Thursday with gas and air to keep me company.

Matthew arrived just as they were transferring me, he was pale and terrified. The next 24 hours are (thankfully) something of a blur. I was closely monitored and not allowed to get off the bed to move around which made the pain harder to deal with. I managed on gas and air until about 4pm and I asked for pethadine.

At around 7pm I relented and asked for an epidural. The next four hours were a special form of hell. During that time four anaesthetists tried to get the needle in, my vertebrae are close together and there wasn't much room for the needle. I spent four hours in real agony while they poked at my spine with needles and at around 11.30pm they finally got it in and I could rest. By this time I knew something wasn't right but no one would listen to me.

At around 4am Friday I was fully dilated and was asked to push, this seemed to go on for hours and at times there were five or six worried faces at the bottom of the bed. His heart rate and mine kept dropping and they kept doing blood tests and looking concerned. Sometime around

7.30am they suggested we go to theatre and try forceps. So they wheeled us off.

Forceps were tried but he just got firmly wedged, it turned out he was back to back and probably never would have come out naturally. Why they didn't know this I'll never know.

I was prepped for a Caesarian section, by this point I would have agreed to anything just to get him out safely. He was pushed back up the birth canal and removed via the sunroof (and not the cat flap). It's a strange and unnatural feeling having a baby pushed back up having spend hours pushing him down. He was born at 9.15am, 8lbs 15oz of gorgeousness. He was silent but, "It's a boy!" went around the theatre and Matthew and I turned to each other and said, "We've got a Benjamin". We didn't know what we were having but were delighted with what we've got. It took him a few minutes to pipe up but it was a lethargic cry. Matthew cut the cord and he was brought over to be admired. I loved him instantly but it felt like part of a really strange dream.

Reality of motherhood: On arrival Benjamin was beautiful and just wanted to be cuddled, he was lethargic and didn't really want to feed. He wasn't interested in the breast, there was no milk to be had and the midwives were too busy to help, so he ended up being bottle fed.

He was being closely monitored by the

paediatric team who discovered what they thought might be the signs of a worrying and rare hormone imbalance, they insisted we stay in until a full diagnosis could be made. I was moved from a busy ward to a side room and we fell into a routine of daily tests and consultations on Benjamin's health. I was almost at breaking point.

Until they knew what was wrong with him he was subjected to oral doses of saline solution which made him throw up and made his symptoms appear worse to the medical staff. The worst moment was a stress test which was so traumatic neither Matthew nor I can speak of it without crying. I would physically fight anyone who wanted to do that to my child again.

After a week of tests and trauma we were allowed home. He was clear of any health problems and there was no need to worry. We were incredibly relieved but angry at what we'd all been put through.

Taking your child home for the first time: I think all parents have the same experience. You bundle your baby up in their car seat and drive home at 4mph, that was about the same for us.

I think for Matthew and I we'd spent a week thinking Benjamin was gravely ill and he'd been through enough in his first seven days, so we were perhaps more protective of him than we needed to be. But once declared fit we were almost bundled off the ward, so at 7pm in a cold November evening we went home at 4mph.

I was exhausted and Matthew had only really seen him during visiting hours so he took over. Benjamin settled in and we settled into a routine. I did days, Matthew did nights. I say routine but he fed on demand, which turned out to be about every three hours and things just fit in around that.

Benjamin was always really laid back. He slept through at 6 weeks and he'd sleep for 12 hours a night. The trade off was he'd only cat nap for 10 minutes a day which was tiring. He was jolly and smiley and loved to cuddle. We adored him.

We've always followed his lead, he seems to indicate when he's ready for the next step, like stopping the bottle and having a sippy cup or moving to his own room. I think us not forcing him to conform to expected ideas in terms of development has made him more relaxed. Why force a child who isn't ready to do something just because a book or a health visitor says so. It's worked for us and he's happier for it.

Due to the stress during pregnancy, the

traumatic birth and his first stressful week I was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. Looking back I certainly spent his first 18 months in a high state of anxiety and had frequent flashbacks to some of the more distressing moments. I don't think he was affected by it but I was definitely more protective of him around others, especially medical people.

The best/worst advice: The worst advice I was given was "sleep when your baby sleeps". Who does that? In over two years I've maybe managed it 3 times if I've been ill and it's really only in the past year or so he's napped during the day.

If your baby goes to sleep then it's a quick tidy, clean, cook something, grab a shower, have a drink, eat something. It's never put your feet up and nod off. If you do manage it then well done but I've not met a mum yet that did.

The best advice was "try baby led weaning". One of the first things we did when I was pregnant was buy a food processor for mashing everything up, but really who has the time? My sister in law suggested we try it, what a revelation. If your child is snatching real food off your plate and eating it why are you mashing food for him?

All we did was stop salting food and cut down on the spice a bit. I think we probably did eat more pasta with pesto that first year, but that stuff is like cat nip for kids. He's a really unfussy eater these days and will try anything. He loves fish and his favourite is smoked trout pâté. Why limit your child's palate to fish fingers, such a shame when there are such culinary delights to be had.

The hardest part of being a mother: No one tells you that you'll be ill all the time. When I went back to work and he went to nursery I was solidly ill for about 5 months because he'd just rub his germs on me. I was exhausted and struggling cope with undiagnosed PTSD.

I've had a bit of a catalogue of misfortune since he arrived, which culminated in spinal surgery in February (long story short, I had an accident in November 2012 which left me at risk of paralysis). Matthew has been outstanding and looked after us both. He's an amazing man and it hasn't been easy or him.

I think in Benjamin's little life it's been most hard for me to watch him grow and change while I've been stuck on the sofa in a codeine haze. I miss running round the park with him, picking him up and swinging him round, bathing him and putting him to bed. I miss being the proper hands on mum I once was. I hope that he's too young to remember this time and that I won't always be like this.

The best part of being a mother: This is such a hard question because I love everything about him and being a mum. But...

Motherhood is a joy. Benjamin is an amazing little chap. He's bright, charming, sensitive and so loving and caring. The best thing is he's so bloody funny. He's got a really great sense of humour which I think will be an asset to him.

I love spending time with him. He's independent enough to be able to entertain himself for hours but we love doing jigsaws, playing with his train sets, reading book after book, after book. Obviously I wish I could do more with him but it is what it is.

I love it when it's just the two of us and we snuggle under a blanket and watch In the Night Garden together and read. He loves Hairy Maclary and laughs his socks off when I make all the dog and cat noises. I'm really uninhibited when I'm with him which I love as I'm not as confident as I used to be.

I am really enjoying him at the moment, he's a real character and he's made giant leaps with this speech recently. I love chatting away to him about the world and what he can see in it. His love for choo-choo trains, cars and doggies. I love how he lists his favourite people and counts as he goes up the stairs. Each day is a new discovery and an exciting lesson in the world around him.

Honestly, there is no feeling more wonderful to me than being given an enormous cuddle and a snotty kiss by Benjamin.

Hopes for your family: For Benjamin, I hope he grows up to be his own man, not to run with the pack but to stand firm in his own convictions. I want him to be happy in whatever he does. If he carries on being funny, kind and considerate then I'll be pleased with that.

I'd love him to have great taste in music, early indications are good with early preferences for The Wonder Stuff and The Charlatans. I played lots of Faith No More and Rage Against the Machine when I was pregnant and he likes to dance to them too, though we are more selective with the swearier songs.

Matthew takes him to toddler football and I suspect he harbours dreams of him holding the FA Cup aloft in glorious triumph.

My hopes for me and Matthew are that we come out of this run of my bad luck soon and that I can return to a more normal life. It's been bloody hard work for him and stressful too. He's a brilliant husband and father. I know how lucky

we are to have him.

Long term I don't know what I hope for, I'm currently off sick from my job in the NHS. I don't know when I'll be fit to return to work, if ever. Large parts of my life are effectively on hold.

We did want to have another baby but we think that is probably not possible now which is a shame. We are so lucky to have Benjamin, he is a blessing and worth every minute of pain and anxiety we went through to get him.

Every time I think of Benjamin my heart fills so completely with love for him, it's an amazing feeling. I hope one day he'll have a baby and realise just how much we adore him. I hope that life doesn't stamp all over him and his dreams.

Advice for new and expectant mothers: Firstly get yourself to pregnancy yoga, it was brilliant at keeping me calm during the birth and I still use some techniques now if I need to calm things down a bit. Look after your back. You only get one spine, mine is effectively ruined now. Be kind to your body.

Other mums can be awful, so find ones you actually like. I went to an awful, cliquey playgroup for six horrible months because I thought I should. They went out of their way to make me feel excluded, I found another play group who are wonderful. Shop around and find groups you like.

Do it your own way, you know yourself and your child best, don't bow to pressure from other people if you think it's the wrong thing to do.

We've tried to be true to ourselves and be pretty laid back parents, encouraging in all the right places, cracking down on anything dodgy like not sharing, throwing his food, biting etc.

We said from the moment he started walking that someone wouldn't always be there to pick him up later in life, so now if he falls he picks himself up, if he hurts himself then we will be there for him.

For a time it was hard to watch him fall and we had to sit on our hands, but stoic little chap that he is, most of the time he picks himself up, dusts himself down and he's off running. Lots of people tell us "look, he's fallen down" thinking we've not seen it, but we have. They probably think we're terrible but he's not hurt, he's fine. He knows how to solve his problems and that we'll be there if he gets stuck. Isn't that what every parent wants for their child. \\\

Name: Sam

Children: Lyla, 4 and Britta, 16 Months

Expectations of Motherhood: I suppose I hoped what everyone else does – that you won't change that much. You'll still travel, get to gigs, the cinema, eat out, wear clothes with non-elasticated waists, get through a day without discovering some piece of discarded food in your hair . . .

Reality of Motherhood: Who knew what a journey this was going to be? I fell pregnant straight away and was textbook thrilled/excited/nervous.

Then at 13 weeks I had a miscarriage. I'll never forget going to hospital with horrendous stomach pains and the midwife asking me, "How far apart are your contractions?" And I thought, *oh god – I'm in labour, but there won't be a baby at the end of it.*

Looking back, that was the first moment I realised that being a mother is never what you expect it to be. But I did know that whatever it brought I wanted it more than anything.

It took a few months to get pregnant again (in which I really struggled with depression), but then In Feb 2007 I fell pregnant with Lyla. I remember how nervous I was at the six week scan, but saw a heartbeat and a teeny baby, and in October she was born - healthy and beautiful. I remember on about day four thinking, "What ON EARTH have we done?" I couldn't imagine a time when we could ever go to the shop / a friends' house / on holiday EVER again.

When we decided to try for baby number two, again I fell pregnant immediately. At about five weeks I suddenly got really nervous that I would miscarry again – and so the great early pregnancy unit at the MRI gave me a scan and at six weeks I saw a teeny baby and a heartbeat and was euphoric.

At about twelve weeks I was at work and had the tiniest drop of blood. I phoned the midwife who reassured me it was nothing, but as the evening went on I just got more and more scared. They gave me a scan the next day and I saw my little baby, who, according to the size charts, had died two days before.

With my next pregnancy I got through three scans before the baby died – with the two after that I miscarried before the first scans. I feel so much empathy with anyone going through any fertility issues and know that it does affect everyone differently but the feelings of grief, failure, self-loathing and desperation that I experienced were overwhelming at times. Were you a "mother" to those nev-

er born babies just because you never held them and fed them or not? I don't know.

In September 2010 I remember thinking I can't do this anymore – it's one last try and then . . well I didn't know what the end of that sentence was, but that last chance hotel was our beautiful girl Britta. And until the moment at 40+2 that I held her and heard her cry I can honestly say I never never thought she would arrive safely.

She did arrive safely, but she then had colic, and she NEVER slept and she cried alllllllllll the time and I remember thinking "What? – you were SO wanted and we went through so much to get you and now it's like some kind of waking hell!"

As I said . . things are never quite as you expect them to be. She remains a challenge(!) She's also so full of life, energy and joy, I wouldn't change a thing.



Taking your children home for the first time: I remember the drive home from hospital with Lyla on the M56 was hair raising – I had the senses of a cat - I could smell that speeding driver from 5 miles away. I wanted to scream at everyone, "Slow down! Use your mirrors! I have the most precious cargo in the world! – please be careful!" 15mph never felt faster.

Once home, it just felt right. Exhausting, but right. I never had that moment of, "Good grief – we're now in charge of this person - aghghgh!" It just felt normal and that we were where we should be. I went home the day after Lyla was born, but with Britta I told them on the delivery unit that we wanted to go home right away. They had a bed ready on the ward, but as it was my birthday I wanted out of there and to get home and have cake and a glass of plonk (maybe I shouldn't have told the midwife that!).

The best/worst advice: I don't think Mothers have ever been more scrutinised or discussed as we are today. You can't turn on the radio or TV or open a paper without some pundit or expert discussing the shortcomings of working mothers or stay at home mothers – how adversely we are affecting our children's emotional development or smothering them to the point of malfunction.

We have an over-abundance of advice both good and bad and it's often hard to wade through it all.

Talk to your friends, be honest with them about how you feel and how you're coping. Don't assume everyone is doing it well apart from you and you may be surprised to hear that everything isn't rosy in their garden either - a problem shared and all that . . .

People who tell you, "Ah! These are the wonder years!" when your six week old

hasn't slept for, ooo about six weeks and you feel like you've been run over by a train – put it in the bin.

The main thing to always remember is no one EVER judges you as much as you'll judge yourself – so if you give yourself a break, that's more than half the battle.

Oh and as a friend once told me when I was delirious with lack of sleep and a screaming child – it really IS OK not to like your child sometimes (but they don't tell you that in the movies..)

The hardest part of being a mother: Going through pregnancy loss was very hard for me – and I know people think they're comforting you when they say, "Don't worry – you can try again," and, "It was meant to be," but I always found that so crass. I'm also aware that people simply don't know what to say when you lose a child.

I remember one heavily pregnant woman saying to me, "At least you get to wear clothes with waists – look at me!"

The best ever comfort I got was a woman I didn't know too well actually who just looked me straight in the eye and, "That's a shitty thing that happened to you. I'm so sorry - you didn't deserve that" - no attempt at explanation, no words of hope for the future. Just an understanding.

The biggest challenge now is the constant boundary pushing, which with two girls (of different ages) who are pushing two very different boundaries can seem overwhelming. I really don't know where us parents find that extra reserve of patience when we've just been asked, "Why?" for the 900,000th time that day, whilst another child is trying to climb into the washing machine.

Oh and as low points go, having my lip split by a thrashing toddler two hours into a 7 hour flight was pretty much as low as I ever thought it could get. Then as I tried to mop up the blood she threw up. Alllllll over me. Those airline blankets really don't make a good outfit, no matter how you try and accessorise.

The best parts of being a mother: The love. How to even begin to describe it? Remember when you met your partner and you thought about them all day and felt excited when your phone rang because it might be them and thrilled when you knew you were meeting later and then so screamingly delirious when they said they loved you? Like that times a million. But with a bit more puke.

Hopes for your family: Britta has a really rare condition called mastocytosis, which wasn't diagnosed until she was 8 months old which can cause nasty cramping and wheezing as well as skin lesions. I hope we continue to manage the condition, as she can get on with life really well at the moment. I hope too that she's part of the 60% who grow out of the skin lesions part of it, as it's hard to see people point and stare at your child, but not as hard it will be for a teenage girl to go through that.

I hope we all manage to stay close and stay happy and stay healthy and stay sane. But mainly stay sane.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Strap yourself in – it's the ride of your life. Whatever you expect this to be – it will surprise you. Parenthood brings you the most heart-bursting joy you can imagine. The love you feel is beyond anything you could dream of. But you know – there is also frustration, despair, absolute fatigue like you can't believe and of course that food in your hair too. Ahhh – you're going to LOVE it! X \\\



Name: Tahira

Children: Two boys and three girls, aged between 37 and 27.

Expectations of Motherhood: I was the oldest of 10 children, and helped looked after them when they were little so I had a lot of experience in dealing with babies and toddlers. Looking after my siblings came quite naturally to me so I imagined it would be similar to that!

Reality of Motherhood: I came to England when I was married aged 19, and didn't have any of my family to help so it was very difficult dealing with bringing up small children in a country I wasn't completely familiar with. Although I am fluent in English now, it was very difficult at first as I couldn't really communicate with people properly and so had to deal with everything myself.

Taking your child home for the first time: It was an amazing experience, I couldn't believe they were my little babies and wanted to show them off to the world. Back in those days they kept you in hospital for 7 days, and taught you absolutely everything you needed to know from changing nappies, bathing them, winding them, everything! They really prepared you in every way. After you were sent home a midwife would visit every day for the first week, and then every couple of days for the next two weeks.

The best advice: My mother always taught me to trust my gut feelings and that was brilliant advice.

Worst advice: I was told not to pick up my baby too much as it spoils them and it will give them the habit of being held all the time. To be honest, I didn't really listen to that and just wanted cuddle my baby all the time.

The hardest parts of being a mother: It's hard when I tried to give my children advice and they would always think they know best. They are all grown up now and my daughters have children themselves, and they often say I was right!

The best parts of being a mother: It's lovely having a big family, it's wonderful when the house is full and everybody is talking and laughing. They are like my best friends now and it's all been worth it.

Hopes for your family: I pray they all remain happy and healthy and we all stay close to each other.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Don't read books on how to look after babies. Always listen to your own mother's experience, and follow your gut instinct always. \\

Name: Denise

Child: Harry, 5

Expectations of motherhood: My husband and I had been determined that we wanted to live out a perfect fairytale. We'd been together for a long time and marriage had been important to us. The next natural step was to have children. As children who'd both been born as accidents and from unconventional families, it was important for us to do things 'the right way'. Looking back, the fairytale couldn't have turned out any more differently to our expectations. I'm a single parent now and I'm having to write a new story, and so in retrospect none of that actually mattered.

Never in a million years had I expected to become a single mum. We'd been obsessed with doing 'the right thing' as a couple and doing what made us look like the perfect family, but in the end it just didn't work out like that. It sounds crazy now, to think I was so conservative in my attitude towards becoming a parent.

Reality of Motherhood: The bubble burst immediately at Harry's birth in a traumatic 18hr labour. Harry was in the wrong position - back to back - and was eventually delivered by emergency C-section. It made me reconsider all of my original expectations of motherhood. After 3 days of trauma and looking after this new little thing, finally coming out of the haze, I fell in love with him. For days I'd felt disconnected because of everything that had happened in the birth. Then finally it was like a little door in my heart opened - I like to call it my 'John Malkovich door'. As an adult you expect that you've experienced every emotion, but you really haven't until you feel this unconditional love for your child. I imagine people have more children because it's like a drug addict harking back to their first high. If you could buy that love as a drug, you'd be unbelievably rich.

Motherhood now, as a single mum, has meant a real change in my life, but I have realised that the fairytale can be rewritten and our relationship has developed into something really special.

Taking your child home for the first time: We were kept in hospital for 5 days. By the time we left they had diagnosed Harry with hole in his heart and we were told that eventually he would need an operation. Returning home was tinged with the worry of not knowing exactly what was wrong. We found ourselves dealing with the emotions of being new parents, sharing the same experiences as other new parents, but at the same time being scared stiff because of what was potentially going to happen to our poorly baby.

I tried to enjoy him as much as possible in those early months. I indulged in doing the things you can do as a new mum - not having to get dressed, eating cake, etc. Other people expected me to look after them when they'd descend on us, but I wanted us to be spoilt. It's a strange bubble you're in while midwives, health visitors and parents-in-law breeze through your door on a daily basis. I really enjoyed feeling special for those first few weeks, and then it hit me that I was going to smell of sour milk for the next few months. I remember one occasion when I was in the supermarket with my new born baby, and everyone was smiling and looking at me. I felt so proud



with my beautiful boy. At the checkout I remember seeing milk all over the till and in reporting it to the assistant. Her eyes glanced down to my chest - it was me!

Harry had open heart surgery at 5 mths, and it was a totally weird experience. Up till then he'd lived as a relatively normal baby boy. I remember becoming obsessed with breast feeding - I'd originally felt like I didn't want to be bullied into it, but when it transpired that he was ill I did become a bit evangelical about the whole thing. It was the best medicine he could have and as a fairly helpless parent it was the one thing I could do to help the situation. I knew that the bigger and stronger he could be for his operation, the better.

Harry was in Alder Hey for 3 weeks and we stayed with him during that time apart from the 3 days when he was in intensive care. That time really opened my eyes to how lucky we were. I remember one time when I was making pot noodle in the hospital kitchen and came across a dad who was making a full sunday roast for his family in the kitchen. I said, "you're pushing the boat out, aren't you?"

and he explained that they'd been in there for 18 mths with his daughter and he was trying to regain some normality. His daughter had a brain injury and he didn't know when they'd be leaving.

