



What's your story?

Women share their experiences of mothering

Sharing our lived experiences make us feel less alone. Through sharing the joyful and painful moments of our lives we can feel more connected to and supported by each other. These are the stories of two women's experiences of mothering...

KARRYN AND LILLY

This is a story about Karryn and Lilly. I was 17 when I got pregnant with Lilly. I remember the night I sat down with my Mum and Dad to tell them. I remember sitting choking on the words, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and managing to say very softly "I'm having a baby". My Mum looked up from what she was doing and said "What did you say love?". It was hard enough to get it out the first time but I managed to tell them again. I am not sure what I had expected Mum and Dad's reaction to be, but it probably wasn't Dad saying "Well ok, it's done, lets deal with it".

I was doing VCE year 12 when I found that I was pregnant. Mum came up to school with me and met with the Vice Principal. He said that the school had no issue with me attending while pregnant and as I was due in August I could finish the first semester and if I was ready could return after having Lilly to complete the year. It sounded so easy; it didn't turn out to be that way.

The stares from the other students and some staff were a taste of what it was going to be like to be a young mum in Melton. The name calling and labels went along with those looks. "Stupid", "too young", "out of your mind" were all things I heard whispered as I passed. Lilly's father was still around at that time. He was involved in our lives probably up until Lilly was ten months old. I think that he decided that being a Dad was too much for him.

I returned to high school when Lilly was almost a year old. Managed, somehow, to pass and was encouraged by some great teachers to apply for a course at Uni or TAFE. I applied and completed a course to work with people with an Intellectual Disability. While I was at school Lilly went to a Family Day Carer, Doris, through the Melton Shire Council. Doris and her family made Lilly and I feel like we were part of their family, which made leaving Lilly a little easier everyday.

After TAFE I worked for Victoria University as a Personal Aide. After a while I began working for my parents. I loved this because it meant that if Lilly was sick I could take her in with me or have time off without

having to make excuses to an employer. Another aspect of being a single mum is not having someone to share this load. Some employers don't seem to have an understanding of this. After my parents business closed down I worked in an admin job but realised that I wanted to do something different, I wanted to work with people.

I went out one lunch time and picked up a copy of the VTAC guide. I went through and circled courses that I thought I would be interested in. I really wanted to work with families and children, probably because of my personal experiences. Social Work really stuck out for me and I applied. I completed my Social Work Degree at Victoria University. One thing that I discovered through my degree and placements was that I really enjoyed my local community. This led me to apply for my current job as a Foster Care Worker with the Salvation Army in Melton.

Being a young single mother in Melton I had a lot of experiences, both positive and negative, that I believe have shaped me into the person that I am today. I have had lectures from strangers on the street, I had a woman pick Lilly up from her pram in a supermarket to tell me that she thought that I was too young to be a mother, and felt alone in a crowd of older mothers waiting to pick up children from school.

But I have also had the love and support of family and friends, I've learnt to manage on my own, and most importantly I've been able to watch my daughter grow up to be the beautiful, strong young woman she is.

2005 was a big year for me. I turned 30. I FINALLY graduated University and became a fully fledged Social Worker, I started my first ever full time job and I bought my first house. Thinking back to the night when I told my parents that I was having Lilly, I would never have imagined that I would be where I am today. I thought that being a young mum meant that my life had been mapped out in a certain way. But now I know that if you hang in there you'll map out your life the way you want it. I can't say that being a young mum in Melton has always been the most positive experience, but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Things I would like to tell other mums living in Melton:

- ◆ Know that there are supports available. But don't expect that people will tell you about them! There are lots of services around that offer supports for you and your children (eg Shire of Melton, Djerriwarrah Health Services, MacKillop Family Services. As scary as it is Centrelink can help with returning to study or work or childcare.
- ◆ Stay connected to the people who are important to you, whether they are family, friends, relatives, neighbours. Don't feel ashamed to tell someone that you need help or that you're not coping.
- ◆ Other mothers are the best source of advice and inspiration. They know because they've done it too! Never give up hope!

LOUISE AND NICK'S STORY

This is the story of myself, Louise, and my son Nick. I became pregnant when I was 21. It was unplanned. At first it was frightening as I didn't know who to talk to about it. I knew that I would remain single and that I wouldn't have a supportive partner, but I also knew that my family would be supportive. I had some confidence that I could do it as a single person, but overall, I just couldn't see why I could not do it! I've had some ups and downs and learnt a lot. I suppose I am lucky that my family are supportive, I don't take that for granted.

When you first have a baby, it's a shock to discover your life is not your own any more. As a mother, lots of expectations are placed on you and it's daunting at first. It's confusing being told so many different opinions and attitudes. You can get through it by getting help from family or good workers. I've had to learn to ask for help, and not take it too personally if you occasionally come across an unhelpful worker or unhelpful criticism. That was a big thing for me.

When you are a parent you have to ask for help. It's a strength to get help from services, family and the local community. You are making life harder when you cannot tell anyone your fears or problems, or thinking you should not ask for help. You have to see it as a good thing to get resources for your family.

I was at uni doing an arts degree when I became pregnant. I was pretty aimless and didn't really know what work I wanted to do. My parents encouraged me to stay at school - we agreed that getting an education was important to help me set up myself and be independent financially.

What's Your Story?

There are lots of ways that women can express and share their stories including talking in support groups, journal or diary, artwork, craftwork and scrap-booking. Why not give it a go!

After I had Nicholas, I decided I needed a clear career path and became interested in social work. I was able to study full-time and my family supported me with caring for the baby. I also used professional childcare.

When I graduated, I got a job as a family worker in Melton. My role has been to give parenting support to families with children, sometimes in people's homes and more recently parent groups. My work has involved working with many parents of different backgrounds, single mums, single dads, parents with disabilities, grandparents and parents who cannot speak English, just to name a few!

Being a parent myself has helped me to relate better to the families I meet. At the same time, I believe I am more respectful of their experiences and open to letting them guide the family work we do together.

I have found that most people you meet in the Melton community are open to people who are single, or have a disability or are in some way different from a regular nuclear family. Parenting seems to be an important commonality amongst local people in the Melton community. It can even be a good 'ice-breaker' to talk about children when you meet new people.

I believe that being a mother is valued in the Melton Community. It's good to go out and meet with other mothers. You have more in common with other people around you than you think and it helps your confidence.

I didn't plan on being a parent as young as I was when I become one. On a day-to-day basis you feel like it's hard work, but if I stop and look back, I can see how well I have done. I'm very proud of my son who is 10 years old now. It can be challenging being a single mum when you feel you are different from the norm, but there are more of us around than people think, living very successfully. The media is often responsible for portraying single mums in a negative way, as though something is missing or wrong about your family. But Nick's doing very well and he's a happy little boy. He surprises me all of the time!

Things I would like to tell other mothers:

- ◆ Being a mother is valued in Melton. It's good to go out and talk with other mothers and this will improve your confidence.
- ◆ When you have children, you have more in common with other people around you than you think and you may even have some good advice for other parents you meet.
- ◆ Ask for help from your family, it's a strength to get help. Thanks for reading our story - I hope you find it helpful!