



Mothering Our Mothers

by kimmelin hull

In the wake of conducting a survey of 130 postpartum women regarding their needs following childbirth, I had the distinct honor of traveling to Nevada to visit my best friend and her husband, while in their 35th week of pregnancy.

Having been confined to modified best rest over the previous ten weeks, my friend was in desperate need for some company, and a little help in preparing for her soon-to-arrive baby girl. Over four days' time, I washed baby clothes, prepared meals for their freezer, installed their infant car seat system and did a little house cleaning. But more importantly, we discussed the concept of arranging sufficient support measures for the young family after their baby's arrival.

Having spent the three-hour plane ride between Bozeman and Las Vegas tabulating the results of the "Mothering Our Mothers" survey, I was both astounded and unsurprised at the results.

The respondents' answers to the nine-question query were uniform and simple. What women needed most, in the days and weeks following their babies' births was to be mothered.

In questions ranging from "What issue did you receive the most help with?" and "Who did you receive support from?" to "What could you have used more help with?" the answers strayed very little from each other.

Each woman needed a trusted, comforting person to ensure she had time to rest and bond with her new child. She needed provision of nutritious food as she recovered from the rigors of childbirth. And she needed someone to "protect the nest" of her home—which included general household management, and controlling the frequency and duration of visitors. Although the women surveyed had the opportunity to elaborate on the types of support they would have liked to receive, such as with the question, "What would have made you feel most loved, supported and

pampered?" most women didn't express the need for anything more luxurious than significant moral support, and a dependable person to proactively attend to their basic needs.

So why even conduct such a survey, you might be wondering? At a glance, it seems obvious (at least to me) that women need to be mothered as they made the transition mom. But the social, cultural and geographic dynamics in our country are leading us farther and farther away from the tradition of women caring for women after childbirth—a tradition that is thousands of years old. And this pattern is propagating itself at every level—from federal policy (or lack thereof) all the way down to the individual family unit. One survey respondent summed up her frustration in the postpartum period this way:

"There isn't any sort of paid maternity leave in this country and therefore I used all my vacation and sick [leave] for the first five weeks and the remaining nine weeks were unpaid. This made it

so difficult to focus on my new baby... [worrying how] we were going to make ends meet."

In fact, a review of the information available on Wikipedia regarding parental leave policies, as compared by country, reveals shocking news: the United States, along with Australia, are the only two nations world-wide in which there is no federally mandated paid parental leave. And Australians even have a leg up on us due to a two-year unpaid federal precedent that at least preserves a woman's job while she is away. Comparing these statistics to: Sweden, where mothers and fathers can share a total of 18 months of parental leave per child; China, where women receive 90 days of 100% paid leave; and even India where women, depending on place of employment and the number of living children, are allotted up to 135 days of paid leave, makes it obvious that something needs to be done here at home.

Thankfully, organizations such as Moms Rising, (www.momsrising.org) is waging a battle against this lackluster support of young families. The organiza-

tion's website offers abundant information on our current federal Family and Medical Leave Act, several proposed state bills that would provide significant improvements in the amount of leave family members could take to care for a loved one, and ideas for citizen activism. There is also an extensive list of partner organizations that have chosen to align themselves with Moms Rising.

Aside from the lack of governmental support for the bonding and recovery postpartum families need, our fast-paced culture and geographic migration patterns have weakened the degree of familial support new mothers receive.

As jobs, educational opportunities and other factors spread family members across the country and beyond, the amount of time and availability grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins have to tend to the birth family has become limited. While some new parents still live close to their own parents or siblings, many of us live hours, if not states away from our loved ones. This makes it harder for those who would otherwise gladly provide the

care new mothers need in those precious first days and weeks after a baby's birth. To deliver hot meals, watch the baby for an hour while mom takes a nap, or just spend an afternoon here and there being with the new mother to provide emotional support as she learns the ropes of motherhood is becoming a brief punctuation in the larger transitional postpartum period.

In Korea, tradition states that new moms and babies are to be cared for under strict guidelines for a full twenty-one days after birth. While the responsibility of cooking for and protecting the mother and baby from cold, illness and other visitors, typically fell upon the woman's husband as well as both sets of grandparents, increasingly more Korean mothers are checking themselves and their newborns into postpartum centers that relieve aging grandparents from these duties, and allow fathers to maintain their own rigorous work schedules. According to a Korean woman with whom I attended my Lamaze certification course several years ago, these centers even send out aides to the family

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household to ensure the father, and any other existing children are well cared for in the mother's absence.

While this trend isn't perfect, it accomplishes one significant goal: Korean postpartum women are receiving the amount and duration of care they need and deserve.