We were so lucky because Harry could be mended, and it was that moment when I went from, "why me?" to "we're so lucky". After his operation he recovered quickly and has managed to live life as a healthy little boy since.

Best and worst advice: There's no one piece of advice that has stuck out to me, but it's important to discuss problems with friends. Everyone has their own

pearls of wisdom but not everyone finds the same thing works for them. Trust your instincts.

The hardest parts of being a mother: I miss reminiscing with someone or sharing with someone about how amazing he is. I also can't ever leave a situation and get distance from being a mum, like just saying I need a bath or my own time. I don't have any family support nearby, but I have got a network of really good friends. Without them I wouldn't have been able to get through this. I'm much braver as a person now too, motherhood has shown me that I am quite strong and can get through things.

Nobody tells you that at some point you will really dislike (almost hate) your child. You'll love them, but you really don't like them, and that's ok and normal. Our relationship has changed since I've become a single mum because I have to be 'good cop' and 'bad cop' now. He can go to his dad and experience purely good times, whereas I have to lay down the rules and discipline him.

Recently the lines have blurred slightly between being a parent and child - in

earnest, I probably discuss more with him than I should but I like to be very open with him because we're a team. I don't have to share him with anyone as a single parent - I have to cope with the bad bits but I get all the good bits and those dark moments have made our relationship so much stronger.

The best parts of being a mother: I love him, he's funny and has his own personality. He's my best friend for life and we have a lovely relationship. He's also at an age where we can do fun things together like sneaking him into the cinema to see films he's not really supposed to. He's his own person and has an incredible personality and his own very valid opinion. I love that he's great company - for kids and adults - and he is genuinely funny. I'm so proud that he has created independent relationships with adults who are my friends, and these are relationships that exist because they honestly like each other. At first when we did things, just Harry and I, it felt like someone was missing for both of us. Recently it feels like we are a complete family, just us two.

Hopes for your family: I hope he'll be able to have a good relationship with his father.

I hope that he felt loved by us growing up.

I want him to always be happy in whatever he does and chooses to do - I think that's all that matters.

What advice would you give new and expectant mums:

Listen to your own voice, don't be bullied by anyone.

- Don't buy into false expectations and fairytales - It's your book, you are the author, you have to write it - Whatever you choose to do, it's the right way - You can feed them all the organic purees you want, and give them a great mixed pallet of tastes, but by the age of two all they'll want to do is eat white food - Everything passes, everything is a phase - Enjoy it. Luxuriate into the first 6 mths, sleep when the baby sleeps and you'll get enough - Give in to being a mum and meanwhile don't feel bad about not being the best wife, lover, daughter, work colleague or project manager of your home renovations. Take the time out the indulge in motherhood, this is the time to do it.

We get really hung up on what we should and shouldn't do, but all that matters is having a happy child. There's a tendency to buy into what people tell us to do in books, but people have been having babies for 1000s of years without them. \\\

Name: Gemma

Child: Herbert, 2

Expectations of motherhood: I had to remind myself throughout my pregnancy, especially near the end, that it wasn't just about the birth. I was so consumed with how I was going to get him out, that I almost forgot that he was going to be with me forever. Everyone tells you about the exhaustion, and the sleepless nights, but I don't think this is something you can ever really understand until you've had a baby, so it didn't worry me too much while I was pregnant. My husband and I had been watching our friends closely over the years as they had children - so I wasn't completely naive about motherhood, but the labour did take up more of my thinking time than what the next twenty or so years would be like. I was worried that I would never be selfless enough to be a good mother - a worry that is still with me nearly two years in.

Reality of motherhood: The reality is that I still feel very much the same - like a little girl playing house - but with a little boy to hang out with, and try to look after as best I can. I think I thought I would turn into a 'proper grown-up' when Herb was born - but this hasn't happened as yet. There are many realities of motherhood - I can now multi-task to the extreme and as a working mum, I feel guilty all of the time, our house is not as clean as it could be and I am always covered in something slimy...

However, the other realities are that the smallest things give me the most brilliant joy. Herb eating toast has always made me smile inside and out - his greasy fingers holding the crust - little finger held up to the side like a posh lady drinking tea. Words cannot describe the overwhelming wonderfulness of the reality of motherhood. The intense thrill at watching someone you made and grew learning the ways of the world is my favourite reality of motherhood.

Taking your child home for the first time: Herb's dad and I were really paranoid about having a 'clingy' baby - so launched into our very first night at home with 'controlled crying'... At 4 o'clock in the morning, after Herb had been crying for maybe less than 5 mins, Joe threw down his arms in exasperation exclaiming he 'had never known anything like it in his life!' Luckily this made us laugh a lot, probably deliriously, and we realised this was true. We really had never known anything like this in our life, but we had it forever now so we had to work with it. The controlled crying obviously didn't work and we struggled through night one. (The midwife kindly informed us the next day that we shouldn't really try this method until



Herb was at least a few weeks old!)

The best/worst advice: The best piece of advice I got was from my great friend Fleur, who admitted she did not experience the 'overwhelming love' when she gave birth to her first son, like we are all told we will. Fleur warned me that the love grows, and maybe even slowly at first while you get used to each other. I instantly felt protective of Herb, but I did feel like he was a tiny little stranger in our house. He didn't really smile until he was 10 weeks old too - which didn't help! I know this might seem like the most terrible thing to admit, but it's true and it is this piece of advice I will pass on to others as there is so much pressure put on mums to feel/behaviour in particular ways. Becoming a mum for the first time is overwhelming and huge - and we should be allowed to do it all in our own way - and trust that all feelings are natural and valid.

I can't remember any bad advice. Although I think the contradictory advice on breastfeeding puts unnecessary strain on new mums.

The hardest part of being a mother: At one year and ten days old, on 17th March 2010, Herb had a stroke - the cause of which has never been definitely identified, although it was most probably due to a very high temperature down to an infection. We are very lucky the stroke was small and the damage done, relatively slight. His recovery is naturally slow, and although great so far he has very definite weakness in his right side. He has learned to walk, but has to wear a little splint to help and his right leg is now shorter than his left. He has devel-

oped good manual dexterity in his right hand, although he favours the left - especially when he's eating! We have regular appointments with various health officials, from physios to paediatric neurologists - all of whom are completely amazing and supportive - and I think we will be seeing them for the next few years at least.

And this is the hardest part of being a mother: the fact you can't just crumple and give up. The fact you love your child more than you ever thought it possible to love anyone and that any hurt/pain suffered by them physically pains you too - and that all you want to do is take their pain away and make it yours. That you would do anything to make them happy and well, and the fact that sometimes there is nothing you can do but hope.

Herb being ill was without a doubt the most terrible time of my life and has left me somewhat lunatic with regards to his health, and at times feeling lonely and heartbroken, but on a positive note, I do believe it has made my family and I stronger and, hopefully, more aware of others' hardships too.

More hard things: the constant guilt - the fact I can't give Herb all my time because I have to go to work, and that someone else gets to see him smile, play and laugh all day. And learning to be patient.

The best parts of being a mother: The intensity of emotion - seeing delight in Herb's eyes, laughing with him, smelling his hair, feeling his love through his spontaneous hugs and adoring glances.

Witnessing his strength in recovery, his patience and concentration; every time Herb chooses his right arm and hand for an activity my heart sings. When Herb had his stroke he could not lift his right arm and so could no longer suck his thumb, his natural 'soother'. It was crushing to watch him try and get his thumb to his mouth and not be able to - heartbreaking to know that such a simple comfort had been taken away from him. Day six of our hospital stay and as Joe put Herb to bed in his hospital cot, he made it. Thumb reached mouth and Joe and I sobbed with relief, heaving with heavy hearted joy as we knew this teeny step was a momentous one. The best part of being a mother is watching Herb, my son, growing into a little boy and doing all the things little boys do.

Hopes for your family: I hope with all my everything that Herb always gets to do everything he wants to do in the future - from playing the guitar to running a race. The simple things.

I hope we always laugh together and like each other. And I hope my little boy is the kind of son who regularly calls his mother. ..

Advice for new and expectant mums: In a very quiet voice, (as I recognise this could be a little annoying - and I was just very lucky) I would recommend hypno-birthing - it worked a treat for me. But in a loud voice I would recommend trying to ignore everyone's advice and just go with the flow - do what you think is best for your baby; try not to look for patterns - they change every day; relax and have a lovely time! \\\

Name: Ruth

Child: Martha, 1 yr old

Expectations of Motherhood: Its funny but now I've had Martha I can't really remember what I felt like before she was in our life. We were really lucky as I had a straightforward pregnancy so I think I was just filled with excitement about having a child that we'd be able to call our daughter or son and starting our own family. There are people in my life who I admire as parents and I guess I wanted to learn from them and hoped to have a fairly relaxed approach to parenting. I wanted to try to integrate our baby into our lives without everything changing too drastically, but actually once she was here that didn't really cross my mind and I didn't necessarily want to do the things I couldn't do anymore anyway.

Reality of Motherhood: We did a lot of walking for the first six months. Martha wasn't a good sleeper and would sleep best in the pram so Pete and I walked everywhere, all the time, whatever the weather. It was exhausting, felt like we were constantly in a tag team and the sleepless nights were relentless. I used to get a feeling of dread during the evening before I went to bed, knowing that there was another really testing night ahead of us. Having said that the daily experience of feeling such love for her was wonderful. It does get easier and generally I think I enjoy being a mum more each day. She definitely amazes me more every day.

I feel like my identity has really changed since having a child, I feel more confident in myself as a person since becoming a mum and having your own family gives you a feeling of security. It also puts things into perspective as I guess you don't have as much time to question things, its just about getting on with each day.

It's harder to go on holiday with a baby and the days of packing light are definitely over. I do miss being able to travel without a baby.

Taking your child home for the first time: I remember sitting in the back of the car with Martha, looking out of the window and thinking 'wow - every adult walking along this road in Stockport was once a tiny perfect baby like this'. It sounds cheesy but it was like I suddenly had a better understanding of humanity and the wonder of life. It made me realise that everyone starts from the same place but it's so much to do with the life you're born into that will shape your direction. We found ourselves laughing at ourselves as we drove so slowly and carefully feeling much more vulnerable than we had ever done before.



There was a lovely feeling of calm in our house when we first had her home (which didn't necessarily last). I think it was partly because of hormones and also because if we were relaxed we felt it would help her to feel the same. It was nice to be in a cocoon for the first few weeks, having some days just to ourselves but then also really loving introducing family and friends to our little girl. Also to find ourselves constantly staring at her with amazement and looking across the room at this little person thinking 'ooh there's three of us now!'

The best/worst advice: Lean on other people and if someone offers help then say yes even if its just to do something little. Don't try to do it all by yourself.

I found the books too much and didn't read them much apart from once when it left me feeling totally stressed as Martha didn't behave in the way the books described she should. Asking friends about how their babies have been and for any advice always felt much more reassuring.

The hardest parts of being a mother: The tiredness and having to always put your own needs aside.

The best parts of being a mother: Going into her room when she wakes up in the morning and seeing her smile when she sees you. Creeping into her room at night and watching her sleep. Seeing her learn something new. Seeing the pleasure having a child brings to the people you love. Watching her play with her cousins and my closest friend's children. Experiencing her coming to you for comfort and security. Watching her develop her own independence and confidence as an individual. Watching her laugh at something she finds really funny. Sharing all of this with Pete...the list is endless.

Hopes for your family: That we are always able to communicate well with each other and respect each others' differences. That we value each others' company and the time we spend together. That we are gentle and patient with each other. That we learn from Martha as much as she learns from us. That relationships with family and friends always remain central to our lives. That Martha is able to think freely, grow up to be quietly confident and fulfilled in whatever she does. That she's not afraid of trying new things. That Martha has a sister or brother in the future.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Take each day at a time and lean on your friends and family. Don't push yourself too hard and don't do anything you don't feel ready to do. If you're having a really hard day, ring someone and tell them - it feels so much better once you've shared it. \\\



Name: Liz

Child: August, 8 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I knew it would be tough, but to be honest I couldn't actually picture myself as a mother so it all seemed a bit delusional. I tried not to think about it too much and just hoped a healthy baby would appear at the end.

Reality of Motherhood: The first 6 weeks..... horrific! I could not believe nobody had pulled me to one side and warned me about this while I was pregnant.

Obviously the sleep deprivation is a killer, but absolutely nothing prepares you for this. You would never be put in a situation (unless as a form of torture) where you are woken every 2 hours. It was around week 2 that I realised I would not be having more than a 3 hour block of sleep for quite a while! This would be bad enough on its own, but add to it a bruised and battered body, plus learning to breast feed and its even worse!

Now 8 months in..... motherhood is still exhausting but so much fun! I feel so

privileged to spend everyday with August.

Taking your child home for the first time: After spending three days in a shared room with 4 other women (one of whom was in labour!) with August screaming the place down and demanding a feed every 30 minutes I was ready to get the hell home! My partner and dad picked us up and it felt like a get-away car. We shoved all my stuff into a bag, grabbed the baby and fled! I was sure they'd made a mistake and if we weren't quick enough they would change their minds and be after us.

As soon as we got home I started cleaning.....I went into hospital on the Monday morning and didn't get home til the Thursday evening, so nothing was how I left it. Two grown men had been living at home while I was away so let's just say standards had slipped a bit!

The best/worst advice: The worst advice was from a breast feeding counsellor who said, 'if it hurts your doing it wrong'. I did everything I was supposed to but it still hurt. A lot! I stuck with it and after about a month things fell in to place. I think August and I were just getting used to something that was new to

both of us.

The hardest parts of being a mother: No matter how much help you have or are promised, in reality it all comes down to you. I think it was around the third month I suddenly realised, 'Oh my god I am the one who has to do everything!'

The best parts of being a mother: The bond I have with August right now. I know as she gets older this will be split more equally between her father and I, but while she is still a baby and so dependant on me I'm enjoying the rewards of being the apple of her eye!

Has becoming a mother changed you? In some ways yes but these could be temporary as it's still the first year. She is my number one and it can be hard to concentrate on much else. The idea of going back to work at some point scares the hell out of me and I'm lucky that I can take my time a bit. I do look back on things I used to worry about and think, 'WOW, you had way too much time to think about things!'

Hopes for your family: I just want to raise a happy, healthy, and confident little girl and hope that I can be there as much as possible for her.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums? In the first few weeks only surround yourself with people who will be 100% supportive of you. You will most probably be exhausted, depressed, highly strung and extremely emotional, so anyone judgemental need not apply! \\\



Name: Lucie

Child: Charlie, 14 mths

Expectations of Motherhood: I guess I didn't really have any expectations of motherhood – I had no experience of babies whatsoever and could count the number of times I had held a baby on the fingers of one hand (1,2,3...yep, that was it), I had never changed a nappy, never been left alone with a baby, never helped to dress or bath or feed a baby. I think it's fair to say I was utterly clueless. I knew it would be hard work, intense and tiring (although I had no idea just how hard work, intense and tiring!) and I was terrified by the 'foreverness' of having a child. There is no changing your mind, no going back, no half measures – once they are here, they are going to be around for the rest of your life and that's a frightening prospect. Of course, once they arrive, the thought that they might not be around for the rest of your life is even more terrifying.

The Reality of Motherhood: My partner Dave had been broody for a while and, whilst I had never really considered myself particularly maternal, I always saw myself having children at some point in the future. We adopted a very casual approach of 'when it happens, it happens' and we were really lucky that it happened very quickly – although finding out three days before we were due to go to Glastonbury was less than ideal to say the least(!). I think I had the most sober festival experience in human history and was in bed by 9pm on the Saturday night (rock & roll, eh?) My friends all wondered what the hell was wrong with me but as it was such early days, I didn't want to jinx it by telling people (call me superstitious...). Other than me and Dave, my sister and her boyfriend were the only people there who knew – my sis helped me with my ruse by buying me pints of lemonade and orange juice so it looked as though I was partaking in the Glasto mandatory standard, pear cider! Looking back, fainting spectacularly whilst dancing to Paul Simon may have been something of a give-away.

While I was pregnant I constantly stroked my bump – that feeling of love and protection was immediate and intense. I felt so proud of my body and loved the private little world I was sharing with my growing baby. People seemed friendlier in general, more helpful and chatty, and I enjoyed the slight nod of solidarity that I exchanged with fellow mums-to-be on the street. But alongside this sense of wonder, excitement and love, I also felt I was operating on a level of heightened anxiety – the worry of something going wrong was, for me, far more exhausting than the physical changes of pregnancy.

I was six days overdue when my contractions started and everything went according to plan, until a few hours later when I was rushed to hospital with a scary bleed. In the rush my birth plan went all to pot – I forgot my phone (containing my hypnobirthing mantras and music), and the bleed meant that the birthing pool was out of the question (somewhat to Dave's relief, who was dreading having to use the "poo-catching net" of water-birth lore – yeah, thanks very much whoever told him



about that). In the rush to leave the house we'd also forgotten the baby bag, so when Charlie was born he was swaddled, Baby Jesus-like, in hospital-issue blankets. It didn't do me many favours in the Mother of the Year category when the midwife noticed I had remembered to bring THREE bags of my own clothes, either.

The labour itself was relatively straightforward and I got through on just gas and air. The pushing stage did seem to last a very long time, though – and I had an unfortunate experience with a less-than-tactful doctor (amongst myriad excellent hospital staff) who marched in, barked at my midwife to 'JUST CUT HER!', and marched out again. Talk about bad bedside manners. The best physical description I've heard of giving birth came from my best friend, now a mum of two, who when pressed to describe what it actually feels like (an impossible question, but you can't help but ask) said: 'It's just like doing a massive poo.' And, in a way, it is.

Charlie was born at 2:15am – exactly 24 hours and 7 minutes after my first con-

traction. As he was plopped on my chest, I fell in love instantly – He was absolutely perfect other than a slightly pterodactyl-esque head shape (luckily a temporary result of the series of tight turns that marked his journey into the world). After about five minutes, he tilted his head up and latched himself on for his first feed – I had been worried about whether this would come naturally to me, but he knew exactly what to do! At least one of us did....

Dave left a few hours later to get some much needed sleep and I was left in the delivery suite with my son. My son. My son. You have 9 months to prepare yourself, but it still feels most surreal when it actually happens. I tried to shower but was bleeding too much and left the bathroom looking much like the famous scene in Psycho. I remember trying to mop up the blood with loo roll whilst feeling like I was about to pass out before giving up and apologising profusely to the midwife. After a while we were taken up to the ward. I couldn't sleep a wink that night. I was terrified that he would wake up and I wouldn't have a clue what to do with him.

The next morning, breakfast was brought and I asked for tea and bran-flakes. The rather brusque midwife left these just out of reach on my tray table. As I'd had a stitch (not to mention a baby) mere hours earlier, it was painful to move and as I watched my tea go cold and my bran-flakes go soggy, I suddenly felt like bursting into tears. It was all too much. How could I do this? I felt hopelessly out of my depth already. At exactly that moment, Charlie started to stir and

I suddenly realised I had a choice. I could either fall apart, or I could dig deep, realise that this tiny person was entirely dependent on me, and step up to the mark. I popped to the loo, brushed my teeth, had a wash and changed my clothes. I emerged a different woman and felt genuinely excited and ready for this new chapter in my life and all of the uncertainties, challenges and adventures that lay ahead.

Taking your child home for the first time: We were able to go home later that day, although lack of food and loss of blood meant I almost fainted carrying Charlie out of the main hospital entrance. I managed to hand him to Dave in the nick of time – it's not a very good start to motherhood: dropping your baby before you have even left the hospital. It took 15 minutes to fit the car seat (note to future parents: put the car seat in before you have the baby) and then Dave drove home so carefully (waiting ten minutes before right turns, hands at ten-to-two on the wheel etc) I felt as though I was sitting in on his driving test. When we got home, our three cats came for a quick sniff of the new family member and our biggest cat Fletch went to sleep in the pushchair, which set the tone for much (ongoing) territory-marking. It took us three weeks to name Charlie – which shouldn't have been surprising given that it once took me three months to name my cat and she ended up "picking" her own (well, it was the piece of paper her paw touched first) from the shortlist. His middle name was easy and had been picked pretty much as soon as we found out we were expecting a boy at the 20-week scan – Frank, after my Dad.

Best Advice: Trust your body. It sounds a bit hippy, but it knows what it needs to do at every stage. Throughout my pregnancy and labour I was constantly amazed that my body could produce and provide everything that this baby needed to grow and develop into an actual mini human. It still blows my mind when I think about it. Ain't nature great?! Try to make time for yourself. Even if it's just ten minutes a day and remember who you are. Becoming a Mum is an incredible experience. It does change your life but that doesn't mean you have to lose yourself or your identity.

NEVER GOOGLE YOUR CHILD'S SYMPTOMS.

