

# Being an At-Home Mother

While I was growing up, and during my pregnancy with my first child, Finn, now three and a half, I always thought I would work outside the home as well as having my children. I believed: it would provide 'a healthy balance' for me to work part-time, that it was important to share in the bringing in of income into the household, that I would avoid the 'trap of female dependence' (I'd read a lot of Simone de Beauvoir and other feminist writers), and that it was important to keep my mind active.

I was entitled to one year's maternity leave, and left work one month before Finn was due. I had discussed the possibility that I might return to work 10 to 18 hours a week. I loved my job, and the people at work were fantastic, encouraging me to leave it open and decide after Finn was born what would work.

Finn's birth, attended by his father, Loren, my oldest friend, Cilla, and our midwife Yvette, was a truly sacred experience. Cilla's six-week-old baby, my godson Ngaru, called Finn out into the world, and the six of us shared that awe, wonder, intimacy and intense physicality of welcoming a new baby. My heart opened so wide! Finn shared our bed, breastfed, lit up our sleep deprived lives.

Somehow when Finn was still tiny, I negotiated that I would return to work 10 hours a week from the time he was six months old. My mother would be Finn's caregiver. She was going to move back to New Zealand from Scotland to be with Finn while I worked. I had it all planned!

When Finn was three weeks old, a Plunket nurse visited and reduced me to tears, telling me: he was old enough now to be left to cry for up to 15 minutes, he should be sleeping in another room, and if I didn't keep picking him up every time he cried, he'd soon be off to sleep. She said the only reason I wasn't letting him cry to sleep was that I lacked confidence.

I'd read *The Continuum Concept* by J. Liedloff long before I had my children and it made sense to me, but I felt vulnerable and distressed by this home visit, and quickly rang old friends for support. Debbie and Cilla told me to trust myself and that no one knew my baby better than me. A while later, everyone in my ante-natal group was having issues with their babies' sleep. I wasn't concerned about Finn's sleep – he just snuggled into me and had his mother's milk when he wanted to and we both slept fine - but he was rolling now, and I was worried about leaving him in our bed for a daytime sleep – Debbie suggested I contact La Leche League.

I started going to meetings at Christchurch West Group, and I am hugely grateful to the Leaders, Anne Isbister and Faith Alexander and to the other women in that Group, not only for having lots of experience and helpful suggestions about co-sleeping, but for being with me and for mewhere I was tussling with what to do about going back to work.

I couldn't leave Finn. He'd never seen or touched a bottle. At about five months I'd tried expressing and giving him my milk in a bottle. Wise baby. He would play with the bottle but wouldn't drink from it. I can remember breastfeeding him to sleep on a mattress he had been playing on, on the living room floor, and saying to myself, "I can't leave him!" There wasn't a same time he slept every day, it was different from day to day, and he breastfed to sleep (another thing the Plunket nurse had told me was a real no-no). I couldn't see how I could do it but more importantly, I didn't want to.

I worked through my concerns about letting them down at work after they had bent over backwards for me, and about my mother having set aside six months of her life to be there for Finn, and booked her tickets which were non-refundable, and about our family income, and my future prospects in the career world. It all finally came down to me wanting to be with my baby, wanting to be with him. And my partner Loren wanted that too. I can still remember us doing arithmetic and budgets and working out together what it would mean, how we could do it.

My LLL Group was alongside me throughout. Within the next few months, after not going back to work, Finn had chickenpox, infant measles, impetigo, surgery for a peri-anal fistula and developed eczema. Working first with orthodox medicine and then with a naturopath and an anthroposophical doctor we had a 24 hour regime of care for him. Many times a day we administered drops, ointments, things to take with his food. I ate no wheat, dairy, eggs, peanuts or tomatoes. We worked on his acupuncture points and did other treatments. It was a full-time job! We started Playcentre when Finn was 14 months old. He loved it right away and still does. Our Playcentre whanau has given tremendous support to our family and we've seen Finn grow from a very attached baby and toddler into the independent and self assured (and still very attached) three and a half year old he is now.

When Finn was 16 months old, Lila was born at home with the same awesome team and Julie and Rose, our midwives, as well as Finn and Grannie (my mum) and our friend Cathra. Cradling my tiny wet daughter in the birthing pool and seeing Finn's look of wonder, my heart was full to bursting. Finn and Lila exchanged a look, of recognition, I thought, and then Finn wanted to show his baby sister how to breastfeed, and hold her little hand.

I remember my astonishment when Finn went from breastfeeding about three times a day and not at night, to feeding all day and all night - at every opportunity - like his newborn sister. Loren was an amazing support, especially at night. He would bring me whichever child needed their "num nums", and hold and cuddle the other, settling that child with him. Again, the support of my LLL Group helped get me through. Our current Leaders, Linda Dockrill and Susan Proctor, devoted a whole meeting to looking at how I might wean Finn to one less feed a day, helping me chart each time he breastfed, and suggesting alternatives I might try. Sometimes I was feeding Finn because I just wasn't able to put in place all the other things that he needed as well as meeting Lila's needs. Thank you Linda and Susan for your encouragement and care that helped me find my way.

I am still tandem feeding, and can't believe Finn is having "num nums" only every other night at bedtime. This was his idea when we were talking about how he is growing up and someday he won't have "num nums" anymore. He decides and we mark it on a calendar for a week or so ahead whether it's a "num nums" night or not a "num nums" night. He checks his calendar and proudly lets us know what's happening that night. Lila is still having lots of "num nums" in the day and in the night, and I am so much more relaxed with her as I realise that she will let me know when she is ready for her next step. I am really loving my breastfeeding relationship with my daughter.

It is all so worth it! Being at home and out in the community, at Playcentre and other places with my children means I am there with them in all or most of their experiences. I know what they are talking about when no one else does, and what they are remembering because I was there with them. I am rewarded by events such as: coming home from a busy morning at Playcentre and going to bed in the middle of a Finn and Lila 'sandwich' (with a few extra "num nums" to keep them sleeping); stopping what I am doing to help make a hut or build blocks or read a story or play in the sandpit. For a time, I was doing nothing much else except being with them, seeing them roll, crawl, walk, learn to eat solid food eventually after playing with it for a long time. Yes the laundry did somehow get done and sometimes meals on the table too, though we share with Christie Means (*Aroha* Vol 5 no 2 – March/April 2003) the fish and chip solution. Articles, such as Christie's, in *Aroha* have been uplifting, inspiring and also very practical support for me over this last year when it hasn't been easy to get to meetings.

I am grateful to be able to live life to our timetable, to know (or at least have an intuition or instinct) when tiredness, hunger, teething or getting sick affects my children's behaviour; and how to comfort them. I am able to support their development at their own pace, knowing it is right for me to be with my children, right here, right now. And what of my development? I have learnt not to blame the children for what they do, not to get angry with them when I get hurt. The list goes on and on.

Sometimes it seems hard, especially when I'm very tired, and I imagine walking out the door in the morning dressed beautifully and spending a day achieving something tangible. But I am sure deep down that this may be the most important work I will ever do, together with my partner; the raising of these two human beings to be all they can be, and along the way to strive to be all I can be.

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