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Home Help. Who needs it ?

By Ruth Hungerford

Before we had our first baby I was so focused on the birth not on what would happen after. I had heard everything from “babies are lots of work” to “newborns just sleep all the time, so you’ll get heaps of other things done” so I really did not know what to expect. The reality was way more intense that what I had ever imagined. Here I was, an educated, informed, practical , totally in control person, completely undone by this tiny little person who seemed to need so much!

Breastfeeding was much more difficult than I had expected. I’d read all the books which was useful but it’s like *reading* about how to play the flute, and then having to actually play it. It was clearly an art that I had to learn by doing - and I was never good at practicing stuff (I like to get it right the first time)! Fortunately I had supportive midwives who knew about breastfeeding, as well as a sister in law in La Leche, and of course Simon who was incredibly supportive and believed in me as I struggled to learnt the art,. Between them all, baby and I finally got the hang of it. Once we had got the breastfeeding sorted though, I still couldn’t figure out why this tiny person took up so much time !

But ...then one day while I was sitting on the couch feeding the baby, I did the maths. The ‘average’ baby feeds 10 to 12 times a day. That would be once every two hours if babies cared about having a regular timetable, (which in my experience is not anywhere near true . Add to that figure that according to a survey in New Zealand on newborn babies, they sleep anywhere from 11 hours a day to 20 hours a day. So if your baby is at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of sleep (like all mine were), she’s asleep 11 or 12 hours a day, that leaves 12 hours to fit in 10 to 12 feeds, and if a feed lasts an hour or so (sometimes longer) then most of the ‘awake’ time is spent sitting and feeding (although this is not all bad—it is good for reading books and resting yourself). In the other 12 hours, you need to get your 8 hours of sleep for the day, (plus a day time power nap—very important:-) and get all the other things done like eating and drinking and washing and household chores and work. Of course, you may get a baby that sleeps more which is a bonus as you get a few more hours in the day to do stuff—but—there’s still an awful lot of stuff to fit into a 24 hour period. So the result is that unless you have help, you get very tired because there actually is not enough time in the day to do everything!

Helping new Mums and babies is a concept as old as the first Mums and babies. A recent (2003) cross-cultural study of the post-natal period found that

“In most societies, birth and the immediate postpartum period are considered a time of vulnerability for mother and child. the postnatal period is defined as approximately 40 days in most cultures; most societies have special postnatal customs that include special diet, isolation, rest and help in the household. The resemblance between different cultures is striking. Many postnatal customs from rural societies that were common before 1950 have

disappeared. The focus on rest and help in the household for the mother after birth has been reduced.”¹

There are some sound reasons for these traditions.

1. Breastfeeding and milk supply take time to establish and the best way to do this is to spend the first few months feeding baby on cue and making sure that Mum rests, eats well and drinks (water!) lots.
2. Birthing a baby, while normal and natural, is a fairly major task that involves a lot of energy and takes time to recover from. Women need to rest and allow their tissues and muscles to heal. Having to step back into work too quickly can slow this process.
3. Bonding - the process of baby and mum becoming attached—happens best when mum and baby can spend time together, getting to know each other.

In some countries it is normal for mums to be looked after for the first few weeks after childbirth. In the Netherlands for example, there is a government subsidy to allow all mothers to access a trained ‘home helper’ (krammhulp) for two weeks post-birth, who comes in for between 2 and 8 hours a day to help with whatever the mother needs (e.g. help with other children, make meals, do housework, provide support to the mother with breastfeeding etc)².

In good old Aotearoa we don’t (yet) have subsidised home help, so we need to utilise family, friends and the support groups out there to help us in this time.

Ruth

References

1. [Eberhard-Gran M](#), [Nordhagen R](#), [Heiberg E](#), [Bergsjø P](#), [Eskild A](#), *Postnatal care in a cross-cultural and historical perspective*, in [Tidsskr Nor Laegeforen](#). 2003 Dec 23;123(24):3553-6. (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14691498).
2. Pepsicles (home help service), www.pepsicles.co.nz

P.S. By the way—I did learn from my experience with my first baby. With the next baby my parents came and stayed for three weeks and cooked, and cleaned, and entertained the toddler, and let the baby sleep on them so I could have a shower. It was bliss for both Simon and I—and it truly made the babymoon time, a joy.