

# Family health nurse Sue Colville remembers eureka moment

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Stephanie Gardiner

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Child and family health nurse Sue Colville with clients at the Hornsby Early Childhood Centre, Hornsby, Sydney. *Photo: Kate Geraghty*

When a new mother bravely walked into a health clinic without her baby, nurse Sue Colville was shocked.

It was the late 1980s, a time when weekly newborn weigh-ins were all the rage and the focus was largely on the baby.

"I can still see her face. I thought 'I hope nobody's looking to see that she's here without her baby'. She wanted to come and talk about herself," remembers Ms Colville, a veteran child and family health nurse.

That encounter in a northern Sydney clinic sparked her passion for supporting the wellbeing of new mothers. A trained midwife and former daycare worker, Ms Colville believes her most useful skill is listening.

More than two decades on, at a time when post-natal depression and stress on new mothers have become talking points after the [discovery of two abandoned babies within a week in Sydney](#), Ms Colville sees modern pressures affecting parenthood and child development.

"People have lost their instinct. There's more books, there's more apps," she says.

"Mothers in particular don't trust themselves to know what to do with their children. We're trying to get mothers to be the expert of their own children."

When Ms Colville visits new parents in the Hornsby area, often she knocks on the door of a small apartment, a change she has seen as Sydney house prices rise.

"There's one apartment block that we go to a lot for new babies and there's a small patch of grass and there's a sign that says 'Do not play on the grass'.

"As soon as I saw that, I thought 'no'. We can't be all cooped up."

And while it is supposed to take a village to raise a child, Ms Colville meets many new parents

whose families live overseas, interstate or hours away. And new mothers are often left alone in their house with a baby very soon after birth, when their partner returns to work.

So Ms Colville encourages mothers at the parenting groups she runs at the Hornsby community clinic to create their own villages and talk openly about the realities of parenting.

"I always say if they find one friend then I've done a good job. It's about trying to get people to come together and parent together.

"You're allowed to say 'this sucks' ... because then we can have a conversation about how are we going to manage it."

Over the years, Ms Colville has also seen the role of the father change dramatically, with a combination of family and financial pressures contributing to post-natal depression in men.

"It's that overwhelming sense of responsibility like 'suddenly I'm the provider for the family'. They might have been outwardly doing OK, but then they've hit the wall."

Through all the changes and trends, Ms Colville still thinks of that woman she met 25 years ago when she talks to new mothers.

"If you don't have a healthy mum, how can she look after everybody else?"



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