

# THE MAKING OF A MOTHER

STORY RHIANNA MITCHELL





**Mother-Baby  
Nurture  
co-ordinator  
Sharon Cooke says  
the program helps  
give new mums the  
support and space  
to connect with  
their babies. A  
documentary on  
their experiences  
will air this week.**



Clockwise from left:  
Mhairi Leitch and  
Grayson; Lara Miller and  
Ollie; the playgroup-  
based program needs  
more resources to meet  
demand.



**THE FIRST MONTHS OF MOTHERHOOD CAN BE BEAUTIFUL — AND BRUTAL. A PROGRAM TO HELP STRUGGLING MOTHERS FEEL LESS ALONE HOPES TO STOP THEM FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS**

Early last year, when Lara Miller was navigating the first few weeks of motherhood, things that had once been so simple, so mundane, suddenly became impossible. A 1.5km walk to the local shops with newborn baby Ollie cocooned in his pram began with a warning to husband Jack to “be ready” for the phone call that would inevitably come, asking to be rescued.

As she walked, and as Ollie started screaming, Miller was convinced those around her were judging her as an incapable mother. She saw every passer-by as a threat, poised to take her baby from her because she was simply no good at caring for her son.

She would spend every second in the shower wondering if Ollie had stopped breathing. Invitations to barbecues or going to brunch with friends — how she had pictured spending her maternity leave — caused her to break out in a sweat.

A self-described perfectionist who was always immaculately put together and who thrived on her successful, busy career in real estate, Miller no longer recognised herself.

“I had never suffered from mental health issues before, and it hit me like a tonne of bricks,” she says.

“I had ideas on what (motherhood) was going to be like, I had the designer pram, the designer baby bag, then all of a sudden I’ve got these feelings that have overcome me. I thought I would be the mum brunching with my girlfriends but in reality I was the broken one, who couldn’t leave the house.”

She had a textbook pregnancy until just before 34 weeks when she was put on strict bed rest and medication to prevent early labour. Ollie was born just before 37 weeks after an “amazing labour”, but the new parents faced an early challenge when he was admitted to hospital at 12 days old with an infection.

Meanwhile, the day five “baby blues” Miller had been warned about had not dissipated, and were in fact worsening as each sleep-deprived day dawned.

When her obstetrician asked how she was at a five-week postpartum check-up, the floodgates burst.

“I couldn’t stop crying, I had been struggling but I had been keeping it in because I was embarrassed,” she recalls.

Miller was referred to the One for Women clinic in Midland, which then recommended she attend a support group for vulnerable mothers, facilitated by Playgroup WA.

Mother-Baby Nurture is a 10-week program for mothers and babies in the first six months, with each course run by a psychologist as well as a previous graduate of the program, across seven Playgroup WA sites.

To mark its 10th year, and to make both service providers and families aware of the challenges of the perinatal period and the help that is available, Playgroup WA will this week premiere a documentary featuring insights from 14 graduates of the program.

Miller is among the women who wanted to speak out in the hope they might prevent other women from feeling the crippling fear, despair and isolation which clouded their first weeks of motherhood. She attended her first Mother-Baby Nurture session when Ollie was about seven weeks old and immediately felt understood, and free from judgment.

“They didn’t make me feel like my fears were silly, they listened. Hearing the other stories, we all had similar experiences, and it helped to normalise what I was feeling,” she says.

“I knew postnatal depression existed but I didn’t know I would be overcome by it so significantly and really struggle. It’s something that isn’t openly discussed enough.

“Mother-Baby Nurture helped me to find the beauty in motherhood, and helped me to bond with Ollie, and let go of all my anxieties and fears.”

She is one of more than 1000 women who have taken part in the program in the past decade. Mother-Baby Nurture co-ordinator Sharon Cooke describes it as a privilege to sit alongside mothers and watch them, and their relationship with their babies, transform.

“I find it absolutely heartbreaking to hear the pain, loss and struggle and hear some of the traumatic stories, but on the other hand I see great capacity in these women who, for whatever reason, are finding it tough,” she says.

