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How to cope when raising kids
becomes a handful



A one -of-a-kind workshop conceived by a Hawthorn woman is helping new mums get the most out of motherhood. By Georgina Jerums. Photographs by Jaime Murcia.

Mums in the hood

Hawthorn psychologist Betty Chetcuti was in for a rude shock when she first became a mother. Recovering from childbirth and returning from the hospital in 1997 with her first son Nicholas, the 36-year-old quickly discovered motherhood was a job with 24/7 demands and no holidays. (If mothering was a paid job, she jokes, it would come with on-going training, holiday and sick leave, and cash bonuses.) “I didn’t think at all beyond the birth,” says Chetcuti. “I loved children and I figured, ‘Heaps of other women have done this, I’ll be okay’. I thought I’d be playing a lot of tennis with my baby asleep in a pram courtside.” She laughs at her naivety. Trying to cope with almost no sleep, rather than enjoying a mid-week hit with the girls, was the reality.



Betty Chetcuti and sons Liam (left) and Nicholas.

“Is it just me,” Chetcuti asked herself, “or is motherhood really like this?” Why weren’t other mums coming clean about the bouts of loneliness, the craving for acknowledgement and the sleep deprivation? Why the cone of silence and guilt about not enjoying it all the time?

Chetcuti was an intelligent, high-achieving professional supported by a loving husband and a strong network of friends. Yet she found mothering the most difficult challenge she had ever faced. She loved her son and didn’t have post-natal depression, but anger, guilt and anxiety

set in when she’d been up for hours at night holding her red-faced baby. “Recent research in Britain has found 18 hours without sleep is equivalent to being over the legal alcohol limit,” she says.

This study of 47 mums in December, 2000, by the Edinburgh Sleep Centre found new mums short of sleep drive worse than if they were drunk. It stated 11 per cent of new mums suffer severe sleep deprivation and a third lose some sleep. Nearly a fifth of those who took part said they regularly went 24 hours without sleep in the first eight weeks of their baby’s life.

The survey found some babies woke as many as 15 times a night and – surprise, surprise – it was usually the women who get up in the night. Ninety per cent of those who were getting more than six hours a night described themselves as

happy, while 39 per cent of those getting fewer than three hours were unhappy.

“When I had Nicholas, I used to say to people, ‘You can come and visit me any time in a 24-hour period because it’s all the same – I’ll probably be up,’” says Chetcuti. “But my second baby (three-year-old Liam) used to sleep all the time. It’s just how they come out.”

Chetcuti correctly assumed other mothers must be going through similar experiences and decided to run one-day group workshops in her home. Her “Being a Mother” workshop was devised in the early months of 2001 after the birth of her second son, Liam, and while

she was re-establishing her private psychology practice. She would put the boys to bed, and then start work, sometimes going to bed at 2am.

“We only have our children for such a short time and many of us find that despite our love for them, we still shout and get upset and angry,” says Chetcuti. “This workshop is about creating happier mothers. Our communities are so reliant on effective parenting keeping families together. If the mother falls apart, often the whole family disintegrates.”

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“And how often do we, as mothers, get time to sit and think about our most important and challenging role and the numerous issues that confront us in this role? We are even followed to the bathroom.”

The first workshop was held in August last year and is now run monthly. Follow-up nights help create “that sense of community of generations ago”. “We’re not in community anymore,” says Chetcuti. “There’s too much for one single person to absorb. We do the laundry, the cooking and the playing with the stress of raising children in isolation. As human beings we’re not designed to live by ourselves.”

That resentment can lead to guilt. “There’s a saying, ‘show me a woman who doesn’t feel guilt and I’ll show you a man,’” says Chetcuti. “There are two types of women. Ones who are angry at other people, such as their husband, and there’s the other type; women who feel really responsible for everything and blame themselves directly for everything.

Chetcuti was in the second category when her first son was born. “I needed to know everything: what does this runny nose mean, does it mean they’re sick? I was too anxious, because I was too tired because I had an unsettled baby. “If you had a nanny, a husband who could read your mind, your baby was sleeping and you had regular contact with friends, it’d be great. Your stress would be less. But that’s not how it is.”

But Chetcuti says mothers can make motherhood more satisfying for everyone “when we demonstrate being able to really attend to our children even when we are busy, calming ourselves down when we have become angry, and doing things with purpose especially when we don’t feel like it, for example, getting up to resettle a child at four in the morning without being furious about it!”.

Her words hit home and the workshop has attracted the interest of academics. “RMIT and the Australian Catholic University are looking at my workshop as a research initiative,” says Chetcuti. RMIT researchers have been meeting with her to analyse the workshop findings.