Worst Advice: "Trust your instincts." Okay, so I know this one is controversial and I'm sure that tonnes of people have had this as their best advice. I agree it's a wonderful idea in theory, but what do you do if, like me, your instincts are predisposed to hysteria?! When every cough is the start of tuberculosis, every rash is the onset of meningitis, every bump to

the head is a serious concussion waiting to set in... I know, I know, these are my neuroses and I have to (and am trying to) deal with them. I just get frustrated when people tell me to “trust my instincts” because I honestly don’t think I can, and it makes me feel as though I’m failing at the most basic level of motherhood.

Other worst advice, “Sleep when the baby sleeps.” He didn’t!

The best things about being a mother: Unconditional love both ways. It really is like nothing else I have ever experienced - loving and being loved so whole-heartedly, so completely, without reserve, question or judgement. I know it’s a cliché but when he looks at me and smiles, everything is truly right with the world.

Seeing traits of the people I love in him. Sometimes he’ll grin at me (usually whilst doing something mischievous that he knows he shouldn’t be!) and I’ll just see Dave’s face looking back at me or he’ll be snoozing on the sofa, a perfect, miniature version of my Dad, his Pops. He has inherited the deepest, bluest eyes from my Mum and Sister, and when he shrugs and rolls his eyes, he is suddenly his eldest cousin. The person I love most in the world reflects the people I love most in the world and that is a wonderful thing.

Seeing how excited he gets about the simplest things is helping me to appreciate them afresh. All of the things I had been taking for granted or had stopped noticing years ago, I am suddenly seeing again. It is both humbling and inspiring to rediscover the world through his eyes.

Spending time with him – he is genuinely a cool and funny little guy. He has a cracking sense of humour and makes me laugh out loud on pretty much an hourly basis.

I love daydreaming about who Charlie will be, what he will do, what will excite, inspire and amaze him. The whole world lies in front of him just waiting to be explored. So many wonderful discoveries and untold adventures await him and I hope he will experience, embrace and enjoy it all.

The hardest thing about being a mother: Constant worry, particularly about his health. I sometimes feel that I lurch from one paranoid obsession to the next: from 0- 6 months it was SIDS; from 6-12 months, meningitis; since 12 months (now he has learned to run and climb), it’s head injuries I fear the most.

Early mornings. 7am is a good lie-in these days. On the bright side, I suddenly have so many more hours in my day and feel as though I’m much better at



managing my time and making the most of every minute that I do get to myself.

It’s relentless! All day and all night, every day and every night, although we are really lucky that my family live close by and are happy to help out to give us a much-needed break.

The immense responsibility is sometimes overwhelming.

Has being a mother changed you?: Yes and no. I’m still the same person I was before I had Charlie, but with a few tweaks. I’m Charlie’s Mum and I am immensely proud of that, but I’m still Lucie - and that’s really important. Motherhood has changed me in the respect that I’m now much better at putting things into perspective and not sweating the small stuff. I also have a better work/life balance than ever. Being a mother is the most important thing in my life and Charlie comes first, but that doesn’t (and shouldn’t) mean that nothing else in my life matters. For me, being a good mother is about being able to balance all the different elements of your life and give each the right amount of time and energy to keep everything on an even keel. I don’t always get it right but I try.

Hopes for your growing family:

In no particular order: That Charlie learns to stroke the cats gently rather than demonstrating his love by grabbing fistfuls of fur and pulling their tails.

That as a family we remain happy and healthy and strong and supportive for one another.

I want to make Charlie proud of us as his parents. We don’t necessarily need to be best mates but if he grows up thinking his folks are alright, that’ll do me.

That Charlie is happy in his own skin.

That he is kind, caring and courteous but not too preoccupied with what others think of him.

A sibling for Charlie... but not just yet (!).

Advice for new and expectant Mums: There is no ‘right’ way. There is no magic book that has all the answers and will, if followed to the letter, guarantee a happy, healthy, socially confident, well-balanced, polite and resourceful child who sleeps through the night from two weeks, eats a healthy and well balanced diet and never cries. Sorry.

The truth is we are all just bumbling our way through, trying to do the best we can and find the things that work for us and our family. Sometimes it would be amazing to just have the answers handed to you but in the main, one of the most rewarding things about motherhood is finding your own way through a tricky situation and coming out of the other side.

You don’t need to buy everything the adverts tell you to – I was something of a marketing person’s dream. I despair of the number of things that remain in their boxes to this day...

That said, if you are planning to breast-feed and prefer to cover up, I would highly recommend buying a breastfeeding shawl (I opted for a Baby BuBu poncho style one with press studs so it fastened securely) My life changed after I bought it and suddenly feeding in public was a far less daunting prospect.

Go on a baby and children first aid course. Hopefully you’ll never need to put it into practice but the confidence and peace of mind it gives you is priceless. (www.milliestrust.com is an amazing charity that offers free / reasonably priced courses across the country) \\\



Name: Elizabeth

Children: Rufus, 2 years 7 months and Dulcie, 7 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I so desperately wanted to be a mother, and I suppose I imagined all the things I think I saw that other mothers seemed to have- healthy, thriving children that gave them equal measures of joy and being pains in the bum. I never assumed I would have a disabled child, although something niggled at me during my pregnancy with Rufus, and there was an underlying level of worry. I would have probably incorrectly assumed that life with a disabled child was something unimaginably difficult and scary. It is, but it also brings a level of joy that I'd have assumed wasn't possible. Sheer excitement in the minutiae of life (he's smiled! he's picked up a toy and assessed it properly!) and a strength that I didn't know I had.

Reality of Motherhood: Nobody can prepare you for the shock of your first child. How utterly upside down your life becomes. Add to that Rufus was premature, very, very ill and spent his first four months in hospital whilst we were being told it was unlikely he would ever make it home- well, the 'reality' was so distant from what I expected. To not be able to hold your child and nourish them for their formative weeks (a gap that has been healed immeasurably by having Dulcie) was so incredibly difficult and

yet somehow there were moments of calm, laughter and real happiness when Rufus was in hospital.

Now with two so young, I wondered what I stressed about with one! And in lots of ways Dulcie is really easy- she isn't complex, she's completely unmedicalised our lives. But by god, she brings a whole new set of things. Being mobile quite early, demanding my attention. Rufus is easy by comparison now!

Taking your children home for the first time: After he came home, I was bound to the house by fear. He was still so fragile and tiny. It was pretty isolating. But once we did start reaching out, going to baby groups, my fears started to disappear. Now the shame with Dulcie is that I don't have the time or energy to go to groups, but watching the two of them together at home, interacting in their own little way, is really rewarding.

Bringing Dulcie home after a natural labour (Rufus was an emergency c-section), with her breastfeeding so easily I have been known to describe (possibly a bit dramatically!) as an elastoplast on my heart. My pregnancy with her had some very scary moments, and they induced her two weeks' early as she looked as though she wasn't growing as well. But the minute she was born I knew she was ok. There is this mystical 'mother's instinct', but I really believe in it.

The best/worst advice:
The best: "This too shall pass"

I love this- moments of pain, moments of glory. Everything is a stage. It's good to remember that hard things will come to a conclusion somehow, and also not to rest on your laurels and embrace the glorious days as they are far too short.

The worst: The multitude of friendly opinions about what you should do based around what worked for someone else. Especially contentious issues like feeding, weaning and sleeping. Which is all newborns do I suppose! But especially with breastfeeding- they have to go to you like this, try holding them this way, you have to get a good latch. Arrgggghhh! I literally needed to clear my head of all the 'should be doings' and let Dulcie take the lead trusting that she knew what she wanted. Especially difficult after a child with an extreme oral aversion.

The hardest parts of being a mother: All the wiping- bums, faces, hands, high-chairs, your face, your clothes. There's a level of stickiness you become at one with. Also feeling like you're not allowed to admit to being bored. I love my kids but somedays it's just meal/feed/dress/whinge repeat all day.

The best parts of being a mother: With Rufus, it's that fleeting bit of eye contact. And he is a happy, happy soul. He has a laugh that I promise you makes grown men smile. From 100 feet away. And it's being his advocate- I feel proud to be his Mum. With Dulcie, it's everything as it's supposed to be, but I also now know not to sweat the small stuff. And to believe in

myself. So being a mother has really empowered me, more than my career ever did

Has becoming a mother changed you? Yes, immeasurably. In so many ways. But sometimes I like to remember who I was before all this, because I get asked so often 'are you Mum?', especially with hospital visits with Rufus. And I think yes, but I also have other things I can do!

Hopes for your family: That we deal with tomorrow and all it's unknowns with the same strength and reasoning as today. Rufus's condition is classed as 'life limited and life threatened'. And I think of that in a detached way, but I hope still with enough clarity to access all the things he needs for the best quality of life whilst also not sidelining Dulcie. I hope at some point I feel grown up enough for all of this!

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Trust in your feelings and instincts, but don't drive yourself crazy by trying to 'fix' everything or believing that every little worry will happen because you've thought it!

And skim read any books. Your babies will let you know when you're getting it right by them. Expect this to only be 50% of the time if you're lucky! And if the unexpected happens, and you end up in an unknown place, reach out and ask for help.

Shy bairns get nowt. \\\



Name: Lindsey Bowers

Child: Henry, 2 and 6 months pregnant with a girl.

Expectations of Motherhood: I had visions of my life pretty much continuing as it had before. We'd still go out for lovely meals, just with either a sleeping baby or a patient, well behaved child sitting and eating with us. Being one of those families you see at the park or the pub beer garden in summer with a cute cooing baby or toddler running around. Life as normal, just with a new addition!

I think in my mind I'd added a baby into all the fun, happy situations and activities we did. What could be so hard about that?

Reality of Motherhood: I honestly don't think I considered the flip side to the new arrival. Like, what do you do to occupy yourselves on the wet, windy weekends now there is a child too? I don't think Henry would appreciate Gossip Girl box sets or long pub lunches as much as me. Also what happens when you're ill, or worse still, you're all ill, and all you want is to sleep but you have to be a mother first?

Saying that, the reality is much better than my expectations. I didn't expect to love my child as much as I do. Such emotion and protection for one thing seemed impossible before. Life is funnier now too! I spend a lot of my time with Henry, laughing. Seeing him experience new things for the first time in a joy and getting to enjoy things like Christmas, with children around is the best.

It's hard, extremely tiring and trying at times but 100% worth it.

Taking your child home for the first time: Henry was a little bit small when he was born so we had to stay in for the first night to check he could maintain his temperature. It was the last place I wanted to be and was very tired and emotional when my husband Dave had to go home. When we were given the green light to leave, the next afternoon, I was so excited to get back. Dave's dad came to collect us, but forgot the car seat so we couldn't leave until he'd been back for it. That was the longest time! It was wonderful to get back that evening and spend our first night at home with Henry. Both completely clueless as to what we were supposed to do with him - a feeling which lasted a long time!

The best/worst advice: We found as soon as I fell pregnant with Henry, once you have a baby you're seemingly fair game to be given all manner of (mainly) unsolicited advice. You're told what to feed them, how to feed them, where they should sleep, how much you should hold



them. You simply HAVE to try this routine, that book, don't give them a dummy, make sure you swaddle etc etc. The list is endless, but you come to realise that no one has all the right answers. There is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to raising children and you can feel swamped with the thoughts and theories of others.

So, I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I don't have a best or worst piece of advice we received. I found it all quite overwhelming so took to figuring it out for ourselves instead.

The hardest parts of being a mother: When he's ill. It's getting easier as he can communicate a bit more and let us know

what hurts, but that's been one of the worst bits. Right from the start we knew something wasn't right and he seemed uncomfortable and in pain. He was diagnosed with Reflux when he was 5 weeks old thankfully we got the right medication to help him take his milk and keep it down. He also had colic for the first 3 months which was awful as we couldn't do anything to help. Nothing eased it and he cried constantly. These days it seems different, as although we are more aware of what's wrong with him, it's still equally as hard because he's a proper little personality. To see him go from a happy, chatty playful boy to being clingy, quiet and sad is tough as you can feel pretty useless.

The best parts of being a mother: Definitely seeing him grow and develop daily. I'm always amazed with his new skills and love seeing him get funnier, more confident and show new sides of his emerging personality. He cracks me up daily.

I'm also a sucker for the love and hugs than only a toddler can give. All encompassing, smothering ones - usually accompanied by chocolate or snot.

Has becoming a mother changed you? I'd love to say that having children turned me into a patient, wise, earth mother sort who really found myself in my new role. But in reality, nothing was that extreme. I'm certain that I'm more confident, more loving and hopefully my patience is improving, but I still feel the same as before. I enjoy the same things, give or take (I put my recent love of crafting down to staying in more now I have children).

I'd also hope I'm less selfish and I'm really trying to reign in my fears and phobias so as not to pass them onto my children.

Hopes for your family: The obvious things; that they're happy and healthy. But also that they are confident enough to believe they can achieve whatever they want in life. I want us to be wholly supportive of their choices - that way, if things don't work out, they feel they can talk to us about it, not that they're judged. There is a lot of negativity out there as it is, which can make you think you've failed before you've even tried - I think as a parent you're there to bolster their dreams and cushion the blows.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: I still see myself very much as a beginner, so don't feel I can dish out the advice but if I was pushed, I'd just say try to relax and not beat yourself up when you're finding your feet in the early days. \\\



Name: Gemma

Child: Joel, 14 months

Expectations of motherhood: I always knew I wanted to be a mother, but I didn't think we'd have a family until we were in our 30s. I was only 25 when we got married and although we planned to have a baby we also had big plans to travel the world. Then a few years ago I got diagnosed with endometriosis, I was quite poorly and was told that I might find it difficult to get pregnant. Suddenly my priorities changed and it seemed like the most important thing in the world. We talked a lot about it and decided that it was better to start trying earlier.

It took us a while to get pregnant, but not as long as a lot of people and I'm now really grateful for that. However, at the time it felt like we were the only people in the world who didn't just have to *think fertile thoughts* to make a baby. After a few months it became an obsession, I read every book and took every fertility test and it felt like it was all I could think of or talk about. I was scared it was never going to happen for us and felt so guilty that there might be something wrong with me. After more than a year, we arranged to see a fertility doctor and the day I got my appointment I found out I was pregnant. It was such an amazing feeling; I remember just saying those words over and over in my head 'I'm pregnant' just to see what it felt like. I loved how it sounded and felt such relief that we were going to get what we so desperately wanted.

During pregnancy, if I thought about motherhood I imagined myself as a complete natural who would be back in her skinny jeans within a week, would breast feed like a goddess and would raise healthy brilliant children all whilst whipping up a spectacular batch of cupcakes and keeping an immaculate house. On other days I thought I would be a disaster who would raise delinquent children and never wear mascara again,

but thankfully I think the reality is likely to be somewhere in between.

I was nervous when I was pregnant as I felt quite out of control, obviously I could control everything that I did and what went into my body, but I was terrified the baby would just stop growing or that I had wanted a baby so badly it was a phantom pregnancy. Because of this I don't think I gave too much thought to what it would be like when he got here, I naively thought that conception and pregnancy were the difficult bits!

Reality of motherhood: I was very lucky as I had a straight forward and quick labour. I had been very positive about it and didn't feel scared as I just wanted him here and really thought as soon as he was, everything would be fine. I had imagined that I would have a relaxing, dignified water birth and they would pass me my beautiful child and all would be well. In reality, even the most straight forward labour is completely undignified. When I first saw him I was a bit stunned and I couldn't hold him because I was horrified at the amount of blood and just kept asking, 'Is that normal? Is everything ok?'

When I calmed down we had skin to skin contact and he fed straight away, it was pretty magical and I knew instantly that I would do everything in my power to be the best mother in the world. Unfortunately, the panic then came back as dozens of nurses and doctors all came in to take a good look at me. I had to go to theatre due to some complications and this burst that magical little bubble. It was rotten to be whisked away, but I was back with him within a couple of hours and we were both fine. When I got taken up to the ward the midwife made me a cup of tea and gave me a biscuit and I sat in bed and watched him sleep. It really was as wonderful as I'd expected and I felt enormous calm. Everyone had said I wouldn't sleep in hospital, but after staring at him for a while I slept really well. I heard other babies crying and thought

perhaps I'd got a really good one because he slept all the way though. I'm really glad I slept that night because for the next four months Joel did not sleep for more than an hour at a time!

To say Joel was a bad sleeper is the biggest underestimation ever. We became obsessed with sleep, I know every new parent says the same, and everyone will warn you about it, but nothing can prepare you for it. Someone once said to me that once you have a child, sleep is never very far from your mind, and this was so true for us. I used to meet up with friends and we would compare how much sleep we had the night before, the standard greeting became, 'How was your night?' At the time I genuinely believed I was the most tired person in the world and if someone told me their baby had slept for more than an hour I would be sick with envy. I breastfed Joel, and from what I know of mothers who haven't, lack of sleep is the biggest downside. I thought there must be something wrong with him as he fed all the time, and for ages. I would sit up at night feeding him looking at articles on the internet about breast feeding and wondering what was normal. I realise now he was fairly normal for a breastfed baby, but I just was not prepared for it.

I think the reality of motherhood is quite different to looking after a newborn baby. Motherhood is terrifying, exciting, difficult, rewarding, exhausting and exhilarating all at the same time. But that first 6 weeks is like a boot camp before you can start getting to the really good bits. In the beginning, just getting out of the house is a small miracle. Our first proper trip out was when Joel was 5 days old, we went for lunch and I sat in a café whilst Steven was at the counter and just cried. It suddenly felt overwhelming to be out of the house with our baby. He looked so tiny and it seemed wrong that he should be anywhere near the real world. I was also equally terrified that he would wake up and I would have to feed him (god forbid anyone might see my nipple!) or he would cry and I wouldn't know what to do and I would be found out as the incompetent mother that I obviously was.

I was struggling to keep it together and a lady came over and asked if I was okay, she assured me, 'It gets better,' and said I was very brave for being out of the house with a 5 day old baby. It's funny because at the time I thought it was weird to say I was brave, but now I see people out with tiny babies and I understand what she meant. At the time I thought I should be out and about, getting back to reality and showing the world what a competent parent I was. If I have another baby I fully intend to stay in my pjs for a month and demand everyone else comes and makes me tea.

During the first couple of months when everything felt like a battle and I doubted myself and my instincts on an hourly basis, my husband and I would ask ourselves each night, 'What went right today?' Some days the best I could come up with was, 'he's still alive'. In hindsight, there's not much that can beat keeping a small child alive.

After that first few weeks of feed, change, sleep, feed, change, sleep, panic, feed, cry, feed etc etc. Something clicked. I'm not saying I was suddenly the wonderful earth mother I fantasised about, but somehow it wasn't all so terrifying. I could get out of the house in under an hour, I was a dab hand at feeding without exposing myself, and I could make, butter and eat a piece of toast one handed. I began to relax and actually enjoy this little bundle that I had been given. There was a momentous evening where we put Joel to sleep upstairs whilst we stayed downstairs and had tea and watched TV. I felt like we had really achieved something! It was a far cry from the early days where I would fall sleep without any dinner.

Taking your child home for the first time: I was so excited to get out of the hospital and take Joel home. After Joel had passed all his tests, I had eaten some fairly grotty fish and chips, had the best shower of my life and had been visited by Graham (the very handsome anaesthetist), we were given the green light. I bundled all my things into a bag, put Joel in his snow suit which drowned him and we got him into his car seat. As we walked him down the stairs and to the car I could not stop grinning. I felt like we were doing something naughty and half expected a mid-wife to come and say, 'Sorry, we made a mistake, of course you can't keep him; he's too perfect'. But we must have slipped through the net because we got him to the car and buckled him in, this was all spoiled by a crazy lady in the carpark who kept asking us for money, but we shook her off and Steven drove us home. I don't remember if we talked, I sat in the back with Joel and we listened to Noel Gallagher's high flying birds. I remember thinking it was a shame that the first bit of the outside world Joel got to see was an industrial estate in Wythenshawe. When we got home we put his car seat down in the middle of the lounge and both just looked at him. He was asleep and neither of us knew what to do.

One thing that really sticks in my mind about the first few weeks was how insignificant everything else seemed. I remember watching TV and getting cross - they were making jokes and it all seemed so frivolous. It's ridiculous but I just thought, 'I've just had a baby, do you not know how significant that is?' and I

couldn't think about anything else or anyone. If a friend talked to me about work, or a problem, I couldn't concentrate and kept thinking, 'this is nothing compared to having a baby, look at that baby! How can you care about anything else'? Of course, thankfully, this wore off and I am now able to hold a relatively normal, non-baby related conversation.

