

Linking Infants & Families to Supports

LIFTS

Annual
Magazine
2022

What's Inside

Healing
Journeys

*Balance in
Busy Times*

Asking
for Help

*Resources &
Activities*



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A publication by HMHB



Healthy Mothers,
Healthy Babies
The Montana Coalition

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Cover photo by Tiffany Photography



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From the HMHB Den

Welcome to Issue 2 of LIFTS Magazine! If you're not already aware, LIFTS stands for Linking Infants & Families to Supports, and it is a project of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, The Montana Coalition, Inc. (HMHB). We maintain an online resource guide at <https://hmhb-lifts.org/>, where you can look up resources and family-friendly, substance-limited events for families in your area. If you would like help navigating the site, call our LIFTS warmline at 406-430-9100, and an HMHB staff member will assist you.

In this issue, our contributors are sharing their own lived experiences from several Montana communities – Billings, Butte, Helena, Missoula, Ronan, and Shelby. Each story is a little different, as people are all different. But one common theme is people finding a little more grace and ease in life by identifying what they need and seeking support in getting it. In that spirit, we're featuring stories about people using certain resources listed on LIFTS, including Early Head Start, the Buy Eat Live Better program, and mental health services. Please don't be shy in looking up resources on LIFTS and seeing if they're the right fit for your family!

Of course, storytelling itself can be a powerful healing force, both for the teller and the audience. In this issue, some writers have demonstrated brave vulnerability by sharing their experiences and feelings, in hopes that a reader who is struggling can feel a little less alone. While those stories hold a special place in my heart, I also want to thank those contributors who shared lighter stories of everyday life and "help that helps." My work on this magazine

gives me hope that we can build community simply by being present with our own experiences and acknowledging one another.

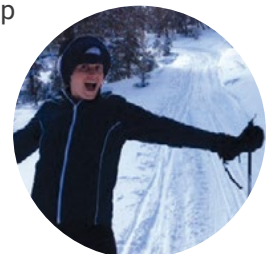
Speaking of acknowledging, I want to highlight my colleague Claire Larson's work on this magazine. Claire recently returned to HMHB in a new role as Storytelling and Records Coordinator, and she has served as a story coach for some writers and a very valuable sounding board and editor for the magazine as a whole. Claire will continue her work as a story coach in various outlets for HMHB, including as host of the Mother Love podcast, to help families share their stories and raise their voices.

...one common theme is people finding a little more grace and ease in life by identifying what they need and seeking support in getting it.

On that note, we'd love for you to connect with us! What do you think of this issue? Does a particular story resonate with you? Did you learn about an issue or resource you hadn't heard of before? What kinds of content would you like to see in a future issue? How can we do this better? Do you have an idea for a story you'd like HMHB to consider for the next issue of LIFTS or for another outlet like the Mother Love podcast? Send us your feedback and story ideas (not the whole story) by emailing us at stories@hmhb-mt.org, messaging us through Facebook Messenger at <https://www.facebook.com/hmhbm/>, or filling out a story idea submission form at the link available on our website at <https://hmhb-mt.org/get-involved/>. An HMHB staff member will follow up with you. We'd love to keep the conversation going!

Elaine Dahl

Elaine Dahl
HMHB Associate Director





Perfectly Okay

By Maureen Ward

I've always loved Disney movies. The Lion King came out when I was 7 years old, and the song "Hakuna Matata" has always been one of my personal favorites. Trying to live a life of "no worries" is a #lifegoal for a Type A Perfectionist like me. Hey, a girl's gotta have goals, right? When I was younger, I always thought pretty fondly of my ability to stay organized. The art of scheduling my life down to the 15-minute increment in my delightfully color-coded planner with matching to-do lists was something that others should strive for. I was a productivity goddess...and then...I became a mom.

Oh, now mind you, I had plans. I planned to give birth naturally. I planned to breastfeed for a year. I planned to be back on my feet and running a 5K within eight weeks of childbirth. But for the first time in my life, ALL of my plans went down the drain. About eight hours into childbirth, my son got stuck and had to be delivered by emergency C-section. Then, he was tongue-tied and never learned how to latch during breastfeeding, so I moved to Plan B: exclusive pumping, which only lasted about five months because the schedule became unmanageable after I returned to work full time. Oh, and running? That C-section took its toll, and it would be months before I was really back in any groove.

But we adjusted, and life started to plateau into a new normal as a family of three. We don't have immediate family in the area, but they aren't too

far away, and it was always helpful to spend the weekend with our support system, catch up on some sleep, and not have to cook or do dishes. We could even still eat out occasionally without too much stress. There was a false sense of security that it "wasn't too bad after all."

Son number 2 came 26 months after the first, and that's when we were really off to the races. After that, rarely did things go as planned. Having a second child for some reason made things five times more difficult than having one. Trying to manage an infant, a toddler, a home AND a full-time job seemed unsustainable at times, yet full of joy. I never wanted to wish away those precious moments of their early lives, but there was always a part of me secretly yearning for the day I'd never have to change another diaper. I really wish something like the LIFTS online resource guide had existed then, something to point me to more supports.