SOME MOTHERS ...

Three Melbourne participants in the “Being a Mother” workshop discuss guilt, stress, anger and other joys of motherhood.

Clare Collinge, 30, from Balwyn. Children: Jack, six; Alice, four “going in 13”; and Harry, one. Former occupation: Community radio announcer.

Working in radio can be high pressure.

But you found mothering harder? Yes, I was a presenter on Whitehorse/Boroondara Community Radio. At work, you’re in complete control. If you don’t get the work done, it’s only you at fault. If, however, I’m feeding Harry downstairs and Jack’s upstairs getting ready for a swimming lesson in 45 minutes and they’re not doing what you ask, you’re mega-stressed because they’re not doing what you want. **What are your thoughts on mothers feeling guilty about not coping well with the daily stress of being with the children?** It’s important to realise you’re not alone. There’s that horrible feeling when you scream at them. You’re so angry, but you think, ‘I shouldn’t have done that because now they’re in tears’. You feel really bad and you know that’s not what you’re meant to do. That plays on you and you’re thinking, ‘Why are they doing this to me? I can’t believe they’re making me so angry!’ And you’re in a bad mood for the rest of the day. I’m a work-in-progress because I’m not perfect. The program helps you change over time.



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Clare Collinge

Clare Collinge and son Harry

Why did you feel you needed to go to a mothering workshop? I had a lot of problems with urgency. I wanted things done now. And that made me really angry. I’d say, “Get in the car now”, and , “Get your shoes on now”. It builds into this big mountain. I discovered that in the workshop. Defining that and recognising how I behave with the children was a big step.

Can a one-day workshop make a difference? It shows you what you have to do. After the workshop, for the first three or four days, I was in ecstasy, cruising through life. Then things started to falter, and I thought, ‘What do I do now?’ You go back and redo (the anger management learnt in the course). The kids made a huge mess of their room, and I was thinking, “Oh my God, I’d just cleaned it up. This is too hard. I’m so angry.” It was an immediate feeling. But you redo the work from the workshop and retrain your thinking. For more effective parenting I’ll say, “Come back guys, how about we tidy up this room and then we’ll go

for a walk to the park.” Much more effective. I did the workshop just before Christmas. We had the in-laws arriving, and there was a mad rush to do all the Christmas stuff. School had finished and I had the kids around all the time.

Do you enjoying mothering more now?

Yes. There are more times where you catch yourself smiling. Of course, you enjoy your kids, but sometimes you get so overwhelmed. If the kids are trying to tell a story, and you’re busy doing something, just stop and listen to them. Like this morning, no one wanted to sit on a stool that wobbles. Normally, I’d shout, “No one’s getting brekkie.” It was early in morning, I was tired, trying to get things done, and I hadn’t had my coffee. But this morning, instead, I said, “Well who do you think should get the chair?” Because I wasn’t all wound up in my own anger, guilt and frustration, I could think, “What needs to happen? They need to decide among themselves”. I wasn’t angry, I could think clearly, I wasn’t in a rage. That’s a big issue for me.

Do you think more mothering courses are needed?

Yes. When I say to people, I did this workshop and it changed my life, they say, “That’s great for you, but I don’t have a problem”. You don’t have to have a problem to get something out of it. I think the government should subsidise people to do this type of course.

Katrina Bowman, 33, Oakleigh. Twins, two, Ella and Charlotte. Former occupation: Public relations manager.

How was life before motherhood?

I was a career girl, a PR manager working 60-hour weeks. I felt I was ready for children, but nothing ever quite prepares you.

Was motherhood harder than being a PR manager?

Oh, God yes! It’s the hardest work I’ve ever done, because it’s constant. Every day I think about my life without children. But since doing the workshop, I enjoy my children so much, but there are times when I still (feel furious). Part of the reason for my anger was regrets about having

twins. But through the course I recognised there's nothing I can do about that now. Here we are, I want my children to be happy, I don't want to be shouting at them, I want a close, living relationship and I want to enjoy it. We're not going back now. It helped me move on.

What pushed your emotional buttons? I did the workshop at the end of last year. I was getting angry and I didn't like it. I was throwing things and kicking cupboards shut. I didn't like the fact that I was shouting at my children. My experience of motherhood was quite different from what I expected, partly because I had twins, so there were a lot of additional challenges. I didn't know why I was so angry. I thought, 'I've got every reason to be happy, two beautiful children, a lovely husband, everything in my life is okay', But there I was with this anger building up inside. I needed some help with how to control my anger.