Best advice/worst advice: The day after Joel was born and we were still in hospital I asked the midwife for help breast-feeding, she manhandled him and me to get him latched on, it was unpleasant and I felt like I wasn't part of it whilst she grabbed my breast and shoved it into his mouth. Eventually he was feeding and as I relaxed into it I instinctively stroked his hair. She batted my hand away and told me not to do that as he would 'enjoy it'. I immediately stopped and felt so silly that I had got this basic thing wrong. Looking back I should have slapped her. He is my baby and how dare she criticise me for touching him. Once I was home and got some perspective I could see that she was wrong to have said this and thankfully breast feeding went well for us, I went back to stroking his hair when feeding and still do it when I give him his bottle now. Who knows, maybe it'll ruin him for life but it's nice for the time being!



The best piece of advice was from a friend who already had two children when Joel was born. She told us to do whatever was necessary for us all to get some sleep. This did mean feeding him to sleep when he was tiny, giving him a dummy, letting him sleep in our bed and at about 10 months doing controlled crying. All big no no's according to some people. I don't think it matters, he now sleeps in his own bed every night, doesn't need a feed to fall asleep and I seriously miss the days where I could bring him in bed with us in the morning for half an hour's extra sleep! I'm sure there's a cut off or maybe we've just been lucky (or thanks to controlled crying), but I

think that as with most things, if you listen to your child and follow their cues, they will get in the end.

Hardest parts of being a mother: The worry and anxiety, every minute of every day. I have terrible visions of Joel choking, stopping breathing, getting kidnapped, contracting a horrible disease, getting hit by a car etc etc. I lie in bed at night and will suddenly be overcome with terror that he's stopped breathing and I'll have to go in and check on him. I don't know whether I'm more or less anxious than other parents, but the constant thought that something awful might happen to him is exhausting.

My emotions are now more powerful than ever and I react to things in unpredictable ways. When Joel started crawling I turned up at a friend's house in tears because I felt unprepared. I'd spent that morning trying to get ready with him mobile and I felt I was going to unravel. I suddenly realised I couldn't just leave him because he could move and so the logistics of getting a shower and getting dressed foiled me. I came up with the brilliant plan of shutting the bedroom door with him in the bedroom whilst I ran to the toilet. Inevitably he crawled over to the door and sat behind it so that when I tried to get back in I had to edge the door carefully so as not to knock him over. In hindsight, leaving a baby behind a closed door is stupid for many reasons and I felt like an idiot for not realising that at the time. The reason I was crying when I got to my friend's house was not because I nearly hit my small child with a door, but because I felt guilty for being annoyed that his crawling made my life harder. I felt awful that instead of celebrating this milestone I felt resentful.

Although I have had amazing support from some of my friends and my sister, I often feel like I don't have a role model and that I'm making it up as I go along. I don't have a very good relationship with my mum and although I have some very happy memories of childhood and there were some things she did very well, she's not able to be there for me now and when other mums talk about their mums coming over and ironing/cooking/babysitting/listening/giving advice I feel a bit sad.

Best parts of being a mother: It's lots of fun. Before he arrived, when I thought about being a mum I imagined this tiny person who was completely reliant on me and how that would completely change my life. What I never bargained for was how much I would enjoy hanging out with him. He is brilliant and he's only 14 months old. I love seeing the world through his eyes and realising that there is so much that is exciting and beautiful out there. Experiencing all of

his firsts is a privilege and I'm documenting them like I'm the first person to ever have a child – first foods, first time at the beach, first shoes, first tooth, first car journey, first steps, first easter egg, first day at nursery. It's never-ending and brilliant. I love how he's so enthusiastic about things, tonight he laughed with excitement and flapped his arms up and down because I presented him with a satsuma. It's infectious and we both sat there giggling whilst we shared a satsuma.

I loved being on maternity leave, that's not to say that looking after Joel full time was easy because at times I was a wreck with how hard it was. But I pledged to make the most of my year off and do as much stuff as I could with Joel and I feel I did that. We were out and about every day, I took him to lots of groups, and we always had plans. If we're at a loose end we'll go to a café and share a tea cake and I'll read him a book. I never realised that having a baby meant I would have constant company and would never be bored, I am so in love with my little family. Sometimes Joel will do something funny or new and Steven and I will just look at each other and smile, I'll say 'he's ace isn't he?' and we'll both feel very smug that somehow the pair of us managed to create this perfect little person.

Hopes for your family: I hope that Joel will always know he is wanted and loved. I hope that he continues to be the happy and funny, sociable child that he is, and that we continue to cram as much fun stuff into our free time as we can. I hope we're able to move in the next year or so to a bigger house where he can run around in the garden and have a play room, and that we will fill the spare room with another baby who will be excellent company for Joel (I secretly fantasise about what good friends they will be and that they and their partners, and then children will always want to come to our house for Christmas).

In the longer term, I hope that we will be able to teach Joel enough about the world that he will go out on his own and have some amazing adventures. I hope that he grows into the kind of young man who gives up his seat on the bus, instead of the kind who smashes up bus stops. I hope that he finds someone wonderful to love who loves him back, and that he finds something to do for work that he is good at and enjoys. I hope he is the kind of man who calls his mum once in a while.

Advice for new and expectant parents: This is not so much advice, but an observation/warning. Becoming a parent changed my relationships... all of them! Some for the better, and some not so much. I have been amazed at the support of some friends. Of course the very fact

that I was off work with a baby meant I spent time with people who were also off with their babies and in doing so I have made some amazing friends that I don't think I would have got through this year without. But parallel to this, some friends have not been as supportive or enthusiastic as I needed, and that has been hard to accept. Probably most profoundly, it has changed my relationship with my husband. I didn't think I could love Steven much more, but when I hear him laughing with Joel, or reading him his bed time story, it's super cheesy but my heart just swells fit to burst and I cannot help but smile.



Advice - If someone offers you help, take it, get your visitors to make the tea and don't let anyone in who doesn't come bearing cake. Going back to work after maternity leave won't break your heart (even if it might feel like it at the time), don't leave a small child unattended with a toilet roll and boxes/wooden spoons/anything dangerous are much more exciting than the most expensive, top of the range educational toy.

Relax! I think I was too hard on myself with a lot of things, I cried over giving Joel a dummy because I thought it made me a failure. In reality it stopped him crying which gave us all a bit of peace and quiet, how can that be a bad thing? As long as he doesn't have it when he's off to university I think he'll be okay. I wish I had really believed the advice that you can't spoil a baby. I remember worrying in the first few days whether it was okay to hold him all the time, if I could go back I probably would have never put him down.

Everyone will have their advice (she says typing advice) some of it will work for you, some of it won't. That doesn't make you or them a better parent. We're all doing the best we know how to do, and no one can be perfect all of the time. Mums can judge one another, I think we're all guilty of it and some opinions are more acceptable to have than others and some mums have louder voices than others. If you surround yourself with people who support you, encourage you and who you can be honest with, you won't go far wrong. Oh, and buy a hand held Hoover. \\



Name: Emily

Child: Leo, 6

Expectations of motherhood: Low. I was a student and single and skint and it was a complete shock. I wasn't keen on babies and didn't know much about them, apart from the usual screaming, smelly stereotypes. I'd known the father for a while, but we weren't together and he wanted nothing to do with it. I was absolutely mortified.

I was and still am pro-choice, but when I was faced with that decision myself, I found I couldn't have an abortion. I spent eight months feeling very scared and angry. Had I known how things were going to turn out, I would have been quite excited, but at the time it all seemed pretty bleak. People kept telling me the baby would be the best thing that ever happened to me, but I thought they were just being kind. I went through a lot during my pregnancy; working long hours, having to fight to save my job, saying goodbye to the people and lifestyle I loved. Despite the weirdness of the situation, through all that, I did begin to feel like my baby and I were a team. I spoke to him when he moved and he became more real to me when I

found out he was a boy at 20 weeks. But I couldn't really see very far past the horror of giving birth, which terrified me. Beyond that, I knew I was signing up to a life very different to anything I'd ever imagined and just hoped it would all work out.

Reality of Motherhood: Overall, a pleasant surprise...

The birth was atrocious, but that's what I expected. There was no earth mother idyll for me; I knew it was going to hurt and I knew I wanted every drug I could get. My predictions came true: thirty-odd hours of back-to-back labour, loads of gas and air, two shots of pethidine, an epidural that I had to beg (scream) for, followed by an emergency Caesarean (it turned out after all that, he wasn't even engaged and never would have come out the conventional way.)

I didn't get the bolt of love people go on about but I did think my baby looked beautiful – and weirdly familiar. They put him in the crook of my arm in the recovery room and I knew I wanted to protect him no matter what. Happily, one sunny afternoon when things had calmed down a bit, I got the famous rush and it was as good as everyone says. The

late nights and bodily fluids take over for a while and you get on with it because you have to.

People say nature makes you forget the pain of labour and I reckon it makes you forget the general chaos of having a small baby too. I sometimes think, 'it wasn't that bad.' I was very lucky because Leo slept and smiled a lot, but it was hardly a relaxing time. Now, I'll see a bottle of Infacol or get a whiff of a newborn nappy and think 'Oh God, remember all that...'

I love Leo immensely. I am so pleased that I was miles off the mark when I thought parenthood would be crap. We have great adventures together, he's endlessly entertaining and loving, friends love spending time with him and that makes me proud. Leo can remedy the worst days with a drawing or a cuddle or a pun. He comes out with wise stuff way beyond his years, but then he'll still ask me to do a puppet show with his teddies at bedtime. Leo gave me the determination to get stuff done, too: I went back to university and finished my degree, then forged a career. So it is a cliché, but all those people who said he'd be the best thing that ever happened to me weren't wrong.

I'm not going to say being a single parent is perfect or ideal: it is hard on your own, but because it's just been us two from day one, it's all both of us have ever known. I am also incredibly lucky to have a lot of practical and emotional support from friends and family and I am extremely grateful for that. I love being Leo's mum and I am so happy he came along when he did.

Taking your child home for the first time: I stayed in hospital for a week, overhearing the other women on the ward begging to go home and thinking they were mad. OK, the food was abysmal, but who wouldn't want to be able to buzz the nurses for more morphine or help changing nappies? Then I realised it was because they had partners waiting for them and were actually excited about what lay ahead.

I'd moved in with Mum in the late stages of my pregnancy. After she'd driven us home (really slowly), I put Leo down in the car seat in the middle of the living room floor. He looked out of place. I stared at him, wondering what the hell I would do with him when he woke. Not long after that, he did and I didn't get a second to worry about how I'd cope

again.

The best/worst Advice: On one of those early, blurry days, the crying was relentless. I kept forgetting to eat, my Caesarean wound was hurting, I had greasy hair and I really needed a shower. I remember sitting on the loo sobbing with Leo strapped to me in a sling because I didn't think I could put him down while he was crying. It was exactly how I'd imagined motherhood was going to be and I didn't like it one bit.

I rang Mum on her lunch break and wept. She said, "If he has a clean nappy and you know he's not hungry, just try putting him down and seeing if he'll go to sleep." I took her advice and a few minutes later, he did. Obviously, if he cried for longer than ten minutes (which he did during the colic stage), I picked him up and comforted him, but nine times out of ten, he was crying because he was overtired and just fell asleep. I do realise this isn't the case with all babies and apparently it's quite controversial, but it worked for us.

Mum and the health visitor meant well when they told me to go to mother and baby groups, but as a young, single parent, they didn't turn out to be the best environment for me. There's definitely a silent air of competitiveness in that scene. Who's the earthiest? Whose baby will get a tooth first? Who will get back into her old jeans first? Who has the fanciest pram? Also, having just had a baby, the last things I wanted to talk about were baby poo, baby clothes, baby wee, baby sleep patterns, baby accessories, babies, babies, babies, hubbies and babies. I found the whole thing more intimidating than supportive, but I realise that was probably because of my circumstances.

Since babyhood, the best advice I've received is just to give your child a lot of love, be as open and honest with them as is age appropriate and praise them loads when they're good.

I didn't read any manuals. Even if you haven't got a clue, instinct kicks in. They're humans, so they're all different. You'll figure out what works for yours.

The hardest parts of being a mother: For me, breastfeeding. There was this natural thing that was going to give my baby the best start in life and I couldn't bloody do it. What a start. I didn't get the skin-to-skin contact I'd requested after the Caesarean and when I put him on my breast in the recovery room, he just ignored it. A few hours later, the ward staff told me he was hungry, he'd have to eat and I should try him with a bottle. I asked them if it would jeopardise my plans to breastfeed and they said it wouldn't. I was shattered and worried so I agreed and that was a big mistake. Bot-

ties give babies milk instantly, but they have to work for a bit to get it from the breast. After that first bottle, he would pull away from the breast screaming because no milk came out straight away. He just wouldn't do it. Breasts only produce milk when they're stimulated, so I was running low on supplies and in a bit of a Catch 22. Instead of resting when Leo slept, I tortured myself with the breast pump. They're vicious machines; growling and dragging your nipple unfeasibly far down a clear plastic tube. I'd be plugged into the mains for an hour, exhausted, all for a pathetic trickle. I never quite mastered it and ended up doing half-and-half. I got daggers at the mother and baby groups when I took out a bottle and felt guilty, but I'd been through a heck of a lot and I know I did my best, so I wish I'd have gone easier on myself.

God, the loneliness gets you in the



evenings when you're on your own. You want someone to summarise the day with, talk about your child's achievements, put the bins out, muck in with the washing up, maybe pour you a glass of wine and give you a massage (or whatever it is partners do.) I've learnt that the best thing to do is to go to bed and wake up in the morning to the best company, even if he does think my bed is a bouncy castle.

Nits are a horrible business. Big decisions are tricky, as is the anxiety.

Being the sole wage earner is a lot of pressure. Nursery lulls you into a false sense of security with its long opening hours. When they start school, you've got 13 weeks a year of holidays, 3pm finishes, assemblies, plays, inset days, sports days and massive guilt to contend with. But you know, it might be trite but all of it is worth it.

The best parts of being a mother: There's a lot of ephemeral pain, theories, processes and paraphernalia involved in

having a baby. It can be chaotic and slightly traumatic, even if it all goes well. When all that's over and you've chucked out the last nappy sack and the safety gates and the buggy, it's just you, a really interesting person and their toys. That's when things start to get exciting. I didn't dislike having a baby, but I loved the magic of Leo learning to talk, draw and trying to understand the world. Other notable good parts include: smiles (especially the first one when all you've been getting before that are dirty looks), contagious chuckles, massive fat thighs (theirs not yours), general pride, getting back into stuff you'd forgotten like metamorphosis, swings, space, dinosaurs, trick-or-treating, wobbly teeth and Father Christmas. Also bedtime stories, colouring in, nonsensical chats and crap jokes, copious hugs, bonkers drawings, endearingly misspelt cards and cute mispronunciations. ("Please may I have something from the offending

the worst thing that's ever happened to you, you might be in for a pleasant surprise.

Don't bother with a birth plan – you're only setting yourself up for disappointment. It is going to hurt and if it's your first one, it's probably going to take ages. Gas and air is good stuff.

If you really want to breastfeed, insist on skin-to-skin contact as soon as possible after the birth. Don't be tempted to give your baby a bottle in the first few days, even if you're off your face on morphine and you're told it's hungry. Your real milk doesn't even turn up until day four or five and until then, nature makes sure colostrum does the job. If you are knackered and in pain and you've reached the end of your tether and you do end up giving them a bottle, don't beat yourself up about it.

Talk to your baby from an early age – they take in more than you realise and will shock you with what they pick up.

Don't buy CDs of kids singing nursery rhymes (unless you want to send yourself under.) Listen to whatever music you've always listened to and they'll grow up loving it (or at least having an opinion on it.)

A Nitty Gritty nit comb, tea tree oil, gallons of conditioner and lashings of patience will serve you well when the head lice move in.

Make videos: that funny squeaky noise they make when they come out, the dance they do when they're eighteen months old – they're all just phases.

Read to your child every evening, unless you've had a long day out and it's a late night, or you're in a tent with a wind-up torch.

If you're on your own, Gingerbread (<http://www.gingerbread.org.uk>) offer brilliant advice and support. Also, I'd have been lost without my Homestart volunteer (<http://www.homestart.org.uk>) and the wonderful SureStart Centre and services (which have very sadly been drastically cut by the Government, but do still exist in some areas)

(<https://www.gov.uk/find-sure-start-childrens-centre>.) Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Babyhood is surreal and chaotic, but it passes and calms. Your child keeps you focussed, amused and strong. Always.

Don't forget your non-parent friends. Don't forget yourself.

And tell your child just how much you love them, every single day. \\\

machine?") Finally, feeling a part of a bold team and having loads of regular laughs. A rubbish day is quickly picked up when I go to collect Leo from after school club. I can be walking along a grotty street getting battered by the wind and rain, but if I'm holding his hand and listening to him telling me about his day, it's a joyous stroll.

Hopes for your family: Everyone says it but all you want is for them to be happy. I hope Leo will always be as confident as he is right now and that the teenage years will pass without too much drama. Before he grows up and buggers off, I hope I can afford to buy us a house. If it had a garden, a trampoline and maybe even a treehouse, that would be perfect. I'd also like to go on a magnificent adventure with Leo somewhere far, far away but I think that might be pushing it a bit.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Pessimism pays! If your pregnancy is unplanned and you think that having a baby is going to be

Name: Vickie

Child: Lily-Mae, 3

Location: Levenshulme, Manchester

Expectations of Motherhood: I used to be a real party animal; there was a party at ours every Friday and Saturday. If I had money in my pocket I was going to spend it, because even though I really wanted a baby, I'd resigned myself to the fact I wasn't going to have one. We had tried for 3 and half years and in that time I'd had two miscarriages.

Fertility testing was the next step, and during one of our first appointments at the hospital they said I had to take a pregnancy test before the procedure. I was late, but that was nothing unusual. I did a test and amazingly it said that I was pregnant. Immediately I was sent for an early scan, which then confirmed that I was 2 to 3 weeks gone. I knew not to get my hopes up, but 2 weeks later we went for another scan, where 6 weeks and 5 days was confirmed.

I imagined family life as this little perfect bubble - with a baby we would be all luvvy duvy, with cuddles on the sofa, a house full of harmony, and no stress. I didn't realise that motherhood was going to be hard work. I only imagined the obvious things like changing nappies, playing, cuddles - those pictures you see in magazines don't portray a realistic picture.

Reality of motherhood: When I went for the early scan they had thought I had an enlarged bladder so they kept me there for hours, constantly sending me back to the toilet to empty it. The Consultant was called and he discovered that I had a very large ovarian cyst. It was decided that they'd just leave it. It was large, but it was OK to leave.

Then when I was 6 months pregnant, I was rushed to hospital with chest pains. The cyst had grown and was taking up the precious space that baby needed. It was bigger than a brick. At that point I had to make a choice of either removing the cyst and then creating complications for the baby, or leaving it and jeopardising my own health, plus the baby wasn't growing. The choice I made was to drain it. I was in hospital for 3 days, just in case I went into early labour and during that time a drain was put in my side. They removed two and a half litres of fluid (more than a coke bottle), but after that everything was fine.

Pregnancy had been hard work with really bad morning sickness - every second was horrific. I was massive; gigantic! I couldn't move. I had swollen ankles and problems with my back, because after the cyst had been drained the baby went



through a massive growth spurt. I was told that the baby would about 9lbs (despite the fact I'm quite small). At the end of the pregnancy, after being in labour for 4 days - having constant debates with the staff about whether my waters had gone - Lily-Mae was delivered by emergency c-section on the Sunday after her heart beat had dropped. She was 10b 5.

We were in hospital for 10 days over Christmas including Christmas day too. From the day she was born, and for the duration of the first 6 months, motherhood was nothing like I'd expected. One of the main things I remember is really wanting skin to skin, but I didn't get to hold her for 2 hrs. I found that really difficult. It was nothing like that beautiful mother-daughter first meeting that you imagine.

We'd wanted this baby for so long, but I was so scared - even the simple things like changing her seemed so daunting. My husband was great though and he took over the care. I was quite poorly and both of us needed antibiotics intravenously, then I got another infection in my womb - a haematoma. In hospital Lily-Mae was amazing though. I thought I had a bit of an easy life because she never cried, she was so quiet in hospital and she slept lots.

In the hospital I felt quite pressured to breast feed, but it just wasn't working. They tried to get me to express, but I wasn't having any luck with that either and we weren't prepared for bottle-feeding because I'd assumed breastfeeding would be second nature. You don't get warned that there could be initial problems with breastfeeding and the added pressure from midwives doesn't help when you don't succeed. You feel upset that you can't do best for the baby, because 'the perfect mother breastfeeds', but what can you do if you can't breast-feed? It really got to me, and coping with the infections at the same time was really tough.

Taking your child home for the first time: We had my husband's step son at home with us for the first week because it was New Year. I couldn't wait to get home and enjoy the time as just me, Sam and Lily-Mae.

I found that first week very very hard - Luke doesn't usually live with us, so finding our routine with another guest was difficult. I tried to establish a routine for the 3 of us, but Sam was having to look after his 8 year old son. I felt that I needed my husband's full attention. It probably is through selfishness, but I wanted him all to myself.