“They are working their very hardest to turn things around, and I see great strength, and a high degree of motivation as they fall in love with their baby and want to do the best for them.”

Cooke describes the program as filling the gap that exists between acute intensive mental health services and the Child and Adolescent Health Service child health nurse check-ups and mothers’ groups.

It is a significant gap, with an estimated one in five women — or 6000 WA mums

every year — experiencing anxiety, depression or both during pregnancy or after birth.

“If only we could see the transition to motherhood as being a really critical time for support,” Cooke says.

“To have a mother that has enough mental space to hear and feel and connect with their little one is a great gift for a baby, and you see them make significant developmental leaps through that process of having someone so genuinely delighting in their company. They thrive, basking in their mother’s company.”

Demand for Mother-Baby Nurture is so great that Cooke says she could fill 60, not six, groups at a time, if only there were the resources.

“Social media might have us believe that all babies are sweet and like to sleep and feed and smile lovingly up at us, and that along with them comes home-making contentment and outpourings of bliss, but how very different it can be,” Cooke says.

“It can leave mums disorientated, distressed and in shock. It can wreak havoc, they can have a lot of big feelings . . . love, hate, fear, numbness, delight, despair. These emotions can be really frightening and at times can get in the way of caring and connecting as a family.

“One of the familiar stories we hear from women is ‘I don’t feel so alone anymore’. Feeling alone, and feeling like nobody else would understand, or that there must be something wrong, or broken, is a common struggle.”

Cooke says that in the 10 years it had been running, the program had led to significant reductions in depression and anxiety in mothers and greater maternal confidence and attachment between mother and child.

That sense of isolation and unease is just how Mhairi Leitch felt when son Grayson was born. Her longing for pregnancy had been plagued by hyperemesis, and she developed anxiety which only worsened when her labour ended in a terrifying emergency caesarean section.

Her husband, Andrew, was sent home after the delivery and Leitch was left alone with her worry and confusion. Things didn’t get any better when she and Grayson went home.

He was an unsettled baby who rarely slept, but even if she could have slept, Leitch wouldn’t have, such was her fear that something was going to happen to her baby.

“The only word I identify with that time is ‘suffering’. I was convinced as soon as I closed my eyes he was going to die,” she recalls.

Leitch worked in child care and was caught off guard when parenting did not come easily.

“I love children, I’m a great carer, so when I didn’t find it as easy as I was expecting — if anything, it was the hardest thing I had ever done — I felt angry,” she says. “Why didn’t anybody tell me what the reality was going to be like? I knew I would be tired but the reality was it was one miserable day joining the next.”

Leitch was referred to Mother-Baby Nurture after attending St John of God’s Raphael Services for perinatal mental health.

Like Miller, attending her first session was a pivotal moment. “Everybody understood how I was feeling, and I understood how they were feeling . . . we just needed a safe space to just be who you are,” Leitch says.

“In our society, if you feel anything other than constant joy or happiness, it’s assumed you’re not grateful. Even before he was born, I loved him, but equal to that love was this fear something was going to happen.”

She was diagnosed with postnatal depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder and while she still struggles at times, sharing her struggles with others has helped with her recovery. Grayson is now a caring four-year-old who brings his mum huge amounts of joy.

“I had such a low opinion of myself, I thought my son would be better off without me,” Leitch recalls. “But at the end of the last session of Mother-Baby Nurture, not only did I not feel like I was a terrible mother, I thought, ‘You know what, I’m a damn good mother’.”

For Miller, the realisation that she, too, was a capable mum struck her a few months after starting Mother-Baby Nurture.

One day, there she was, strapping Ollie into his car seat, and hopping in behind the wheel. She realised something was missing. That feeling of dread that had accompanied every moment of her life for months, was gone.

“That was a pivotal moment for me,” she recalls. “Now, I feel like the old me. Just a better version.”

For details, visit [motherbabynurture.com](https://motherbabynurture.com)