



Closer to nurture

You can find them on Facebook, among your own network of family and friends, or even in a pub. These “villages of support” are helping new mums and dads raise their kids — and, in doing so, raising them as parents

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Of all the advice he was showered with before his son Theo was born, Alan Reader remembers one pearl of wisdom more clearly than others. His friend and parent coach Christine Jolly suggested he should be willing to take charge of baby’s ... um ... discharges. “She said ‘be the one to change the nappy. And own it,’” Reader recalls. “She said: ‘Look forward to it as a moment of intimacy, take your time and use it as your opportunity to connect with your baby.’” Being the boss of nappy time has worked so well for the

Kingston dad that embracing nappy changes as a bonding experience is the advice he now passes on to other new dads.

“Unless someone tells you something like that as a new dad, you are kind of left thinking ‘what’s my role? What am I going to do for the baby?’”

Sharing advice like this is something former Royal Hobart Hospital midwife Ron Hastie says doesn’t happen nearly enough these days. Hastie says what were “villages of support” for new parents have shrunk in recent years — and in many cases are even non-existent.

These villages used to spring up around the extended family that perhaps used to be just around the corner, or through bonds forged through childhood. Today, however, our community is more transient than ever, and so those traditional

bonds need to instead be intentionally forged. “Parents walk out of the hospital with this baby and they don’t know what the hell they are doing,” Hastie says. “They just don’t have that village set-up around them like what used to happen, so it’s pretty tough going early on.”

For his 22 years as a midwife, Hastie helped mums and dads through the first few days of their parenting journey. Today he runs the always booked out “Beer+Bubs” advice sessions for expectant dads that are held in pubs across Hobart and Launceston. Hastie says his group is just one way parents are now finding innovative ways to tap into a new kind of village of support.

For example, Hastie recently dropped into the new Dads of Hobart (DGI) group, where expectant and new dads catch up



Clockwise from main: Christine Jolly, Kyle Sneddon with baby Hugo, 7 months, Parker Sneddon, 4, Narelle Sneddon, Jesse Boxall, Lucy Boxall with baby Isobel, 6 months, and Summer Gwynne, Ella Jolly, 8, Olivia Jolly, 10 and Eli, 2; Midwife Ron Hastie (left) at one of his Beer+Bubs sessions; and Alan Reader with his son Theo, 18 months.

with other new dads at a coffee shop and then take their kids for a play at a park. "Because of the fractured village society we live in, they're looking for their tribe and giving the mother a break," Hastie says. At his pub sessions, Hastie hands out flyers about Jolly's Cradle 2 Kindy program.

Jolly agrees there are a lot of overwhelmed and anxious parents who are leaving hospital and going home without a clue — and without a village.

"I think there is a lot of anxiety for first time parents who are like 'how come the nurses are letting me leave the hospital with this little human being and I don't know the first thing about caring for them or their needs?'," Jolly says.

"They are like 'wait, you are letting me leave now! But I have no idea what I'm doing. Why would you let me do that?'"

When Jolly was a first-time mother a decade ago, it was her church family that became her village of support. She had one young couple, for example, who would take the baby for a long walk in the pram so she could enjoy an indulgent shower.

"I had surrogate aunts and uncles at my beck and call to come and give my baby a cuddle," Jolly says. "It was their way of loving me, and it was such a lovely thing to do for me at that time."

Jolly is such a big believer in the power of such villages that she established the Hobart Mums Network Facebook group. Today, it has about 8000 followers and is now run by Child Health Association Tasmania.

Jolly's latest online support village on Facebook is an extension of her Cradle 2 Kindy parenting coach programs for parents with newborns and young children. She also offers phone consultations or face-to-face drop-in catch-ups.

Jolly charges parents \$10 a month to be part of the groups that she says helps first-time parents connect with other first-time parents. Jolly also shares relevant information in the group, where parents can also post their own questions.

Those questions, Jolly says, can be as simple as: "How do I swaddle my baby?" And on that, Jolly is quite the expert. She picked up her technique by accident after watching a random YouTube video. It's so good that Jolly says even Houdini would have trouble escaping it.

"Swaddling a baby helps link their sleep cycles together," Jolly says, adding that it also helps achieve calm. "When we are feeling a bit agitated and stressed and someone comes along and gives us a nice, long bear hug we feel secure and we feel we can breathe," she says. "That's what a swaddle is. It's a nice, firm, warm bear hug."

For Richmond first-time mum Lucy Boxall, learning how to swaddle her baby and to recognise the different signals in her daughter's cries has been a game-changer.

Boxall endured six months of sleepless nights before asking for help from parenting coach and baby-whisperer Summer Gwynne.

Like many first-time mums, Boxall's milk hadn't even come in before she was discharged from the Royal Hobart Hospital's maternity ward. She only stayed for two nights and says the hour-long midwife follow-up visits at home weren't enough time for her to feel confident as a new mum.



Picture: LUKE BOWDEN

"It all felt a little bit rushed," Boxall says. "And once they leave you, you are on your own again, not sure what you are doing, exhausted — and in my case, crying on the couch." But after just one home-visit from Gwynne, baby Isabelle slept through the night for the first time.

Gwynne has her own rooms at Eternal Women's Health in Melville St. She also runs free clinics at the Priceline pharmacy in Glenorchy. Last Thursday, she saw 22 new mothers in four hours. Some mums stayed for a couple of hours after their baby's weigh-in just to connect with the other mums.

"New mums can drop in and see us and get support or advice or just some TLC," Gwynne says. She finds she also discusses issues such as domestic violence, emotional abuse, poverty — and even racism.

"Young parents need a support system around them, a network and a place to go," Gwynne says. "That kind of support network is a huge thing for them. It makes them feel like they are not alone and it normalises behaviour and gives them hope."

Hope is what Narelle Sneddon found from Jolly's Cradle 2 Kindy online support group. She stumbled across it while scrolling through her Facebook feed when she was feeling sad and lost in the middle of the night.

Enduring getting up to her toddler every hour and a half through the night, she had already gone through two sleep

coach "experts". Both had told her she'd missed the mark with her now four-year-old and his terrible sleep habits, and both suggested a "lock-the-door-and-walk-away" approach.

In contrast, she says, the gentle guidance she found through Cradle 2 Kindy resolved in three nights what had been a three-year problem.

The key was about Sneddon empathising with her child. She recalls: "I would say 'Parker it's time for bed now. You need to learn to go to sleep all by yourself. We love you and we are just next door in the lounge. You can be sad if you choose to and cry if you want, but this is how you go to sleep now'."

Like magic, he was asleep in under 10 minutes that first night. It was a similar story the night after. And on the third night, Parker said "okay mum, good night" — and slept straight through until morning.

"They say that it takes a village to raise a child, but I think it takes a village to raise a parent," Sneddon says.

Jolly says it is so important that the difference between having a village or not for first-time parents is like having an empty or full cup. "Without a village you can be physically empty so that you have no energy to give yourself, your spouse or your child," Jolly says.

"But when people surround you, that brings you energy — energy to look after yourself and your family, and to even be that village of support for others."