When we got home Lily-Mae started to wake through the night. I didn't have the help of the midwives and I was very scared - you get used to being told what

to do and how you should do things. Those first 6 months were extremely difficult and I'm really sad to look back because I don't remember an awful lot of it.

Best advice: Sleep when baby sleeps. My husband and I tried alternate nights so that we each got a full night sleep every other night - we were really lucky that his shifts allowed us to do this. Get some fresh air everyday. Mother And baby groups are great. I've made some amazing friends through having Lily-Mae. My friends don't really have kids, so meeting other mums who could give me advice and I could chat with was great. We were all on maternity leave at the same time.

Worst advice: Feeding on demand. I found that when bottle feeding this technique ends in screaming fits. Lily-Mae was waking up starving and it was stressing us all out. We ended up feeding every 2/3 hrs and if she didn't finish it she didn't finish it. Regarding breastfeeding - it isn't best for everyone, so if it doesn't work for you it doesn't make you a bad



mother.

Hardest part of being a mother: When Lily-Mae was 6 months old I was rushed back into hospital with stomach pains. Doctors discovered that had an ovarian tumour which had grown in the pocket of the cyst. There were massive complications in surgery and the tumour ruptured, leading to me being in surgery for 7 hours. I'd had no idea I was ill, putting any pains down to the c-section and having a big baby.

I left hospital after the operation, seemingly well, only to be told by doctors that the biopsy they'd taken on the operating table had confirmed that the tumour had spread. I had to have my whole ovary removed in the end. In this 2nd operation they carried out open surgery rather than keyhole and they found another tumour. After that I was given the all clear (although I am still under Oncology because I do have fibromas on my other ovary).

After all that has happened I think I'm very lucky to be here. I am thankful for being healthy and well. Now I'm over the surgery I'm OK, but I struggle with the fact that I've forgotten that first year (though I don't want to feel sorry for myself). I didn't want Lily-Mae to know I was poorly and had to keep upbeat all the time, so that's probably why I found it such a chore.

Another difficult thing to deal with as a mother is when they're ill. It's impossible to be rational - you don't get told how scary it will be. You constantly checking they're OK, listening out for their breathing in the night, but in reality they're a lot tougher than they look. Weaning was hard work for me and potty training too, but it could have been made harder by the timing and the illness.

Best parts of being a mother: Everything.

she's so happy and healthy.

One of the best moments of my life was being told I'd had a little girl - I thought I was having a boy because a consultant had told me he thought it was a boy.

Has being a mother changed you?: It's made me organised. When you're looking out for someone else you forget about yourself. The things that were important before are no longer important. It's all about Lily-Mae now and how she'll fit in to everything.

Hopes for your family: I want her to stay happy. That she'll be who she wants to be, I hope that she'll never be afraid to talk to me and she'll tell me whatever is on her mind. I might not like what she has to say, but I'll always be here.

Advice to new and expecting mums: Let your child guide what you do in the day, so if they don't want to stay in go to where they want to. We get out everyday - even if it's just to walk down the road. It gives you a break from the same four walls.

Take help if you need it (and take as much help as you can get). It doesn't make you any less of a mother to accept help. I wanted Lily-Mae to know who her mum was, I wanted to do everything perfectly - being super-mum - but it didn't work. You need to realise what's important and that is spending time with your child. There's so much that I can't remember from the first 6 months and it upsets me. I feel like I spent too much time trying to be perfect. Having a messy house doesn't matter, having an occasional takeaway, having a day in your PJ's and leaving the pots in the sink - none of it matters.

On coming homing it became more apparent that there was a real push from 'society' to do things the perfect way. Everyone seems to strive to be the 'perfect' mum. Over time though, I discovered that a happy mum makes a happy child. I wanted to be a perfect housewife with the perfect house - a wife and mother who looks amazing and cooks brilliant food - but it just isn't possible. I don't think you should listen to anyone else who tells you what to do, you know best even if you doubt yourself on occasions.

For everything I've been through, Lily-Mae is so worth it - I see her as my angel. I believe things happen for a reason. If it wasn't for the scans the doctors would never have seen the tumour and then who knows where I'd have been. She's saved me in a sense and so I idolise her. I'm so grateful for what she's done for me. I wouldn't change a thing about motherhood - my little lady is my world!

\\

Unconditional love - she thinks her mummy can do no wrong. I've never felt that love before in my life, where you love that person no matter what they do. I love the way you know what they're thinking and you learn to read their moods. You find out what they need just from looking at them. You become their translator and understand everything that they're trying to say.

I love having the responsibility and feeling like an adult. She's made me grow up and act like an adult. I enjoy cooking for her and we have lots of fun together. You never know what the next day will bring. We do lots of colouring together, painting, reading, playing with playdoh, watching movies and having cuddles - just having lots of fun! I love that she's suddenly become really girly and her own character with her own favourite interests that we can share, like doing hair and nails. We're best friends. She's so happy and I feel responsible for that. I must be doing something right because



Name: Clare

Children: Oscar (10), Archie (8), Iris (6)

Expectations of Motherhood: As I was the first of my group of friends to have a baby, I was pretty naïve about what I was letting myself in for. I was never particularly career focused and always knew I wanted to be a stay at home mum if possible.

I imagined the sleepless nights and all the hard work would all be made worthwhile by this little bundle of joy that I would love with all my heart. I imagined that through hard work and lots of love I would produce a beautiful family that I would be proud of every step of the way.

Reality of Motherhood: It has turned out completely different to how I imagined. My eldest son, Oscar has been diagnosed with high functioning autism (Aspergers) along with ADHD and was (and continues to be) so much harder than I ever thought a child could be. As a baby, he was irascible, grumpy, angry, unsettled and generally unbearable unless he was being carried. He would not sleep and would not lie on his own for more than one minute without screaming the house down. I knew babies could be difficult but he was just different to other babies. It was obvious from the start that my idea of the perfect family was not going to come to fruition.

Although I had two more children soon after who are calm, quiet and seemed in comparison very easy, Oscar's behaviour continues to dominate our lives. We are restricted to where we can go as he gets angry and stressed very easily. He can also be incredibly unkind to his siblings and is unable to see that his cruel behavior impacts on all around him. I am very fortunate to have a soul mate in my partner as I couldn't have dealt with life without him.

As many parents of autistic parents know, it can put a huge amount of strain

on your relationship dealing with this behavior day in, day out.

As a mother, I knew I would be a cook, cleaner, nurse, playmate, confidante, friend and teacher, but I suppose I didn't think that I would have a child with disabilities. It's hard to understand someone's behavior when it's so different to your own and your other children's. It's hard to love someone who doesn't look like they want to be loved and mostly acts like they don't love you, and who flinches when you hug them. It's hard to love someone who hurts your children, who belittles them and who constantly berates them, but in the end you have to, because they are your child, your blood - they are part of you. I never thought motherhood would be this hard.

The reality of my perfect family has been shattered as living with a child with a disability completely takes over you and your family's world. In reality, I feel like I 'parallel' parent my children. There are rules that Oscar follows and if he does, we are eternally grateful. The other children are expected to follow these basic rules and perform above and beyond because this is what typically developing children should do. Although it's hard to explain to a 6 year old why she has to do something and her 10 year old brother does not. It has made our younger children patient, kind and thoughtful around children with difficulties and I hope this difficult start, dealing with a brother with disabilities will make them special people. This is what I want out of motherhood - to bring up kind, considerate and likeable people.

Taking your children home for the first time: It was daunting bringing Oscar home for the first time. Suddenly this wasn't me playing a game of happy families, it was real life and I now had this tiny thing waiting for me, who relied on me and needed me. Scary!

When the Archie and Iris came home, they just slotted in to every day life as if

they were always there. I often thought, 'why did I find it so hard first time round?'

The best/worst advice: I have a child who has always been very difficult, appears badly behaved and is almost impermeable to discipline. People would judge me without knowing what I was dealing with, they would offer advice on how to deal with Oscar without understanding the difficulties he faced, and proceeded to advise me on how they would deal with him. Most advice I received that related to Oscar wasn't useful as people couldn't put themselves in his shoes (or mine).

The best advice I was given as a mother was by my own Mum (as is often the case). She told me that I was a warrior and that I was given Oscar because I was strong enough to deal with him and with all the other people who would judge me because of his behavior. Her advice was, and is, to be strong and to believe in myself because I am going to help Oscar to become a kind, functioning and competent man. I just hope she is right.

The hardest parts of being a mother: Its relentlessness!! The fact that you never really feel that you live your life for yourself anymore. It's a total act of selflessness which can sometimes be overwhelming.

Sometimes I feel like I want to give up and let Oscar continue on down his path of destruction and selfishness, but I know that I can't. I have to keep plugging away at him, trying to set him on the right path and showing him that I love him no matter how he acts. But it's so very hard.

The irony of having a child like Oscar is that he finds it hard to put himself in other people's shoes, but it's also very hard to put yourself in *his* shoes and understand *his* world - it must be really hard being him and my heart melts when I think how hard his life must be. I wish I could make it easier for him, but I can't and I find that hard too.

The best parts of being a mother: Having had a child who doesn't like affection or being hugged, I love the affection that I get from my other children. I love the fact that they need me and want me. I am so proud of them all in their own ways, with their individual characters and infuriating ways and I look at them and think 'wow, I made these amazing people'. No feeling in the world comes close to being a Mum.

Although I have focused on negatives of having a child with disabilities, there are plenty of amazing things about Oscar that I wouldn't change for the world. He is a funny, quirky and very intelligent

person who makes me laugh and cry in equal quantities (almost!) and I honestly wouldn't change him for the world.

The things that others take for granted with their typically developing children are often the best things for me as a mum. When I told him that we were going to watch a United game, he gave me a hug unprompted with proper feeling. That was one of the best days for me.

Has becoming a mother changed you? I don't think so. I have always been capable, competitive, organized and loving and these are the tools that I use every day being a Mum. I am probably a little less self obsessed and a lot more tolerant than I used to be. But I am still me just with less time on my hands.

Hopes for your family: For Oscar, I hope he is able to be independent, to have friends, to be liked and to be happy. I wish the same things for Archie and Iris, but I know these things are much more achievable for them.

I hope that they love each other and look after each other and that they are kind and compassionate. I want people to love them as I do. I hope that their childhood, living and dealing with a disability, will shape them and help them to become good people. Then I will feel like I have done my job as a mum.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums? Although it seems that everyone else is having an easy ride, finding motherhood easy and that their child is perfect (ie. that their child sleeps through at 6 weeks, never cries, eats everything they put in front of it, entertains itself for hours in the morning when it wakes), just remember that most people are lying and everyone is finding it as hard as you, its just that you're being honest! \\\



Name: Carla

Children: Bill aged 2.5 and Iona 11.5 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I thought being a mum would be simpler than it is. My mum had me and my elder brother with a similar age gap to my children and I never remember seeing her struggle or look stressed and she rarely, if ever, lost her temper. She was always lots of fun and seemed to know what to do for best. I wanted to be like that I suppose; carefree and fun but practical too.

Reality of Motherhood: As soon as we decided to have a baby, I was pregnant with Bill straight away. I suppose I was quite shocked by that and there were a catalogue of weird events that happened around the same time, like being burgled, some incredibly snowy weather, our neighbour dying and a new family moving into to what had been a peaceful avenue. For the first time in my life I felt out of control.

I had had a DVT in my leg in 2007, so this meant I was classed as higher risk and placed on daily injections and ended up having many more appointments than average. I am not really a good patient and I don't ever take anything stronger than paracetamol, so the whole thing seemed a bit alien and over the top. My first pregnancy went smoothly and I continued to work my long days and worked hard up until 2 weeks before Bill was due. Circumstances meant that I returned to work part-time when Bill was 6 months old and my husband and our parents took over care on my working days.

I was pregnant again by the time Bill was one. It had always been our intention to have a small age gap, but once again I was surprised by the speed of it all. At first I was less nervous than I had been in the early months with Bill, but the stress of my job began to take its toll and by the time I was 5 months pregnant I was suffering. I became very ill with a chest infection and then at about 7 months pregnant with Iona, she turned and cracked my rib. I was already tired being pregnant and looking after a toddler and knew the next few months would be very hard. The worst thing about being poorly was not being able to look after Bill in the same way. One of the reasons for having two so quickly was so I would be home with my babies, so that I could enjoy the early years. I wasn't used to being out of action and I just wanted to cry as I felt guilty and terrible for my kids.

The reality is, that you do lose your temper sometimes, you never feel like you have enough hands or enough time and you will need just to abandon all hope of



being clean or tidy for a good few years.

Taking your children home for the first time: Bill was born on his due date in a very busy St Mary's Hospital. The birth was fairly straight forward, but the aftercare was shockingly poor and I discharged myself and came home. We were in the lift downstairs and Andy (my husband) said, "when are we coming back again?" (in other words, for number two). All I could think was that my stitches were killing me and I wanted a decent brew.

When we got home, it suddenly felt very real. Even at 8lb 15 Bill looked tiny in the car seat and was all thin and wrinkled. We showed Bill around the house as I had read about doing that in a book and it seemed a welcoming thing to do. I was glad to be home. Then I think he mainly cried, and we barely slept all night. The next morning at 9am the midwife appeared and told me off for still being in my pjs!

Luckily, Iona was also born on her due date and she was quick and efficient about it, despite also being just short of 9lb. This time hospital wasn't as crowded or as awful, but I came home the day after as I wanted us to be together as a family. Bill seemed to take it quite well and after feeling really poorly I immediately started to feel a lot better and could finally sleep again (when Iona allowed of course). It was a wonderful feeling to have all four of us sat on the bed together. I felt very lucky.

The best/worst advice: Worst: When

Iona was losing weight and was looking pretty skinny, I was told by the health visitor not to worry about it as "I wouldn't want her to be big in later life"....she was 5 months old at the time and had gone from the 91st to the 25th centile! I was furious. I was also told that I had done the wrong thing taking my little boy out to socialise all the time and I should have sat him in front of a film and then I wouldn't have to try and take both babies as much. This seemed particularly bonkers as after I had Bill, all the advice was about getting out of the house with the baby so you don't lose your marbles. I have had a lot of poor and conflicting advice from health visitors over the years. I think you are very vulnerable when you are a new mum and a lot of people give you useless advice whilst you are striving to do your best. It can make you start to get very confused.

Best: My GP told me to ignore the health visitors! That was very good advice. But generally I think you have to trust your instincts and do what you think and don't doubt yourself even if you are tired and worn out.

The hardest parts of being a mother: I am not sure what's worst - the worry about not doing the right thing at the right time and the consequences of your actions, or the tiredness which some days can be overwhelming, and not being able to down tools and have a day off.....especially if you have a baby like Iona who flatly refuses to take a bottle.

The best parts of being a mother: Cuddling is a definite highlight, there is no

end to small people wanting cuddles in this house. You get a lot back for what you put in. Seeing your babies develop and change is also really exciting and fun, plus seeing Bill and Iona having fun together is brilliant.

Has becoming a mother changed you?

A few years ago, the highlight of my year was going off to the USA for a week to present at international conferences. I loved my job and I always wanted to give it 100%. Now, I just don't feel like that at all. Even when I return to work in a few weeks time, I will be strictly part-time and while I hope to do a good job, I will be glad to be at home where my heart is.

Hopes for your family: We had always wanted three children, but after having Bill I seriously reconsidered and having Iona that definitely finalised my decision. I don't feel like one of those people who is a natural mother and I want to do my best for Bill and Iona. I only have two knees to sit on and they are taken now.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: If you can, get to NCT classes and find yourself some good friends, even before you have your baby. I would not have managed without my friends and I have met other good comrades along the way. Friends with children of a very similar age, who live nearby, cannot be underestimated. You can share the highlights, low lights, proper advice and later down the line, a few beers as well! They really will get you through the dark days and your babies will have friends for life, which is really lovely. \\\



Name: Elizabeth

Children: Eloise, 2 1/2 and Imogen, 7 months

Expectations of Motherhood: It's difficult now, after the chaos and drama of the past few years, to remember what my expectations were. I remember that I was 33, had met the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and wanted a child so much before it was potentially too late. We were both surprised and ecstatic when I fell pregnant very quickly. However, I was so sick during pregnancy (both times) that I didn't have time to think much about what motherhood might actually be like. I was just focused on getting through it and having a healthy baby. I suppose there was some vague idea in my mind that everything would be ok and we would just 'deal with it'.

Reality of Motherhood: The reality was a complete shocker and those first days with Eloise were a mixture of joy and terror in equal measures! The lack of sleep was just mind-numbing, especially to someone who used to lie in bed until 11am, then maybe wander down to a local cafe for some brunch. I remember crying on the phone to both the health visitor, and breastfeeding counsellor, sniffing, "I just want someone to help me!" Breastfeeding went terribly for me, and I just couldn't understand why it wasn't working.

With hindsight, I can see that both my babies suffered from that unknown entity, 'colic', in the early weeks. The incessant crying! My poor partner spent

many of the early hours swaddling Eloise on the settee in the lounge just so I could get some sleep. But, at the time, we just didn't have a clue what was wrong. There were many fantastic moments, too, of course. I feel like I have an imprint in my mind, a photographic memory of the exact expression on both girls' faces when they were born. Eloise looked sleepily happy, and I would swear she was smiling, whereas Imogen looked positively dumbfounded! (Well she was born in 17 minutes). The reality is that there's a new reality. Life changes and you get used to that new way of life. I'd say my life is a lot more rewarding - each day is so structured and military and hectic, but when I'm finally relaxed on the settee in the evening, I feel so much better for it.

Taking your children home for the first time: We were typical first time parents. My partner had to ask a random person for help with the car seat. We drove home at about 3 miles per hour. I then collapsed into a chair and kind of thought "what now?". But we got on with it and found our feet very quickly. We kept calm and, with hindsight, this helped us a lot. Taking Imogen home for the first time was a little different. We had a two-year old by then and had to stop at a supermarket on the way home to buy her a present from her new little sister!

The best/worst advice: Best advice: To join an NCT ante-natal class. I'm still in touch with most of the mothers from the class even now, and a few of us have become very close. The best thing about this was meeting new people in exactly the same situation. We had a wicked

Facebook thread going for months where we messaged each other at all hours comparing breastfeeding/pumping/sleeping notes. It definitely made me feel so much better to share concerns and ideas with the other mums.

Worst advice: Probably from a health visitor, who said "whatever you do, don't give her any formula", when I was struggling with breastfeeding Eloise. She really made me feel that I would be doing the most awful thing to my child if I switched to the bottle. I then struggled for longer than I should have, and unnecessarily. With my second, I was determined not to feel that way, but I still felt the pressure a little. In the end, I breastfed both for 5 weeks, and I'm proud of that achievement. I have to also make mention of "sleep when your baby sleeps" - advice that seems to be trotted out to all new parents. I mean, really - does anyone do this? Surely these are the times to get the washing on and have a quick brew?!

The hardest parts of being a mother: For me, the hardest part is the constancy of it all. It really is unrelenting day in, day out, especially with two. It's difficult to make a phone call, to read a text message, to even hear yourself think. It's a huge treat to get out for a coffee with a friend, child-free. I was even treated to a spa day, recently, and my friend and I fell asleep for approximately 2 1/2 hours of it! The tiredness is also challenging, but I've surprised myself at how well I've coped with that. I think my brain has adjusted and I now power-sleep when I can.

The best parts of being a mother: Seeing your child become her own person, with her own little character, facial expressions and views of the world. Also, seeing the potential in them, and being so privileged to be one of the few people who will encourage them to achieve it. My daughters are already very different. Eloise is so chatty, loud, adventurous, and self-assured. Imogen will quietly take everything in and consider it, then suddenly burst into song and smiles.

Has becoming a mother changed you? Without a doubt. Everything I did used to be about me. I used to be a worrier, but what did I worry about? Me?! I'm perversely less of a worrier now. Maybe there's so much to worry about with being a mother that my brain simply can't cope with it all so has decided not to bother. I'm more practical and am constantly thinking ahead to the next 'task' to get ahead of myself, just to cope with the day.

Obviously I think about myself much less and about the needs of my family most of the time. Gone are the days of buying a new top every time I went out at night (Thursday, Friday and Saturday usually, during my early twenties!). Now I get excited at the children's clothing section in supermarkets!

Another interesting change is a compulsion to write. I just seem to be experiencing so much as a mother that I want to not only write it down, but share it. For this reason, I started my own blog, and asked to participate in The Mothers project. I'm hoping that my daughters will enjoy reading about their mother's experience of their early years when they're older.

