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## about birth 2006/2007

### Be prepared ... by Telisa Pearson-Collett

*“I used to think that you could be completely prepared for everything. However not being prepared is sometimes what you need to be with babies, because nothing can really prepare you for the overwhelming-ness of that first baby...”*

This is how my friend Ruth began an email to her newly-pregnant sister about all the things she wished she had known when pregnant with her own first baby. What followed was one of those timeless, fundamental conversations that you can imagine must have been taking place between sisters – and between mothers and daughters, cousins, neighbours and women friends -- for eons.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, as in other countries around the world, women have shared their experiences of motherhood, giving advice to ‘first-timers’ and answering questions about what to expect when baby arrives. At first, these conversations would have occurred in the same place as birth itself – in women’s homes. In whare and on marae in traditional Māori villages, in the simple wooden cabins of European settlers and even aboard the sailing ships they arrived on, women of all cultures passed down the ways of pregnancy, labour, birth, breastfeeding and caring for children. As communities became established, and Māori and Pakeha moved into towns and cities, these important conversations continued in farmhouse kitchens (or, in town, the villa kitchen), and across fences dividing neighbour’s gardens.

As towns and cities continued to expand during the last century, families too began to spread out, with adult off-spring tending to live away from parents and siblings, in different parts of the country -- and since the advent of air travel -- different parts of the world. Our friends may also live some distance away across town and our communities are said to have become less hospitable as they have grown. Of course, women still get together to talk, however, we are now just as likely talk about pregnancy and childrearing in places away from our homes – in workplaces, cafés, or the gym. In public spaces it may be more difficult to speak honestly about pregnancy and birth, or to ask frank questions about our bodies or emotions. Even when we talk to the women we know well – our mothers, sisters and close friends – our conversations may be affected by the pressures of modern living, particularly when distance forces us to communicate via telephone or e-mail. We tend to speak differently on the phone than when face-to-face, and it can be intimidating to discuss intimate issues over a long-distance line, or if we think others may read our e-mail messages.

In our modern, high-tech lives, we are now also more likely to get some of our information about mothering and babies in other ways – by reading books, watching television and DVDs and visiting

internet websites. Indeed, it is not uncommon nowadays for women having their first babies not to personally know any parents with young children, relying instead on information from antenatal classes, books, health professionals and their recollections of their own childhood.

Of course, modern technology and greater access to information has its benefits, providing us with the latest international research and the opportunity to learn from the collective experience of many more birthing women than we could possibly meet ourselves in a lifetime. However, the down-side of the 'information age' is that there is often so much material available that we become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of books, articles and websites devoted to a particular topic. When accessing information via the internet, it is also easy to lose sight of the fact that some information posted may not be relevant to New Zealand's maternity care system, hailing from countries with vastly different rates of medical intervention in childbirth (such as caesarian section), or where access to midwifery care may be restricted.

Another difficulty is that the information which is readily available to the public is likely to reflect a particular bias, or point of view. For example, multi-national pharmaceutical companies have large budgets for publicizing their products and distributing pamphlets and articles in support of those products, compared to the funding available to midwives and community organizations working to inform birthing whanau/families in their local community. In other words, *what* we read matters. Brochures on all kinds of issues – from childhood vaccinations to medications and food choices for baby – often give the impression of having been written to 'inform' us of our options, however, all too often, the sponsors of these leaflets and magazine articles have a vested (financial) interest in providing only facts and figures which support their own product. As little more than thinly-disguised marketing material, many commercially-driven publications and 'sponsored' brochures rarely explain the full range of choices available or alternatives to the status quo.

Ruth's e-mail reminded me how valuable a guide can be when starting out on a new adventure – and first-time parenthood could be described as the adventure of a life-time! And a guide is what we have aimed to produce with this issue of our magazine – a place to start searching for information and ideas. Of course, we all have different ways of seeing the world, and a unique way of raising our children, however, we have tried to capture a range of issues and viewpoints that you *won't* find discussed in the mainstream media and to present a fresh perspective on more popular topics. We have thought carefully about the articles we have included and have sourced them from writers and publications we trust and have found useful in our own journeys as parents. This philosophy extends to our advertising policy and we are fortunate to have the support of businesses and service providers suggested by members of our association. These advertisers were happy to support the magazine in its entirety, without common publishing industry inducements such as 'supportive editorial' or 'sponsorship' of individual articles. This support means we have been able to print 350 extra copies of the magazine for distribution throughout the Waikato, allowing us to reach many more birthing women and new parents than in previous years.

Wherever possible we have included suggestions for further reading, website links and – most importantly -- local organizations that can provide advice and much needed parent-to-parent support. We all need to build our own support networks because, as Ruth's e-mail rightly suggests, nothing can fully prepare us for all the challenges we face as new parents and it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the task of caring for a new little person we are just beginning to know. Just as we adults are all individuals, so too are our babies, with their own unique personality and distinct likes and dislikes – meaning that something that works for one child may not work for another. As new mothers and fathers we need lots of people to ask about issues affecting our children and help to find support for ourselves as we learn to deal with challenges as parents. We hope this special issue of the magazine will help you as you prepare for your new baby and begin this journey of discovery together.

Arohanui, Telisa.