"There also isn't a strong outreach [in our community] for new moms to help them with everything (food, childcare, cleaning, sleep, emotional support, etc) and it would be great to see a group emerge for this purpose and to get the word out to new moms if/when it occurs," commented another survey respondent. In fact, 58% of women surveyed disagreed with the statement, "Our present day culture adequately supports women in their roles as mothers."

Not surprisingly, the people that understand the most what new mothers need in terms of support and nurturing, are those closest to the situation. And yet, women who have recently become mothers themselves tend to be so im-

mersed in the day-to-day life of caring for their own families, that to offer any resources beyond putting together an extra casserole while preparing their own family's supper feels almost impossible.

But it can be done. Beyond frozen meals, new moms benefit immensely from the little things that, when performed in conjunction with the efforts of others, add up to big things. Whether you are a family member visiting a new mom for a week, or a friend or church member visiting for an hour, there is plenty you can do to support the new mother beyond taking your turn to hold the baby.

Housekeeping

When visiting a family with a newborn, choose one quick housekeeping item you can perform in their home. Because women in our culture are becoming increasingly stoic about accepting help, you may need to just select the chore of your choice without awaiting the new mom's direction. Simple tasks that can be done while visiting include: unload-

ing and re-loading the dishwasher, sweeping the kitchen floor, putting a load of laundry in to wash or dusting the living room furniture. Unless you're a trusted friend or family member, most new moms will feel uncomfortable allowing their company to scrub the toilets—but you can bet you'll see a smile emerge across her face when you return from the pantry with a broom in hand.

Meals

Dinners that are freezer ready are always a safe bet when it comes to nurturing a new family. But if you're looking for something to do that boasts a greater degree of culinary creativity, put together snack trays of fresh, washed and cut fruits and veggies, crackers and cheese. Women who have recently gone through childbirth (and especially those who are breast feeding) tend to have an unstoppable appetite, and finding a refrigerator full of ready-to-eat healthy snacks is a must. If your budget has more wiggle room, give the young parents a gift certificate to a meal preparation studio



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before their baby arrives so they can prepare and stock their own freezer with meals they are most likely to favor. Many local businesses of this type, such as Prefix, here in Bozeman, also offer the option to pick up pre-made meals at a slightly higher cost.

Care of Older Children

One of the greatest sources of stress for new and expectant parents revolves around the care of their older children. Aware of the needs an existent child already has, young parents worry about the transition their older child(ren) will endure with the addition of another sibling. You can help ease this burden by offering to host the older child(ren) for a play date, take the older kids to a nearby park or, out to lunch or a movie, or if age permits, have them to your home for a sleep over. If you are close enough to the family to do so, place yourself on their "call list," as someone willing to care for their older child(ren) when labor day arrives.

Moral Support

Sometimes the greatest service a visitor to the home of a new baby can offer is an open ear. Women who have recently gone through childbirth need several strong sources of support, and sometimes being a good listener is as much, if not more important than wielding a broom and dustpan.

For women who endured a difficult pregnancy or birth experience, talking through their frustrations, fears, or grievances can be incredibly healing. Moms who are learning the ropes of diapering, bathing, and feeding a newborn for the first time often just need to hear what a great job their doing in those uncharted waters. For women who are breastfeeding, having someone else provide encouragement through the learning process, provision of healthy snacks and plenty of fluids is an absolute must. As is privacy. A woman new to breast feeding will thankfully accept your understanding when she asks for a little quiet time when her baby becomes hungry.

Get Her Off Her Feet

"If people who were hanging out would have made a better attempt at keeping my house clean and not so cluttered, it would have been easier for me to relax. I felt like I was cleaning and picking up more than anyone!"

After observing this, and many similar responses by women in the Mothering Our Mothers survey, I found myself aghast at the suggestion that many visitors show up just to see the baby rather than provide the tasks and support new parents really need. While giving the new mom a break from holding the baby—even encouraging her to take a nap or go for a walk while you watch over her little one—can be incredibly helpful, remember: she's looking to her visitors to add to her level of comfort...not make more work for her! So, whether you're a friend or family member who plans to visit for an hour, a few days, or a few weeks, remember a few basic tenets: Do what the new mom

should not be doing, listen when she needs to talk, nurture her with kindness, encouragement and nutrition, and if all else fails, place yourself in her shoes... and react accordingly!

While here in Bozeman, we may be a long way off from establishing a post-partum center where women and babies can "check in" for a few weeks, I urge us to find other ways to improve the level of support we offer new mothers making their way through this significant transition in life. New moms aren't asking for a whole lot. We just want to be given the time, space, and guidance to ease our way into motherhood.

For more ideas and local resources, click on the Mothering Our Mothers feature on our website: www.mtparent.com

Kimmelin Hull is a Bozeman freelance writer and author. Her new book is A Dozen Invisible Pieces and Other Confessions of Motherhood. Visit her website at www.pregnancytoparenthood.org



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