Hopes for your family: I hope that my daughters feel secure in their upbringing, and secure and confident in themselves. I'm worried (despite being less of a worrier!) about the power of bullying, and I hope they can be resilient enough to rise above this inevitable possibility. I want them to believe they can achieve whatever they want, and that they can always turn to us as parents for help. My biggest hope, however, is that they support each other throughout life. They're so lucky to have each other, and have such a small gap in age, and I really hope they capitalise on this and lean on each other during life's ups and downs.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Listen to your instincts, as you're the one that knows your baby and yourself the best. As a new mum, you're flooded with advice, from family, friends, hospital staff, health visitors, doctors, media...it's overwhelming, but take a step back if you can. \\\

Name: Victoria

Child: Grace Cleod, 5

Expectations of Motherhood: I had no real expectations but always knew I wanted children, there was never any doubt in my mind. I turned 30, got married to my longtime sweetheart, and was pregnant in 2 months. It was so right, and I was so in love with my husband, that it was natural to then create our precious lady from all that love. Looking back I completely underestimated how wonderful it all was.

I was running my own consultancy business with 2 other directors and had been for 7 years. I'm not certain looking back how I thought it would impact that. I do tend to throw myself into anything that I want, so I embraced being pregnant. Looking back I had more expectations of my husband, as a father and what it would be like being pregnant. Somehow in my mind there was a romantic notion that this would be the making of me as a woman!

Reality of Motherhood: Tired, so very tired. No party life anymore. Being the first in my group of friends to have a new baby was real tough, seeing how my then husband was not stepping up to the demands of the changes in our life was a real eyeopener. He really didn't understand the impact of our baby until that first moment of holding her.

Not feeling myself at all, wondering where the person before motherhood had gone, and wondering if I wanted her back? Questioning everything in my life, and understanding how to reconfigure what I was now striving for. The total ultimate and all encompassing love and protection I felt for this tiny little being, so scared of how to protect her now she wasn't inside me.

I also valued my girlfriends so much, and was lucky enough to meet a group of 5 new mums who through the fact that we were all brand new mothers we bonded like glue. Funny as we always say that in any other circumstances, as we are all so different, we probably wouldn't have become friends.

Grace's daddy has just died and this is another reality for which I would never have expected to face. Never underestimate yourself as a mother and what you are capable of achieving.

Taking your child home for the first time: Changing a nappy seemed so difficult, and it was so unbelievable that we were allowed to just walk out with this little baby and drive home.

The best/worst advice:



Worst advice: Don't worry its like shelling peas/you'll be great at giving birth Vic, what with all that yoga you do!

Best advice: Accept any offer of help you get and sleep while their sleeping (I never did either!)

The hardest parts of being a mother: The guilt, that kicks in the minute you give birth, down to the finest detail of delivery, to now around my work/life balance and lack of a father. Having to play both parents roles - Grace turned round to me yesterday and said 'How can I be happy when Daddy's dead?' I just do not feel equipped to guide this precious being through all of this. She's also realised that she's getting a lot of attention and sympathy about her Daddy (rightly so), but actually, I have had to have a very difficult conversation with her about what she still has to do even though her Daddy died.

The best parts of being a mother: Suddenly everything made sense, I now have this anchor which keeps me grounded with my day to day life. She is the funniest, most precious thing in the world to me, and with everything we have been through she has been my saving Grace. Living in Copenhagen with her for 3 years, gave us such quality time, and I really feel so close to her, and she teaches me so much about how to approach the world and deal with our daily life together, including the death of her father. I can't help but laugh at this mini me that is now running around!

Hopes for your family: That she will be happy, love herself and find what she wants out there, whatever that may be. I also hope that one day I can explain to her about her Daddy. I would love to find another partner, but have so much baggage I think it will never happen.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Trust in yourself and your instincts. So many people have advice, but your so well equipped for it, and ask for help!

Don't be ashamed to say how tired/under/overwhelmed you are.

Enjoy the maternity leave as all the clichés seem to be true (it passes so quickly)! Use your family and friends for support, and make sure you get a bit of time for yourself, whether its getting 40 winks, haircut, massage, yoga class or going for a drink, do it, don't sacrifice your whole self. Be kind to yourself.

Don't argue with your partner over the domestic chores, honestly its not worth it, step back and remember that some people are doing it all on their own. \\\



Name: Kate

Child: Edward, 7 months

Expectations of motherhood: We never expected to have difficulty conceiving, and so we waited until we had everything in place before we started trying for a family. By this time we were both doing well in our careers, and had probably had more than our fair share of living like we were twenty-somethings (even though we were well into our thirties). My hopes were for a large, close-knit family. I had seen my partner Alan with our friends' children, and knew he would make a wonderful dad.

Conceiving, however, was anything but easy. It took us four years, a battery of invasive tests, four failed cycles of fertility treatment, a devastating miscarriage and numerous other disappointments. We had almost given up hope when Edward was conceived. My expectations of motherhood then were very different – I dared not expect too much for fear something would go wrong, and even when it seemed as though my pregnancy was to be successful, it was impossible to see beyond the birth. Becoming a mother had become so elusive – something that would never happen to me – that I actually had no expectations other than

to desperately hope that I would be able to hold a healthy baby in my arms.

Reality of motherhood: It sounds obvious, but pregnancy and early motherhood have been an incredibly intense experience, both physically and emotionally. My pregnancy gave me every side effect possible – acute sickness up to week 14, digestive problems, extreme hunger, unstoppable weight gain (four stone!), hip problems (I was unable to walk for the last two weeks of my pregnancy), bleeding gums, terribly sore feet. I could go on. It also made me feel remarkably alive, and I skipped out of bed in the morning during the second and most of the third trimesters, so utterly delighted to be pregnant.

When Edward was born, I fell in love immediately. It was such an extraordinarily strong emotion, and so overwhelming at times that I spent quite a bit of the first few weeks in tears. These were tears of joy, and not the 'baby blues' I'd been warned about. I had, and still have, an overriding urge to be with him all the time, to make sure he feels safe and loved, and I have no doubt I would do anything – anything at all – to protect him. My priorities feel different too. My career has always been extremely important to me, and I could never really un-

derstand why some of my friends chose to be stay-at-home mums. I now understand why, and am trying to work out how I can do my job part-time.

The other reality for me is that my health suffered quite considerably after Edward's birth. I developed a terribly bad back at about week seven, and was unable to lift anything at all, including my son. Initially I was told a bad back following the birth of a child was quite normal, but it went on for so long with no improvement that eventually I was sent for an MRI scan. I was not expecting the result at all – five spinal fractures. The vertebrae had basically collapsed. A bone density scan and further tests revealed that I had developed a rare condition called pregnancy-related osteoporosis.

It's hard to explain how difficult it was to be unable to pick up or properly care for my much longed-for baby while the fractures healed, and to see other people doing things with Edward that I had expected, and longed, to do myself. I also had to stop breastfeeding very suddenly following the diagnosis at four-and-a-half months, as I was advised this would help my recovery. This was probably the most difficult part of the whole saga, my distress partly hormonally-driven. I'm

sure. But Edward soon realised he could get twice the milk in half the time through a bottle (he's not daft!), and has thrived. And because I spent so many months unable to lift him he is not a clingy baby, and is very happy in the company of other people.

Taking your child home for the first time: We spent a week in hospital following a rather long labour which culminated in a dramatic birth, and when we finally got home it felt pretty unreal – I recall being surprised actually. I took Edward from room to room so he could see his new home, and remember breaking down in the kitchen because I never thought this moment would happen. I then spent the next 24 hours convinced I was going to accidentally harm this tiny creature. If he wasn't going to die from being too hot or too cold in his Moses basket (how many times can you check the room temperature in one night, or fret about blanket thickness?), then I was going to probably injure him when I was changing or bathing him. I remember taking him for a hip scan when he was about three weeks old as part of a routine test to check his bone alignment because he had been born with turned-in feet, and being convinced they were going to find broken bones or other injuries. Silly I know, but he seemed so

fragile to me that I felt so utterly cumbersome and clumsy when I touched him.

The best/worst advice: The worst advice I had was that babies are unable to get themselves to sleep. So in the early weeks I spent hours and hours rocking Edward and pounding the streets in an effort to get him to nap. I also at one point ended up with my iPad on my pillow blasting out white noise at full volume in an effort to 'lull' him to sleep in the dead of night. It became some sort of torture device! Not surprisingly I became very, very tired.

We were also told that newborn babies are rather dull, and our expectation was that Edward would probably not become 'interesting' until aged around six months. Not so! We have found every stage to be fascinating, and Edward has always interacted with us and given us so much back. Right from his birth we both felt a connection when he looked at us (I have a wonderful photo taken a couple of minutes after his birth where father and son are staring into each other's eyes). And those gummy smiles of his have melted my heart since he was four-and-a-half weeks old.

The best advice I had was that babies tend to need a sleep after about two hours of wakefulness. So we gave it a whirl, and started popping him into his cot after he'd been awake for two hours; most of the time he would go straight to sleep. Once I binned the books with their reams of conflicting sleeping and napping tips, life became much easier. Another piece of advice I'm so glad we followed was to not have too many visitors in the first couple of weeks. Those few weeks with Edward and Alan – just the three of us – were incredibly precious and tender. There was plenty of time to see friends and family when Alan returned to work after his paternity leave.

The hardest parts of being a mother: There are numerous challenges, most of which have taken me by surprise. The constant worry that you're doing it 'wrong' is one. I had heard many times that your baby "doesn't come with a manual", and I didn't really understand what this meant until Edward was born. I have spent hours questioning my own judgement, and I do seem to live with the nagging fear that something I am doing is unwittingly causing him long-term damage.

Another difficulty is seeing him poorly. We have been lucky so far that this has only stretched to coughs, a mild cold and a vomiting bug; I am dreading seeing him really unwell.

Yet another challenge has been letting go



– or trying to – and accepting other people's help in holding him when I have been unable to. It's excruciating having to watch someone else comfort your baby.

The best parts of being a mother: The absolute, unconditional love I feel for my son. He has enriched my life immeasurably, and makes me feel glad to be alive.

His huge, gummy grin first thing in the morning – so happy to see me; making him giggle uncontrollably by doing something really silly; him falling asleep in my lap when I sing to him and stroke his hair; seeing him develop more and more all the time, with each day bringing something new; and just the sheer privilege of being able to spend so much time with him and getting to know him. This

may sound a strange thing to say as motherhood affects so many, but being a mother is probably the best kept secret ever – I never imagined how wonderful it could be until it actually happened to me.

Has becoming a mother changed you?

Yes. I feel I have grown emotionally. My priorities feel different; I would do absolutely anything for my son. I also feel different with regard to my own health; being in so much pain for such a long time, and being dependant on other people, has made me realise how fragile my own health is, and how important it is to look after myself. Lastly, I now understand a part of my own parents that I didn't before, and feel closer to them because of it. I wish my father was alive to have been able to meet Edward. He would have fallen for him too!

Hopes for your family: My hopes for Edward are that he is happy and healthy, feels secure and knows he is loved, and that he is able to fulfil his potential. I would also like to have a close relationship with him, and be an important part of his life when he himself is an adult.

As for other children...we always planned on having more than one, but we recognise this might not be possible, both because of my age and my health condition. We are seeing my hospital consultant next month, so will discuss the options around having a second child, and whether it is safe. If not, Edward is such a blessing that we will count ourselves very fortunate if he is our only child. We have a wide circle of friends, many of whom have babies around the same age, so I am certain he will grow up with numerous good playmates who will be as important to him as siblings.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Bin the books. All their conflicting advice about routines and sleep patterns just made me anxious.

The other must-do is to take part in an NCT antenatal course. The women I met have become firm friends, have kept me sane and have helped me through a pretty tough time; I'm not sure how I would have coped without them. And lastly, take as much maternity leave as you can afford. It is such a special time, and it will fly by. Enjoy it.

Pregnancy-related osteoporosis: This is a poorly understood condition which affects a small number of women each year. It is believed that the hormonal changes associated with pregnancy somehow cause massive bone loss. Most of those affected regain their bone density within 12 months of the body's hormones returning to normal after pregnancy. More information is available through the National Osteoporosis Society: www.nos.org.uk. \\\



Name: Liz

Child: Imogen, 21 mths when first part of project and Jacob, 6 weeks (has been born since Liz was interviewed)

Expectations of motherhood: Oddly I'm not sure I ever had expectations of motherhood per se. Somehow Imogen was here before I'd ever even thought about motherhood. I'd thought a lot about 'having a baby' but to me the two are slightly different things. All my thoughts about having a baby were focused around the practical implications and how we'd cope. I didn't ever really give much thought to what it would

mean to be a mother. It's been lovely to realise that I absolutely adore it.

The reality of motherhood: Good grief it's hard isn't it!? There is something about being the absolute centre of this tiny person's universe that is both wonderful and terrifying at the same time. I'd always - rather naively - thought that the bond children have with their parents is a result of the amount of involvement those parents have. I think I was totally unprepared for the completely natural, inevitable, unbreakable bond that Imogen has had with me from the very start. It's incredible but such an enormous responsibility.

Taking your child home for the first time: Absolute bliss. I was really lucky to have a very straightforward birth and we got to take her home the same day. I was so thrilled to be going home, so thrilled to not be in labour anymore and just mystified that she was finally here. I can remember so clearly being in the back of the car with her and having to shield her eyes from the street lights. Truth be told it makes me go a bit gooey thinking about it.

The best/worst advice: I must confess that I'm awful at listening to advice. I got advice fatigue while I was pregnant - when the world and his wife seem to fall

over themselves to give you unsolicited advice. I was pretty adamant right from the start that I was happy to try things out but would not blindly follow any method, routine etc. I wanted to figure out what was right for us a family and sod everything else.

Imogen was a pretty easy baby (despite what seemed to be a firmly held belief that sleep was for wimps) so I didn't really feel like we needed a lot of advice (although I always thought there was something fundamentally sensible about the baby whisperer books).

We did, and still do, go with what feels right. So for instance, I didn't breast feed exclusively for 6 months, I've never let her 'cry it out', she's never slept in our bed and we did baby led weaning. I don't think any of things are 'right' for everyone but they worked for us.

Hardest parts of being a mother: The unrelenting nature of it all. Having to do it all day and all night, every day and every night is far far more exhausting than I could ever have anticipated.

The best parts of being a mother: The sense that you're building something new and fantastic. You've gone from a couple to a family and I just find that magical (cheesy but deliberate choice of word).

Hopes for the future: We're hoping to add to our family in the coming years and that's a scary, but exciting prospect. I'm so thrilled with our little family of 3 that up-ending all of that feels a bit nerve-wracking. We're confident it will be worth it though. This is just the beginning.

Advice for expectant mums: Trust your instincts. All of the guidance you'll get is just that, guidance.

Oh and try and enjoy it, they'll be grown and slamming doors before we know it!

*Since writing her answers Liz has had another baby. Here's Liz on being a mother of two: Motherhood the second time around is wonderful. Wonderful and so much easier! All of that initial shock, fear and never-ending worry that you have with your first just doesn't seem to exist second time around (either that or I'm too tired to acknowledge any of it). I'm thrilled that we waited until Imogen was a tiny bit older (she is nearly 3.5 now) before having Jacob. She is old enough to be genuinely excited about the idea of being a big sister and has been nothing but adorable about the little mewling bundle who has turned her world upside down. I am completely thrilled with the little family we've created, and can't wait to just get on with life now that both our children are here. *

Name: Jane Lee

Children: Sophie 2 and Harry 9 months

Expectations of Motherhood: It was a fairly long journey to motherhood for me. I had longed for children since the latter half of my twenties and then, sadly, the long term relationship that I was in floundered and I had to wait to meet the right person to marry and have children with. This happened in my early thirties and we started trying for a baby straight away. However, we had to face a couple of miscarriages before successfully conceiving our daughter. Based on the strong bond that I had with my own wonderful mother, I expected motherhood to be the most amazing thing and couldn't wait for the experience of getting to know my baby and all the fun things we would do, and the love that I knew I would have for that much wanted child. Sophie's second name is 'Arabella' which means 'much prayed for' - and she was.

Reality of Motherhood: The birth of my daughter was a fairly traumatic experience resulting in an emergency c section in which I lost rather a lot of blood. The first couple of days of being in hospital were therefore spent in a slight haze of morphine. However, I will never forget the first night that we were together and lying awake while she slept just staring at her and loving her with such a powerful all encompassing love and feeling so intensely happy (I am sure that this was not just the morphine!) and those feelings have not gone away and are the cornerstone of how I feel about both of my children. The main reality of motherhood for me is that it is a dream come true. There is nothing more amazing for me than to watch my children develop and grow and a single smile or moment of fun instantly makes up for the constant tiredness that has become a way of life for me now. The reality is ALSO that it is hard and it is relentless - waking in the night continuously to feed, change, comfort and then to spend the day feeding, changing, playing, stimulating, and cleaning up after the children. It is physically demanding and mentally draining - but it is ALL worth it.

Taking your children home for the first time: Having been in hospital for over a week with Sophie we felt fairly institutionalised and it was very strange to see normal people walking along the street while we drove (very slowly) home with our new little bundle in the back. I felt like I should be shouting out of the window - 'look I have had my baby - isn't it amazing'. Getting home was a lovely time - we had family there and we put the baby in her carrycot and generally just enjoyed what felt like a massive achievement. The physical pain of having an emergency c section with each

child marred the joy a bit and meant that we needed family to stay and help so we weren't on our own for at least a couple of weeks in each case. I think that this eased us in gently and I am grateful for that.

helped me to get through the day. Another amazing piece of advice was a friend who said 'be kind to one another' - parenthood can bring out such strong emotions in you, particularly if you are stubborn and opinionated as are myself and my husband so sometimes you have



The best/worst advice: The best advice for me was to sleep while the baby sleeps and this is what I did. I have always been a cat napper and the moment the baby went off I would curl on the sofa with my red blanket and sleep until crying woke me. These power naps really

to take a step back and just be kind. I can't think of any bad advice really - but each baby is different and you have to get to know what works for your baby and trust your own instincts as a mother.

The hardest parts of being a mother:

For me the hardest part is dealing with the anxiety that I daily experience with regard to each of my children and the responsibility of them. I have always been a worrier, but my levels of anxiety over the last two years have really peaked. My imagination runs riot with things that could happen and in hindsight I think that my traumatic birth experiences may have not helped this. The way that I am learning to deal with this is to take each day at a time and concentrate on the moment - and to enjoy the moment for what it is. Another difficult part has been accepting that I have to put my own life and aspirations on hold for the moment and concentrate on 'growing and nurturing' my children. I got made redundant whilst on maternity leave with Harry and whilst it is a relief not to have that particular job any more I have been placed in a dilemma as the industry that I was in (law) does not generally practice child friendly hours and I am reluctant to go back to full time work whilst my children are so young. Because of this I have had to accept that, for now, I am a full time mum and am trying to learn that I don't need to qualify this every time I am asked what I do by stating what I used to do as a job. It's a humbling experience but I am getting there!

The best parts of being a mother: Where do I start? The smiles, the laughter, the feeling that now we are a real family, the love that grows stronger every day. I love that I am starting to forge a relationship with my daughter and she tells me things and we laugh together. I love watching my husband being an amazing dad and the care and love that he showers on our children.

Has becoming a mother changed you? Absolutely. It has made me less selfish and much less inclined to care about what other people think of me as I simply don't have the time for it. My children are my world now - not my job or myself.

Hopes for your family: My hope is that my children will grow to be confident (unlike me who has always suffered with a lack of confidence) and will feel loved and supported throughout their lives. I hope that will retain our sense of laughter and fun as a family and always love each other and be there for each other and have adventures together.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Join an NCT group - I have found such support and friendship in mine and wouldn't be without it for the world. Also, try and take pleasure in all the little things that every brings - the smiles, the cuddles and the love. They far out way the general knackeredness and the state that your body gets in after having a child! \\\



Name: Lynsey

Child: Freya, 2.5 years

Expectations of Motherhood: I didn't have a lot of expectations really. I expected I would give birth and it would hurt, but I thought mainly about the practical aspects: washing, feeding, the lack of sleep, teaching the child etc. I didn't really know what to expect when it came to the emotional impact of being a mother.

Reality of Motherhood: A constant juggling act of cooking, cleaning, playing, cleaning, working, organising childcare, playing... cleaning... all driven by the overwhelming desire to do what's best for your child and a LOVE for that crazy little creature! Motherhood really puts

into perspective all the stupid things that you thought were a problem before you had a child. Also, it makes you cry at the news more!

Taking your child home for the first time: For us it was a really horrible experience to be honest. I had been in labour for a really long time (the 1st contraction came on Tuesday morning and she was finally born Saturday afternoon) so I was really tired and hadn't eaten pretty much the whole time. We left the hospital at 10pm into freezing fog and got home terrified and totally overwhelmed with a tiny baby to care for. In hindsight I should probably have stayed in hospital over night, but I didn't want my partner to have to leave. So, overall it was pretty grim, but it got much, much better!

