

friendship

Getting by with a little help from my friends...

WORDS BY ALANA KIRK-GILLHAM

Picture the scene. You had a demented night with your crying, teething baby. Your reluctant toilet-training toddler has thrown the potty across the room and used the carpet instead. There is poo on the walls, Weetabix on your new shirt and wails of despair coming from all three of you. You want to run out of the front door screaming, but instead of reaching for the latch you reach for the phone. It's time to cash in on one of your lifelines and call a friend.

Now, I'm fully aware that there is no actual scientific evidence to back up the following statement. But I'm going to save somebody lots of money on research because I know I'm right – humanity would have dried up millennia ago if mothers did not have good friends. Having a baby is hard enough. Without friends to guide, steer and carry us through the experience, it is near impossible. Most women just wouldn't survive motherhood without good, strong friends, and civilisation as we know it would be extinct.

Friends in need really are friends indeed, and there is no needier a time than after you've had a baby. But of course, like most things in life, friends come in two varieties – the good and the bad.

Everyone has a bad friend, and every

mother has a bad mother friend. They're easy to spot. They're the ones who automatically launch into a monologue about the prim perfection of their beastly beloveds, who never actually ask how you are, and manage to look immaculate and preened even when they're 'frazzled, darling.' (I'm of the firm opinion these people actually have full-time nannies and therefore do not have to wash pee off the stair carpets, hide their roots under a cap because they have no time to go to the hairdressers, or wear sweatpants because there is pesto pasta on all their other clothes.) My advice is to ditch them quick! Let's face it, when you're feeling fat and frumpy, the last thing you need is Posh Spice landing on your doorstep.

Good friends on the other hand know exactly what you are going through, and know that, most of the time, what you need is to vent your frustrations on a listening ear, a hug and a strong cup of tea (chocolate biscuits essential). A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart, and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words, because they have been exactly where you are now. They know the harrowing harangues of a mother on the edge of reason; they understand that the witching hour (the one before the kid's tea when hell usually breaks loose) is

called so because you turn into one; and most importantly, they know that you are still you, somewhere underneath all the guilt, anger and frustration. Luckily they also know that you just can't help yourself when you harp on endlessly about how wonderful your beautiful babies are, and smile in agreement.

There is a reason why pregnancy is referred to as 'being in the club.' Because mums join together in support and sanity of each other, and you don't need to be life-long friends to help out. Mums seem to instinctively know when another of our tribe needs help. You see it every day: when someone gives you a reassuring smile across a crowded shop when you



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are trying to tame a screaming toddler; when someone carries your tray to the table in the café while you push the buggy and get the high chair; when someone lets you ahead of them in the toilet queue because they know every second in that queue is fraught. And when you lift your head above the swirling waters of early motherhood and take deep breaths again, you too become the smiler, the tray carrier and the queue waverer. Because you where there once and know how it feels.

Every time someone I know has a new baby, I wait a week until the mothers have left, and arrive armed with her dinner for that evening. I listen to her talk about her child as if she was the first

woman to ever give birth to a beautiful baby. I make her a cup of tea and clean up the dishes before I leave. I even offer to do the laundry. And when she inevitably thanks me I smile and tell her that someone did it for me, and she will now do it for someone else in the future. Because that's what 'being in the club' means. Because that's what friends do.

We roll our eyes in camaraderie at tales of potty-training fiascos, we nod in agreement at the latest discipline techniques and we cheer enthusiastically when baby eats her first pureed pear. We offer advice when it's asked for, offer our shoulder when needed, and offer a tall glass of chardonnay when essential. Eating

buns in sympathy with her distressed lack of weight loss is also fairly standard.

While parental partnership certainly can get you through the dark days and share in your pleasure of the delightful days, there are times, when (sorry, men) friends are just better. We understand each other in ways that perhaps men, who no matter how 'new age' or 'metro', just don't – or can't – understand. While they whistle off to work, you are still left at home with a grizzling monster, on the verge of a neurotic breakdown. One man had it right, though, and no truer word was spoken. 'I get by with a little help from my friends', sang John Lennon. I certainly do. *