

The reality of baby love

By Professor Anne Buist
Director Women's Mental Health
Northpark Private Hospital

New mothers, more than at any other time in their lives, strive for the most part to be the very best mothers they can be, desperate to love their baby and to do their best for the child in both the short and long term.

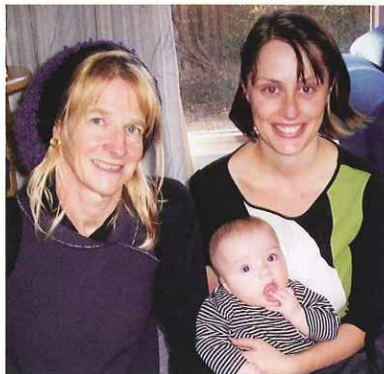
There are many myths associated with this golden glow of motherhood – that it will be easy and natural, that all good mothers know why their child cries and will be able to comfort them and mould them in the way they desire.

The reality for many is in stark contrast. In Melbourne we have several private and public mother-baby units and settling hospitals – each with waiting lists.

Television Programs such as *The Nanny* are watched by parents desperate for the “answer”. Postnatal depression affects some 15% of women across Australia – many of whom delay seeking treatment because of stigma and a fear that they will be seen as bad mothers; it is also often easier to see the problem as the baby – particularly if the settling, feeding and sleep difficulties which all take their toll on the family, are at significant odds with expectations. Lack of support, social isolation, a history of depression and problems with one's own parenting in childhood, and need for perfection and control, add to the increasing anxiety, frustration, depression and feelings of failure and being overwhelmed.

At Northpark Private Hospital in addition to the inpatient mother baby unit catering for up to 13 women and with plans to expand, we have been running 12 week day programs on three days a week to help women deal with their depression and the adjustment to motherhood. Like many other programs, evidence suggestions groups such as these are helpful; but research also shows that whilst we are good at improving mother's depression and anxiety – targeting this alone does not bring about improvement in the mother-infant relationship. This is of particular importance because it appears that attachment – the emotional attunement written about and researched by Bowlby in the 60's – is the mechanism for predicting later child and then adult adjustment, and that this is the key that links maternal depression and the poorer emotional and behavioural outcomes of children shown in research. In most cases these mothers have multiple risk factors – including an insecure attachment to their own mother.

As a result, at Northpark we are launching a new day program targeting not just mothers' depression but also their relationship. This will include intensive video taping of the relationship and feedback, increasing observational skills and awareness of baby cues – and miscues. The first “Baby Love” group will commence on August 4th, weekly until Christmas, but will also be offered as a day program over 8 weeks, starting later in the year. Baby Love will focus on strengths and struggles – and help women to be the best mothers they can be – and of course, to truly love their baby.



Professor Anne Buist (left). Patient Sharna Stone and 15-week-old Jake