The best/worst advice: Best advice: Mummy knows best! If you don't think something is right, it isn't! Worst Advice: Your baby is underweight you should wake her up every 2 hours to feed her!

The hardest parts of being a mother: Learning to have infinite patience in the face of utter exhaustion.

The best parts of being a mother: Remembering all the games you used to play as a kid and getting to be a kid all over again!

Has becoming a mother changed you? Yes, it's given me a capacity for patience I never thought possible (though I still lose my cool). It has made me understand the true meaning of unconditional

love and it has made me less concerned about trivial things.

Hopes for your family: For everyone to be happy, healthy and be the best that they can be.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Go to groups! Mum & Baby groups, breast-feeding support groups, coffee mornings - anything! You will need friends who are going through the same stuff at the same time. If it wasn't for the breast-feeding support group I went to (baby cafe), I strongly suspect I would have given Freya to the neighbours (that's a joke... a bit). Also, the sound of a hairdryer will get a baby to go to sleep! \\\



Name: Lynsey

Child: Martha, 2.5

Expectations of motherhood: I've always known that I've wanted children when the right person came along. I also expected to get pregnant straight away, which wasn't the case. After suffering an ectopic pregnancy I thought I'd never become a mother, then Martha came along! I had a lovely childhood, it couldn't have been better, So many great memories and I wanted my child to have the same.

Reality of motherhood: I was lucky enough to not get morning sickness at all, although I did have low iron which made pregnancy difficult at times. I didn't have a straight forward birth either - I was in labour for just over 24 hours, which finally resulted in a forceps delivery, a blood transfusion and then being taken back into theatre to have the placenta removed.

I was beyond tired and didn't feel all these wonderful amazing feelings I was told I'd feel. Of course I loved Martha instantly - I loved her before I'd even met her - but all I can remember is wanting to sleep and being shocked by the size of her (9lbs 4). She had the cutest little ears and button nose, but I remember her lying next to me and looking at her feeling so terrified that this gorgeous little girl was my responsibility. She was no longer

in my belly and I felt scared that I'd never be able to protect her as much as I'd like to.

Taking your child home for the first time: Everything seemed such a blur.

I was so proud when Paul came to pick us up from the hospital to take us home; walking out with Martha was the proudest moment ever. I remember she wouldn't settle in her Moses basket so she slept in her car seat and she also slept on my chest a lot which I know is not "the right thing to do" but it worked for us, and if Martha was happy then so was I!

Best/worst advice: The best advice I was given was to do what felt right to me and that no one should tell you what to do with your baby. The same related to pain relief during labour - I didn't have a birth plan, I just did what I felt I had to do when the time came.

The worst advice for me personally was not to pick your child up every time they cry or to rock them to sleep. Everyone has different views, but I didn't believe in the "let them cry it out" theory. All babies are different and I don't believe in things being done by the book. It's natural that babies want to feel love and be close to their mothers. I rocked Martha to sleep when she was a tiny baby and we've not had problems with her sleeping because of this. There is also a lot of

pressure on women to breast feed - not necessarily from the midwives, but from society. I chose not to breast feed: not because I couldn't, I just chose not to.

Hardest part of being a mother: The worry! I've worried about Martha since the day I found out I was pregnant. When she was born I was constantly checking she was breathing. I still sometimes find myself doing that now! When Martha was 6 weeks old we found out from a scan that she had hip dysplasia. She had to wear a Pavlik harness for 12 weeks. It was so hard not being able to see her kick her little legs or to see her tiny toes. The harness is used to readjust the hips so that they align in the joint and to keep the hip joint secure, but I really didn't want her to have to wear it. It broke my heart, but we knew it was the best thing for her. Now she is fine, so it was worth it. We were told it was more common in girls who are over 9lbs at birth.

I also live away from my parents which is quite hard when having a young child. My partner works long hours too, so sometimes when I need that little break for 5 minutes I know it's just not going to happen.

Best part of being a mother: Hearing Martha call me 'mummy', and the cuddles! Just spending time with her, seeing her happy and having fun. When I see her playing and wanting to follow other

children and copy them it makes my heart melt. It's so cute I could cry. Martha is such a little comedian. She makes us laugh, and the more we laugh, the more she laughs! Her favourite food is ginger cake and she only drinks camomile tea, which is funny.

I'm lucky enough to be a stay at home mum. I had the choice of going back to work or spending my time with my daughter. I know some people want to go back to work and that's their decision, but to stay at home with my little girl was the best thing for me and Martha. I didn't want to miss a thing and wanted taking care of my daughter to be my job.

Has becoming a mum changed you? In a way it has yes. I now have other priorities and have someone to worry about other than myself! I now prefer cosy nights in with my family to going out drinking!

Hopes for your family: As long as Martha is happy and healthy that is all I hope for. I will support her in whatever makes her happy!

Advice to new & expectant mums: Do what works for you! We don't really have a set routine with Martha. She goes to bed and gets up when she wants and she's the most chilled out child ever! \\\



Name: Benedicte

Child: Anne, 14 months

Expectations of Motherhood: Oddly enough I never really thought about what it would be like to have a baby in our lives. We prepared for Anne's arrival, but I never really thought about what it would mean to have her around. I guess I had never really been a 'baby' person before Anne came along. I didn't know very many kids and didn't really know what they were about. Part of me also consciously resisted forming expectations.

Not having expectations was perhaps a strategy which meant I would be better able to cope with any situation. I just had this image of me as a little old woman visiting my grow-up kids and driving their partners crazy...I hope it will come true one day!

Reality of Motherhood: I completely underestimated the total upheaval involved in welcoming Anne into our lives. The first six months were tough. At first, everything revolves around baby - that's something I had not anticipated. I liked looking after Anne, but found it hard to accept how much my life had changed; I

resented how little freedom I had. When I began to let go of my 'old' life, it all became much more enjoyable. I also started to feel more confident as a mum. By that point, I felt I knew Anne and I understood her a lot better. We shared a bond, we had a relationship.

Now, she is 14 months, it feels strange to recall these moments and write these sentences. We know each other so much better, we understand each other, we communicate and the love we share feels boundless.

Taking your child home for the first time: I remember the car journey. For some reason it felt like a huge deal to get Anne in her car seat and drive her back home. I was so focused on the car journey (!) - I don't really remember what happened once we arrived!

The best/worst advice: The best advice was definitely 'trust your instincts'; it helped me grow as a mum, made me more confident. 'Cut yourself some slack' was another good one...though really hard to put in practice.

Worst advice: A book came highly recommended by one of our friends. It basically advised parents to abide by a strict

routine from day 1. I still wonder how that's even possible. Go with the flow is the best you can do!

The hardest parts of being a mother: The tiredness is an obvious one, but I think it's more the sense of commitment and responsibility that I sometimes find awesome (in all the different senses of the word!).

The best parts of being a mother: Getting to know that little person and building a relationship with her. But more than anything, the forceful experience of sheer love, this is truly special.

Has becoming a mother changed you? For me, being a parent is making a life-long (and beyond) commitment to your child. This commitment is life changing and it impacts on my day-to-day activities, but also impacts on the long-term decisions I make. I like to think I am still the same person (albeit wiser), but a person with an unalienable commitment which informs my entire life.

Hopes for your family: First I hope we can all remain in good health. I also hope we are all able to pursue our individual goals whilst staying united.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: Being a new mum can be a lonely experience (especially when your family is not around and your friends don't have kids!) so try and find other expectant/new mums to share your experience with, you'll make new friends and so will your child. \\\





Name: Lynda

Joe: 9 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I'm not sure I had many expectations of motherhood as such. I knew it was supposed to be hard being a mum and that I would always worry about my child. I knew it would be tiring and I knew I wanted for the baby to be born so I could sleep on my tummy again and stop itching. I hadn't really given much thought to anything past the birth. All the antenatal course talks about is pain relief and breathing, so that's all I thought about. In blissful ignorance I booked tickets for a load of events in early July thinking by the time the baby was about 4 weeks, I would be sorted. Needless to say I attended none of these events.

Reality of Motherhood: I never understood the idea of relaxing before the birth, it's not like you can 'bank' sleep and then use it as a voucher system when you need some more, but I didn't realise how much labour – and indeed my 3-day-from-start-to-finish labour extravaganza – would sap any reserves you might have stored. I feel like I started on a back foot having such a long labour, and so the initial hormone-laden, sleep-deficient, emotional first few weeks hit me like a sledgehammer.

I remember wandering round town in the blazing sunshine, pushing the pram and crying under my sunglasses with sheer exhaustion. It seems silly to think now, that 9 months ago, I would dread my husband leaving for work and leaving me with Joe, and that the first few weeks I literally took one day at a time, getting through it till he came home to help. It's not that I didn't love Joe, it's just that I didn't know him. The routine of feed, sleep, nappy change was so relent-

less, through my bleary, dry eyes it looked like my life had come to a full stop. Three weeks on (having met up with my mum friends) and I was breastfeeding in the middle of the pub without a care in the world. As the months have passed and Joe has grown into his own little person, my love for him has grown to the point where I can't bear the thought of him going to nursery and not hanging out with him everyday. So in reality, motherhood has been twice as hard and a million times more rewarding than I ever imagined and I absolutely love it.

Taking your child home for the first time: I couldn't wait to get out of hospital, mainly because I couldn't stand another prepacked strawberry trifle, but also because I wanted to have my family all together at home. I'd been kept in the hospital for an extra couple of days as I was having trouble breastfeeding, but I was terrified once I got home that Joe was going to starve. I wouldn't go home till I had a back up plan, so I made Matt take a detour to Mothercare on the way home to pick up some emergency formula. I ran in, grabbed some formula, bought an entertaining bear babygrow and hat with ears set and legged it back to the car, where Matt was sat staring at our brand new baby in the rear view mirror. He drove home like he was carrying a car full of loose eggs. He said it was the most stressful drive of his life and I believe him. When we got home, we put the car seat in front of the settee, sat down and said 'what happens now?'

The best/worst advice: The best emotional advice I got was just after Joe was born and was along the lines of, 'Yes it can be pretty awful at first but it gets loads easier'. It kept me going through a tough few weeks. It wasn't advice, but a couple of friends just bought round my lunch and held Joe whilst I ate it. Amazing.

ing.

The worst advice I had was to make loads of stuff for the freezer. Not having a microwave meant that we would have to wait 30 minutes for the food to cook in the oven anyway (and that's if we remembered to take it out of the freezer) – by then anything could have happened – most likely he'd woken up and was feeding again. So for a few weeks nearly all food was eaten cold, whether it started off that way or not.

The hardest parts of being a mother: Here's the top 3 off the top of my (weary) head:

Lack of sleep: At best renders you incapable of mental arithmetic, at worst turns you into some kind of Mumzilla. I don't think I've ever needed coffee in the morning so much in my life. And there's no catching up with sleep, once it's gone, it's gone forever because they don't lie in just because you need one!

Breastfeeding: I breastfed for 8 months and had periods of really struggling with it. I found it very rewarding watching Joe stack on the weight solely from what I had provided him with, and soul-destroying when he was hungry again after an hour. I had a love/hate relationship with it, it was convenient, cheap and I felt it was best for him. It was also at times painful, tiring and I was tied to him as he wouldn't take a bottle. I opted to carry on despite having issues which leads me onto...

Always feeling guilty: Should I move him to formula? Is he having fun? Have I stayed out the house too long having a coffee with friends? Do I read him enough stories? Do I take him to enough activities? Do I take him to too many activities? Did he get that cold from that

half-hour he didn't have socks on? Will he think I've abandoned him when he goes to nursery? And so on, forever.

The best parts of being a mother: Unlike most things where you get out equal to what you put in, motherhood rewards you in buckets for every dirty nappy you change.

I've learned loads of stuff. I know when he's doing an attention cough. I know when crying because he's tired as opposed to hungry. I know he's not hungry, but wants milk because he's tired. I know loads of stuff about him. I'm an expert on him. I could win Mastermind if he was my chosen subject. No one has taught me this stuff, I've not read it, or had it implanted in a chip in my head. I've learnt it from my baby boy. He's taught me.

It makes me feel more proud than I have of anything else in my life, and every time he does something clever, cute or new, I can physically feel myself swelling with pride. I don't think there is a day when he doesn't literally fill my heart with joy.

Hopes for your family: That Joe will always feel safe, loved and happy and has the foundations to make sensible decisions is his life. That he has good manners and treats people well. That he grows up to be the kind of boy you would bring home to your mother. That he listens to all advice, but only follows the good. And that he will still visit his folks when he leaves home.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: My best advice would be to not put any pressure on yourself to be a Supermum in the first few weeks. Don't expect to be being clean and showered, or that you will get any housework done, or that you'll do much more than feeding, changing nappies and rocking to sleep. If you're lucky your baby will sleep somewhere other than you, but someday I wouldn't put Joe down until bedtime. Once you have accepted that you are dirty, exhausted and the house is a tip – enjoy it! As hard as it is, and it is hard, remember that in a few months, you'll have to chase them round the house for a cuddle. They weren't joking when they said 'they grow up so fast'.

On a practical level invest in a sling, so you can carry them around whilst you do things like make a sandwich, get loads of DVDs to work your way through whilst you are trapped on the settee and as soon as is humanly possible meet up with your new mum network. You can guarantee they will all be unwashed, knackered and escaping a messy house too...Oh, and don't buy a top and tail bowl. \\\



Name: Frances

Child: Mia, 18 months

Expectations of motherhood: I thought it would be easy!

I'd always wanted a baby, and when I fell pregnant I was so excited, but at the same time really scared. I was 16 and still living with my mum, with no place of my own and no financial security. I did think it would be fairly straight forward though because my sisters all have lots of kids, so I'm used to being surrounded by children.

When I was pregnant I didn't know whether she was a boy or girl, so by the end I was couldn't wait to find out what I was having. My sister came along to the scans and although I hadn't wanted to know the sex, she tried to get the sonographer to tell her the sex of the baby secretly. He did look but he couldn't see because Mia had her legs crossed.

During my whole pregnancy my mum was really ill and I was her main support - my brother lived with us, but he was rarely in. Then she ended up being taken to hospital and I ended up having to travel from Moss Side to Wythenshawe hospital regularly to visit her. Money was

tight because as a pregnant 16 year old I was not eligible for any financial help. I was having to steal lifts where I could to go and see her, and grabs little bits of money off her for food, etc when I could. She had lots of animals so would always give me cash to feed them.

Reality of motherhood: Not easy at all.

I loved the birth. The second I went into labour I was so excited. It was amazing - I was going to find out whether I was having a boy or girl! I was in labour for 24 hrs, and it did hurt, but it was fine really. I think the pain was exaggerated by the fact that it was my first baby and I didn't really know what to expect. At the end I was knackered but I can't wait to do it again - I loved it!

Despite loving the whole pregnancy and the labour, I've found raising Mia really hard. I love her to bits, but being a mum is so exhausting. Recently Hassan and I have thought about trying again for another baby, but then we decided that Mia wasn't quite old enough. I had to be realistic about the amount of effort involved and the fact that I actually don't get any time to myself. She still needs so much of my attention - I think another baby right now would be too much.

Mia is a really good girl though and she sleeps really well. I had to wake her up this morning; she slept through till 12pm! I find routine really important for both of us - every night it's bath, bed and bottle for 7pm so that I can watch the soaps. I feel like I need 'mummy time'. Sometimes you have to be strict because otherwise they can walk all over you, but there are times when I'll ease off and let her come and join me in the evenings for a cuddle if she wakes up.

Taking her home: It was scary taking her home. She was born on her due date and when she came out she seemed so tiny and fragile. In the hospital they'd shown me how to bath her and had taught me about breastfeeding - I was totally prepared - but being left on my own was quite daunting.

At first I stayed at my mums and remember spending a week sleeping on the sofa with Mia in a Moses basket next to me. I was so tired that I didn't even bother going upstairs to my bedroom other than to get nappies or clothes. Mia was pretty good early on and behaved how you'd expect a newborn to - waking and feeding pretty regularly - but I remember finding breastfeeding so exhausting. Hassan helped me out so much and would take her off me in the nights dur-

ing those first few weeks. He was, and still is, really good with her.

I was offered a place to live when I was pregnant, but wasn't allowed to move in till after she was born. A week after she arrived, I moved into my own place. It felt good to have my own tenancy with my own name on the contract. It did feel strange though. I'd been used to cleaning the house and cooking for lots of people - for my mum, my brother and his friends while my mum had been poorly - but this place was just for me and Mia and it was new to me to be doing it all on my own.

Best and worst advice: Since finding out I was pregnant with Mia I have always had the same health visitor, she's from the 'Family nurse partnership'. The Family Nurse Partnership help with young first time mums and you get assigned one of their health visitors when you're pregnant. They visit you till the baby is 2. She's helped me get a grant for college equipment, she's helped me make appointments and has been there to push certain people when they need a little nudge. She's always there with help and advice.

I was also given a social worker when I was pregnant - I was given me the im-

pression it was something that they do for all young mums, but later I discovered it was because they felt that my mums parenting might be reflected in mine. I had been given a social worker as child because of reports of neglect. I wanted to show them that I would be a good mum though. I took all the support I was offered to prove I was committed to being a mum.

My social worker did help me with financial support - I had to ask for the help, but I was entitled to money. It was weird that they didn't make it apparent to me despite knowing I was struggling with money. It was only when the health visitor said, "Ask your social worker for the money - it is available," that I knew to ask for help there. I didn't understand the benefits system at all because I was 16 - it's all so complicated.

Some of the (government) support I've received has really helped, but I didn't need it all. They didn't trust that I could ask for help myself. They didn't believe that I'd be responsible, so that's the reason why they gave me supported housing. To prove them wrong I just make sure that I use every bit of support to my advantage - if it's there it's definitely worth using.

Regarding good advice, my sisters have been really helpful. They all have 4/5 kids each and when I was buying stuff they'd warn me about the things I

shouldn't bother buying, like changing tables. I ignored them and bought one anyway, and well, they were right - it's hardly ever been used. My family really do leave the parenting to me though and they trust that I know what I'm doing.

Hardest parts of being a mother: When she's poorly. When she's ill it's really hard work because her sleep is so disturbed. And the times when she's fed, bathed and clean, but she's still crying. I think, "I can't give you any more!" It's so hard to know what's wrong sometimes.

I don't get much time on my own either. It's only recently that I've started to get any time to myself. In those early months I didn't put make up on or do my hair. I never had time to look after myself, but that was quite unlike me. It's been nice to spend a bit more time on the way I look now she's a bit older and less demanding.

Losing my mum has been hard too. She'd always been in a wheelchair, so she'd never seen my place - it's a shame. She did get to see Mia lots when when I took her over though. It was in November that she died, just before my 18th birthday. She'd promised she'd buy the drink for me to have a party, but died just before and she didn't get chance to celebrate with me. I'm the youngest of her kids; her baby. To remember her, on my birthday I went to go see her and shared a drink with her on the grave so that I

could mark my birthday with her. I still don't think I've come to terms with it though.

We do have family support though from all of my sisters, and Hassan's mum lives nearby. I'd known a few of his brothers and sisters before I was pregnant, but I only really met his mum when I'd had Mia. We do get on really well though and Mia goes over to stay now and again.

The best parts of being a mother: Little things that they do. The milestones too, like walking, her first birthday, saying, "mama" and getting her first tooth. You think, "Wow. This is what it's all about." It has been amazing to just watch her turn into a proper person.

Has being a mother changed you? I've learnt a lot. I'm still the same person, but I've had so many new experiences. I look back at the younger me, and back then I thought I knew it all. Now I've experienced motherhood I feel a lot wiser. You have to adapt and learn - find your own ways. I imagine that once you've learnt how to be a mum it's like riding a bike.

Hopes for your family: Eventually I'd like to have 4 children - 3 more after Mia. That will be my family. I'm from a big big family, so I love being surrounded by kids.

Career-wise I want to own a big health spa. I'm very ambitious. I've started my

beauty therapy course - currently doing level 1, and then hope to carry on the level 2, 3, and then want I want to do Holistic therapy after that.

I've planned it all out, but in the end I want to own a house and move out to France.

Also, I've looked into surrogacy because I enjoyed the pregnancy and labour so much. I think I'd love it. Right now I can't do it because I'd have to stop smoking and I don't think I'd succeed in quitting right now, but I'd love to give someone a gift like that one day.

Advice to new and expectant mums: Do what you feel is right and don't be scared by what other people say. Everyone has different experiences of pregnancy, child birth and motherhood.

To mums in my situation, well, good luck! It's been hard. I would say, push yourself and never give up. If you want to do something and it goes wrong, don't give up, try again the next day, and if that doesn't work try the day after. Wake up everyday thinking, 'Today's the day'. There is nothing that a young mum can't do that an older mum can.