Was it a shock having twins? Absolutely. I found out when I was 20 weeks pregnant with a scan. Doing Betty's program helped me realise I was angry because I had two babies. I love them both desperately, but I was so jealous of those mums with one baby, whose experience was very different to mine. Talking with other mothers helps establish that sense of community and that network. It helps to know you're not alone in getting angry or depressed sometimes. With the lack of a sense of community these days, it's easy to feel alone when you're stuck at home and everyone else is at work. The conversation at mother's group can be a more everyday chat, whereas the mothering workshop is a chance to really talk and share about what's happening to you in a child-free day.

How has your relationship with your husband changed since managing your urgency issues? I'm not so angry anymore. One thing I got out of the course was writing up a list of all the good things about my children to appreciate them. I also did this about my husband. I focused on the good things and remembered why I fell in love

with him in the first place. Sometimes we get so caught up in being parents, we forget about each other and each other's needs.

Are you more open with your network of friends about the mothering problems you are facing? I always have been. One of the other reasons I was angry was because other women tend to keep it a secret. Everyone congratulates you, instead of sharing the reality of what it's really like. So I make a big sharing with people about the change and how stressful it is. And I encourage friends, if they feel depressed or angry, to see a psychologist straight away. Not to dilly dally.

What wrong with a cuppa with a friend? Sometimes that's enough. You can have a whinge, get it off your chest. That can make you feel better. But if that's not helping, you might need professional help.

You've written about twins. Why? I've written a book with another mother with twins, Louise Ryan, about our experience. (Twins: A practical and emotional guide to parenting twins, Allen & Unwin.) It's the book we wished we had. The number of multiple births is increasing. The main factor is we're having babies later in life and the older you are, the more likely you are to conceive twins. More than 3800 sets of twins were born in Australia in 2000, compared with 2219 sets of twins in 1980.

Do you work? I'm working two days a week and I have my children in child care three days a week. Child care has been a wonderful turning point for us as it's enabled me to have some more balance in my life and it's really good for the girls. They love it. They get to interact with other children and develop a trusting relationship with other adults. Particularly with twins, for them to develop, we don't want them to just spend all their time together.



The Betty Bunch: (left to right) Katrina Bowman with twins Ella and Charlotte; Clare Collinge with Jack (aeroplane shirt), little Harry and Alice (in front); and Betty Chetcuti with Liam (check shirt) and Nicholas (Varsity top).

Kelly Hagenauer, 34, Hawthorn. Max, 15 months, Caitlin, four. Former occupation: financial administrator for a mining company.

What were your first experiences of being a mum? Post-natal depression kicked in immediately after I gave birth to Caitlin, and I was hospitalised. I still have counselling from time to time.

Why did the workshop appeal? This was a good way to talk about the nuts and bolts of what it's really like to be a mum, the daily grind. It was so wonderful to sit in a room and listen, and think, that's me! It was nice to be in a room with other women who were sharing their experiences, saying, 'Some days are really hard' and 'How come all these other mothers seem to cope?' A lot of mothers use other mothers as a benchmark as to how they should act and that assumption can be quite dangerous. It was grounding to be among women facing similar challenges. Caitlin will be at school next year and it will be a little easier to catch my breath.

What was the biggest revelation when you gave birth? The shock of becoming a mother is that it's an ongoing job. You have to think on your feet a lot more than you anticipated because your children go through different developmental stages and that creates emotional hot-spots.

Can you give an example?

My son kept touching the catflap. I'd get angry and yell. Is yelling useful? No, he didn't know the catflap is dirty. If I get angry with Caitlin or Max, I ask, 'Is this state of mind where I want to be right now?', then focus immediately on how I want to interact with them. To change, you need to practice that at every chance

you get. You don't change your habits overnight, but if you really want to, you can change the way you are with the people around you. When my kids get to 20, I want them to look back with positivity about their childhoods, and know I've done the best I can and have a great relationship with them.

- For more information (dates and costs) about the Being a Mother workshop, see www.beingamother.com or tel: **03 9882 7958** or **0407 819 519**. Private health insurance rebates and concession rates are available. Chetcuti was trained in Rational Emotive Behaviour Theory by Dr Michael Bernard (visit www.youcandoiteducation.com), who worked closely with Dr Albert Ellis, the founder of REBT (visit www.rebt.org). Dr Albert Ellis developed REBT (originally referred to as REI) in 1955, with the main premise that "it is our thinking about an event, and not the event per se, that gets us upset". The change model in the "Being a Mother workshop" is based on REBT.