*Frances and Mia featured in photographer Len Grant's award winning blog <http://herfirstyear.co.uk> - a wonderful piece of work and well worth a read. *



Name: Rowena

Child: Maddie, 4 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I'm not sure what I expected from motherhood. Tiredness, yes, and a heightened sense of responsibility; the knowledge that my life would never be the same again. Other than that, rather than expectations, I had hopes and fears.

I've always enjoyed a wonderful family life, and I hoped for more of the same with my own kids. I have close relationships with both of my parents, and I knew that I had great role models to emulate.

My fears, however, centred round the fact that I have never had a burning urge to be a mother. It's not something I always wanted emotionally (as a kid, for example, I found dolls infinitely dull); nor did any hormonal biological clock suddenly start ticking when I hit my thirties. Instead, I made a deliberate decision to have children when I agreed to marry my now husband, knowing that he was a man who wanted a family – and, more importantly, knowing that he was the kind of man who I would want to have children with, as it's always been clear to me that he would make a great father.

Still, I couldn't help but worry – what kind of mother would I be, given that I've never felt 'naturally maternal'? If you've read *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, you'll know my worst-case scenario: uncaring, emotionally detached mother gives birth to future serial killer... was it in his personality all along, or was it a direct result of the lack of a maternal bond?

Fears of spawning a devil-child aside, I had more practical concerns. Would I be able to bond with my child? Would I have the necessary patience, capability, fortitude to be a good carer and role model? What if I completely lacked the maternal instinct? Would my child sense this about me and somehow be badly affected? What if the baby arrived and I simply didn't have a clue what to do?

Reality of Motherhood: The baby arrived, and I didn't have a clue what to do. But that, I now realise, merely puts me on a par with most first-time mums.

The cliché is true – nothing can truly prepare you for becoming a mum. As a writer, half of my work is research, so I researched the hell out of motherhood. I read the books, did the classes, investigated online articles and forums – only for an actual baby to enter the scene and throw a big spanner of reality into the works.



That reality is simple: there is no definite answer to many issues and decisions that you will face as a mother – simply because all babies and all parents are different. Google, previously my lifeline, became my enemy, pointing me to all sorts of vastly contradictory information and opinions. It amazed me, truly. How can something that humans have been doing since, well, humans came into existence, NOT be pinned down yet and completely understood? Where was my fool-proof baby manual? With that all-important chapter one: The On/Off Button, or How on Earth to Get Your Child to Sleep?

Granted, I'm still in the early stages of this, but motherhood seems to be something you simply muddle through initially, doing whatever it takes to keep your baby as happy as possible while keeping yourself as sane as possible.

The first three months in particular felt like a whirlwind of confusion and frustration. Only after week 12 did I finally feel as though I were able to draw breath and take stock. Breastfeeding in particular came as quite a shock – I didn't realise how hard it would be, assuming that it would all come, well, naturally. Cluster-feeding most evenings from 4pm until 10pm was exhausting, not to mention the inevitable worry about whether I was producing enough milk.

When the doubts creep in, I keep reminding myself to take a good look at my baby and see how she's thriving, how happy she seems – and believe that everything does seem to be working out okay. Perhaps I'm even doing a good job. Miraculous!

Taking your child home for the first time: It was snowing as we left the hospital. That's such an irrelevant detail, but I feel it's one I'll remember forever, those delicate flakes floating around our sleeping baby.

After five days of watching our tiny daughter recover from an infection in the special care unit, when it came to going home I found I didn't have any of those fears about how fast we were driving, whether we'd 'break' her, what on earth we were going to do now we were officially in charge. I was just thankful to be going home with a healthy baby.

I do, however, remember arriving at home and putting Maddie down on a mat on the floor, and being amazed at how little room she took up. How could something so tiny herald such a massive change in our lives?

The best/worst advice: The best? *Forget about routines. At least for the first few months.*

Fair enough, routines might work for

some people, but I found they stressed me out – mostly because I couldn't stick to them. Babies, funnily enough, don't appear to do what you want them to – in fact, they seem to derive great pleasure in doing the exact opposite. Worst of all, there's just no reasoning with them. Routines made me feel like a failure. Acknowledging that I have very little control over my baby daughter has, conversely, made me feel more in control – of my emotions, and my ability to be a good mum.

The worst? *Enjoy every moment – this time when they're babies is so precious. It's the best!*

Impossible. Some moments you will truly hate and want to leave behind as soon as possible. I've come to believe that the cuteness of babies is no accident, it's Darwinian; if they weren't so cute, parents would abandon them without a thought! Hormones don't help in the early weeks. I don't think anything has ever made me cry as much as motherhood. Conversely, nothing has ever cheered me up as quickly and successfully as my daughter.

I also refuse to believe that babydom is 'the best' period of motherhood. It's like when people say that your wedding day is the best day of your life. Does life really go downhill from there? Mine certainly hasn't, and I don't believe that motherhood will, either.

The hardest parts of being a mother: Sleep deprivation, oh yes. I now know that it is possible to be walking (staggering?) around your home, baby in arms, and suddenly realise that you've started to dream – and I don't mean a daydream, either.

But it's the all-consuming nature of your new role that I think is the hardest part. Mothering a newborn takes everything – all your time, energy, emotion, attention, commitment. You and only you are your child's mother – and that can be a very lonely realisation, even when you have family and friends on standby to help.

The best parts of being a mother: Smiles. Huge, all-encompassing, gummy grins that light up her whole face and make the world a little bit brighter.

Seeing a little personality start to emerge from amongst the feeding and sleeping. Feeling proud – already – of a determined, curious, observant, sociable, fun-loving, stubborn little monkey.

Having a license to be silly. Who doesn't love an opportunity to embrace their inner child?

Has becoming a mother changed you: I don't think so – I'm still the same



person. But I have gained new perspectives and priorities. Some things just don't seem that important any more, while I enjoy taking pleasure in really small things. Who knew that watching the changing expressions and reactions of a small child could be so entertaining?

Hopes for your family: I hope that we'll be a close and loving family, enjoying lots of fun times and supporting each other through the tough times.

I hope that I can encourage my daughter to be honest with me, and inspire her to be the best at whatever she wants to be.

I hope we'll stay as healthy and happy as possible.

I hope that one day I'll get an eight-hour stint of sleep again.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums? If you're breastfeeding, buy a tube of nipple cream that contains lanolin, such as Lansinoh. Essential. (While you're at it, let your husband know in advance that yes, there does exist such a thing as nipple cream, and you're not just setting him up for having the piss taken out of him in Boots.)

All babies are different, as are all parenting styles. Don't rush to be an experts,

just allow yourself time to get to know your child and build your relationship – because it will take time. The parenting decisions you make (and break) in the first few weeks of your child's life will not mentally scar them for life, nor set them up for being spoilt, nor mean they will grow up to hate you.

In your darkest moments, repeat like a mantra – *this too shall pass*. Everything is a stage with children.

In your best moments, take a deep breath and commit them to memory. Feel proud of yourself for helping these moments happen – they couldn't happen without you.

Be kind to yourself. Don't beat yourself up with guilt when (not if) you make mistakes – we all do. You're only human, and Supermum doesn't exist. Don't skip meals. Eat chocolate. And don't bother with the bloody Hoovering.

And, if you've not yet had your kid, set some time aside now for some leisurely, non-tired sex. Trust me, it's soon to be a luxury!

*In my former life (to be resumed later this year) I work as a creative copywriter. Find out more on my website – www.rowwrites.com *



Name: Nat

Child: Frank, 6 months

Expectations of motherhood: My younger sister has two boys, 12 and 6 so I already had an insight into motherhood and all that it can be and to be honest, it's probably why I put off having kids as long as I did. Just from my auntie duties, I knew first hand how tiring and relentless caring for a child can be and I quite liked being able to come home/drop them off before it got too much.

Jon and I had been married 5 years when I got pregnant and I think people had got fed up with asking us if we were going to have a baby. I just never felt like I was ready or old enough, just one more year and then maybe.

The year before Frank arrived we'd been living in Namibia, I was a lady of leisure and with all that time on my hands it was probably the first time that I'd really thought I could see myself with kids, instead I got a Jack Russell puppy, named Jim and he became my baby.

We'd not been living together back in Didsbury very long when I realised I was pregnant. Despite being in a position

where I should have been overjoyed being pregnant- 33, married, good job, financially secure, house etc- I was mortified when I was holding a positive pregnancy test in my hand.

The truth was I really liked my life with no baby in it. 2012 was going to be all about me after the last couple of years focussing on Jon and his career in Africa. We were trying to get back to some semblance of a normal married life together, enjoying going out and enjoying Didsbury's bars and restaurants, throwing myself back into work and progressing my own career and then bang my year of ME was gone.

Consequently I didn't tell many people until it got too hard to hide. I didn't even let Jon tell his parents until 24 weeks in, I couldn't face lying at how happy I was when people congratulated me. I knew I would love the baby when it arrived, but I just needed to get my head round it first.

I was petrified of giving birth. To the point where I went out of my way to avoid hearing or seeing anything about it. I was scared of having no control of the situation, being so vulnerable and in front of a bunch of people I didn't know.

People telling me that you just need to leave your dignity at the door when you give birth used to drive me crazy. I used to think if I could just take myself off and come back with a baby like the San bushman women do, I would have.

The first day of our weekend NCT course was dedicated to the birth and I did my best to zone out and pay no attention at all to what was being discussed around me. I didn't want to know. The only things I retained from the whole weekend was you're best off being on all fours in labour, that you needed to breathe your baby out (seriously, I have NO idea how that's meant to happen) and that you needed to lean on your family and friends (your network) who lived around you. As Jon and I didn't have any friends or family living nearby, my overwhelming feeling at the end of the course was that we were all alone in Manchester and I had another couple of months to get even more wound up by the thought of giving birth in front of a room full of strangers.

I was expecting to spend Christmas Eve in the delivery suite. Frank was due on the 9th December. Everyone was telling me that first babies are always late and so I thought I had plenty of time to get

ready, mentally prepare myself, relax, watch lots of TV, read some books. But after spending a long day walking around Manchester getting the last baby bits, Frank decided I was ready for him, nearly 3 weeks early.

Reality of motherhood: I wasn't ready for him. Not in my head. I was expecting/hoping to be turned away from the hospital but they said no chance, he was on his way. It all happened very fast but ended up like an episode of Holby City. I cannot think of the whole experience without wincing.

He is ace but it is relentless and I'm bloody knackered.

Motherhood has made me a bit crazy and I never realised what an obsessive google fiend I was. How did Mothers know what to do before? Armed with so much information and choice at every stage has meant my ability to make decisions and be sure that I've made the right one has totally disappeared.

A prime example of this is Frank's name. I've spent the last 6 months avoiding using Frank's name as I had major baby name remorse and I was convinced we should have called him something else. I

could have named 30 girl babies, but boys names were really hard.

Frank didn't have a name for over a week. As I was expecting him to be late, I'd thought I'd have at least another 4 weeks to think of one. In our hasty hospital packing, we'd forgotten a baby hat. The nurses put a tubagrip on his head after he was born, he looked like a little pixie so we nicknamed him Pixie and it's stuck.

I found out a few weeks ago that you can easily change a babies name on their birth certificate before their 1st birthday. So I got my baby name shortlist out. Frank was lucky to be called Frank, I had some seriously weird names on that list. So he'll stay Frank and hopefully I'll be able to start calling him that soon.

I certainly wasn't expecting to have to think about childcare so early on as I have a year off work. As Frank reached 8 weeks, someone asked me if I'd got my childcare sorted. I thought they were joking, but I soon discovered that finding the right nursery with a place available for Frank wasn't going to be easy. It was quite depressing having to look into this kind of thing when he'd only just arrived and it was yet another thing to get obsessive about. Every nursery/childminder I could find were all booked up, I was so worried. Luckily as my worry was about to reach fever pitch, a lovely new nursery opened up in Didsbury, so he's going there. That said I'll have probably changed my mind several times about going back to work by the time he has his first day.

Taking Frank home for the first time: After one night in the hospital, we decided that we'd brave it and head home. Also I was dying to show the baby off to my mum who was still at ours with a chicken casserole. Getting out of the hospital was another matter altogether, the midwives were run ragged and trying to get one to discharge us seemed mission impossible.

At 10pm we decided the best chance of getting out of there was to go and sit on the front desk of the ward. Funnily enough one of our new NCT couple friends Elly and Mike had the same idea, their baby Gabriel had arrived on the same day as Frank. It was lovely to see them and to swap notes on the previous 24 hours. (Me and Elly – How are you – that was bloody horrendous wasn't it – never doing that again – The men – I'm so knackered, yeah me too I'm so knackered, haven't slept for 24 hours etc...). My god.

Upon leaving we were warned to watch out for a fox that had attacked people in the car park. And before that I was just worried about Jon's driving.

The Best advice: The best advice, I chose to ignore. When my GP told me I was crazy to be expressing milk every 2 hours and I'd be better off spending this time with the baby, I was still obsessed with upping my milk supply and giving my baby the best start I could.

Oh how I wish now I had listened. It was only when I stopped expressing milk that I really started enjoying motherhood. I feel sad when I try and recall those little details of the early months of Frank's life, as I struggle. The memory of the whirring breast pump however is a vivid one.



The worst advice: Breast is best. I really did try breastfeeding. I never wanted to, but I felt I should, so when 2 minutes after he arrived I was asked if I was going to breast feed I said of course, I've just breathed this baby out on all fours with no pain relief. I will feed him myself. So it was a shame when Frank wasn't having any of it, which meant I had a humiliating few months ahead.

The first 24 hours in hospital meant having my boobs manhandled by various midwives who were determined that this baby was going to feed whether he wanted to or not. We managed to get out of the hospital as me and the baby pretended that it had all gone well and we'd managed it ourselves without midwife intervention....

We tried again at home but it still wasn't happening.

That's when I got it into my head that I would just express the milk. That way the baby got the best milk but without that trauma.....

After 6 weeks of expressing all the milk that Frank needed, the sound of the

breast pump was driving me insane. I thought I should have one last try at breast feeding. I called one of the NCT breastfeeding counsellors who arrived screeching outside our house like some breast feeding emergency service. It's only now that I can see the funny side of a 60 odd year old woman in my bedroom saying to me – "Right lets have a look at these nipples then". But after the nice lady left, we still couldn't get the hang of it, so the noisy, heavy milking machine was here to stay.

Producing milk filled all my waking hours, when I wasn't attached to the

The best parts of being a mother: He is wonderful. I love the beautiful smile that he gives me the second he wakes up and the vice like grip on my finger when I'm giving him his bottle. My favourite sounds are his happy squeal as he bounces like a maniac in his Jumperoo and his babbling conversations he has with my mum when she visits. It's bitter sweet seeing him grow, he's already such a little personality but it makes me a little sad when he grows out of his clothes and needs a bigger size of nappy!

Maybe not something to admit, but I love to escaping being a mum. Going to the Trafford centre or the pub – without Frank and pretending things were like they were before. Stuff I took for granted before but now give me more pleasure than they ever used to. Not surprisingly I now feel guilty for admitting that.....

I've loved making my new NCT friends. We were all so reserved on the course and on the first couple of follow up meet ups, but that all changed in the first get togethers after the babies arrived. They are a wonderful group of women who don't pretend that everything is perfect, thank God. I've loved getting together, getting their advice, eating cake (or drinking wine) and having a bitch fest about the guys or in-laws.

Has becoming a mother changed you? I think having Frank has made me a nicer person, I'm definitely more friendly and happier in general. My husband Jon tells me I'm less impatient and more tolerant. Most of the time.

Hopes for your family: I hope that Frank is a happy boy. I hope that he's respectful and polite with impeccable manners. I'm hoping he is kind. I'm hoping he doesn't have any worries.

I'm hoping that he will love to read and play tennis like I do, rather than have an obsession with motorbikes and riding them to the point of injury like his Dad.

I'd like to think I'll get over the traumatic birth, but I'm not sure I will enough to have another baby. Consequently I hope that Frank doesn't mind having a Jim the dog for a brother and that he makes friends easily so he doesn't get lonely.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: PACK YOUR HOSPITAL BAG. A bit of advice you read all the time but due to my hatred of packing even for a nice weekend away chose to ignore. Packing a hospital bag when in labour though was not fun.

Breast pumps will slowly drive you crazy.

Don't go near a pair of jeans for a while after the baby arrived. They make you feel fat. \\\



Name: Cathy

Child: George, 6 months

Expectations of Motherhood: I have always known that I wanted to be a mother. I am very close to my Mum and I can only hope that I will have an equally strong bond with my own children.

I didn't meet my husband Ronan until I was thirty three and when we started trying for a baby it took quite a while to conceive, so when it happened we were ecstatic. I was very superstitious during my pregnancy and was afraid that something might go wrong. Although I loved my bump I couldn't imagine the baby that would eventually come out. I didn't prepare a nursery, buy any clothes etc. The only thing we bought was a pram. Everything else was kindly handed down to us from my sister.

Reality of Motherhood: I found the first three months pretty tough. George basically cried whenever he wasn't feeding. The period from 5 weeks till about 3 months was the worst. I nicknamed it the 'all night disco'. George would ini-

tially go to sleep for a couple of hours then be pretty much up from about 2am onwards with colicky symptoms.

I found the sleep deprivation very hard to cope with, but people kept telling me it would get easier and they were so right. Watching George develop and change daily is beautiful. Being a mother feels so natural and has made me happier than I have ever been.

Taking your child home for the first time: I was totally shell shocked and exhausted after pretty much no sleep for five days. I ended up having to have a caesarian and was prescribed a cocktail of antibiotics and painkillers. The three of us lived in the living room for the first few days grabbing snoozes when we could. I'm so glad we didn't have any visitors for the first week. Those first few days together bonding and surviving as a new family were so important.

The best/worst advice: The worst advice had to be 'Sleep when your baby sleeps' - what do you do with a baby who doesn't sleep! The best advice was from my sister about establishing a routine. I began a

bedtime routine when George was about six weeks old. It's true babies really do appreciate the consistency and predictability of following a set pattern each night. Although it took a while to establish, as soon as I play the bedtime music George knows exactly what happening. He relaxes, enjoys his bath and self settles himself to sleep.

The hardest parts of being a mother: Breastfeeding is one of the hardest things I have ever done. For something that is supposed to be so natural there was a lot of pain and discomfort. The pain of latching George on in the early days was excruciating. I would often cry with pain and send Ronan out of the room. When feeding was eventually well established and pain free at about six weeks I found out that George wasn't gaining weight and he had dropped from the 75th to the 9th centile. I was heartbroken, I fed him constantly and he wasn't putting on weight - I couldn't believe it. My Doctor and Health Visitor advised to give him a formula top up. The first night that my husband gave George some formula I was distraught. He gulped it down. I was so upset that this little creature that was so dependent on me would happily take milk from a bottle.

My old boss sent me an article from The Telegraph entitled 'Breastfeeding may be best, but bottles of formula milk aren't the end of the world'. The article basically said that lots of mothers don't produce enough milk and just because breastfeeding is natural it doesn't mean it works for everyone. Reading the article really helped me to lose the sense failure I felt for not being able to exclusively breastfeed. It was also reassuring to find out that my Mum had a similar experience feeding the four of us.

The best parts of being a mother: Seeing George's face light up in the morning and the way he kicks his legs in excitement when he sees me. Cuddling him and making him laugh. The love I feel for him is indescribable and I appreciate how lucky I am to have him.

Has becoming a mother changed you?

As George is only six months old I think I am probably in the honeymoon period of being a full time Mum. I love my new life. At the moment I can't imagine going back to work and being apart from George for more than a few hours. Everything I do and plan is about George. Since becoming a mother I have definitely had to be tidier and more organised. I no longer worry about silly things.

Hopes for your family: I come from a family of four children and am very close to all of my brothers and sisters. I would love nothing more than for George to have a brother or sister sometime in the future.

What advice would you offer to new and expectant mums: The early days turn to weeks and the weeks to months and before you know it that tiny, helpless newborn is a sturdy little vegetable scoffer. Try and enjoy every stage because the time really does fly by.

The advice, support and friendship gained from my NCT group has been invaluable so I would definitely recommend attending a course. The breastfeeding support groups at my local Sure Start centres have been amazing. Talking to other new Mums in the early days kept me sane.

If you decide to breastfeed resign yourself to the fact that a newborn will be attached to your breast twenty four seven. The lady who ran the NCT class told us that you will barely have a chance to make a sandwich. I remember thinking how ridiculous, but she was right. Make yourself a little breastfeeding station with lots of water and food. I was permanently starving. Order yourself some box sets and try and enjoy the hours of cluster feeding. As they get older, babies become very efficient feeders and I now miss those long feeding sessions. Just the two of us snuggling up together. Never say never. A dummy, white noise and rocking all proved to be lifesavers in helping George to settle in the early weeks. \\\