In January of 2020, my youngest turned 3 years old. Hallelujah! We had finally hit a milestone where both of my children could, in general, tell me what they needed, wipe their own butts, and (mostly) sleep through the night in their own beds. I really felt like we'd hit the kid lottery and it was "finally all downhill from here." Little did I know that a worldwide pandemic was about to throw me an epic-sized curveball. All of a sudden, I was working from home with a toddler and a kindergartner who was trying to navigate the

beginning of elementary school on a computer. My job felt flexible, but the months of remote work/childcare began to take a toll on my physical and mental health. I couldn't sleep and was having problems with anxiety. My very supportive spouse became worried about me, and he encouraged me to do the ONE thing I had forgotten to do for myself...ask for help. So I did. I started seeing a counselor and taking some time for myself. I started to forgive myself for imperfection during a time when the world felt unsafe and unpredictable.

“

*...parenting isn't predictable.
Kids don't grow up in a clean,
perfect box. Parents don't
always behave in perfect,
calm and reasonable ways.
And all of that is okay.*

”

But really, I think the pandemic taught me the lesson I needed to learn: parenting isn't predictable. Kids don't grow up in a clean, perfect box. Parents don't always behave in perfect, calm and reasonable ways. And all of that is okay. Over the past 7 years, I've learned a lot about going with the flow, being okay with dishes in the sink or a last-minute change of plans. It's okay to worry a little, and it's okay NOT to be perfect. The thing I really learned? It's okay to ask for help. It doesn't mean you're weak or a failure. It just means you're human. Sometimes, at the end of the day, you gotta take advice from Dory and "just keep swimming." You'll be amazed at the wonderfully IMPERFECT adventures you can have along the way.



Cuddling Cubs

Congratulations on becoming a new mom!



Cuddling Cubs is an excellent resource and support group for new moms like you. It's an exciting time...but maybe a bit overwhelming too. **Cuddling Cubs is ready to help you and your infant thrive.**

Stay up-to-date with the latest info and techniques, and connect with other new moms to share your experiences.

CuddlingCubsPlaygroup.org



We've got some free goodies and gift cards for you as a thank you for joining!



Sign up today! Scan this code, enter your name and email to get started. Thank you!



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FREE Support for Parents & Children!



Children don't come with instruction manuals, but this program provides FREE information to help them as they grow and develop.

Healthy Montana Families helps parents and families grow, learn and thrive together!

For more information or to enroll, please call **(406)444-0041** today or email **mtmechv@mt.gov**





Fostering Connections

By Tina Stevenson, as told to Claire Larson

I grew up in Everett, Washington and, when my siblings and I were young, my dad wasn't in the picture much at all. My mom did her very best to raise us, but she was doing it by herself. When I look back, I wish she had known about the programs and resources that existed to help parents and families like ours. But she didn't, and so she came to a place where it was just too much for her to handle on her own.

From what I've seen, what happened to us happens to other families a lot. There's just this lack of understanding about all the types of support that are there to help parents succeed. Often, parents have so many paths they could take that would help them get out of their stress and overwhelm, but they think they have to figure it all out on their own. Or they don't see a way out, so they reach for ways to escape like

drugs or alcohol. It doesn't matter if what you need is something big or something small. It's okay to ask for help. Many times, resources can do more than just help meet needs; they can save lives.

I don't remember how old I was when I entered foster care, but I know I was really little, and my youngest sister was just a baby at the time. When we were able to be together in the same home, it was my older brother, my two younger sisters and me. Over the years, we were in and out of so many homes that, somewhere along the way, I lost count.

There were times when my siblings and I got split up, and that was such a hard thing. In the foster system, it's hard to keep a group of four kids together, especially when they're moving from home to home as much as we were. We were in a lot of foster homes – some that were good and some that were not so good. We went through different things with different foster parents, and I've learned that we all have our own stories made up of moments of horror and happiness.

Two very different memories really stand out to me. Once, when we were all about to leave one foster home and go to the next, the family we'd been staying with searched us because they assumed we'd stolen from them. I felt embarrassed and ashamed, and I knew I never wanted to make a kid feel like that. In the other memory, a caseworker took me into a room and let me pick out my own clothes. I had never had anything that was truly mine, so that meant so much to me and offered me a glimmer of hope.

We don't remember moments as much as we remember feelings. So when I became a parent and foster parent, I knew I'd do everything I could to help my kids feel loved and cared for. Sometimes, they'd never been in situations where they felt loved for who they are, where they felt like they matter. Most times, that's all any of us need to be okay.

A little over a year ago, I started a nonprofit called Second Blessings to help children and families in need. It's pretty simple. People reach out to me by phone, Facebook, our family

plumbing business, or through the Baptist church where we store our items. Once I know of a need, I use all sorts of connections and figure out a way to fulfill that need. It might be clothing, diapers, formula, car seats, cribs or even just answers to questions about other types of assistance available. For example, if someone could benefit from housing assistance, I connect them to resources for that. If they need help with food or transportation, I try to steer them in the right direction. It's really important in rural areas like ours because people don't always know about the support that's designed to help them.

I have also been appointed to the Toole, Teton, Pondera, and Glacier Counties Foster Care Review Committee. I get to look over open cases and make suggestions that might help foster families succeed — anything from parenting classes to resource referrals, to substance use support groups or counseling. The work of the committee is obviously close to my heart, and it means a lot for me to be able to help in this way.

When I talk to people about fostering, I hear a lot of the same fears and doubts. "Aren't you heartbroken when they leave?" "I've thought about doing that but now is not a good time." "What about the impact on the children I already have?" And here's what I think every time I hear those concerns. *Yes, it is really hard when it's time for our fosters to move on. There's grief there and it is real. I can get through those feelings, though, because it's not about me, it's about them. Now might not feel like a good time, but things will never be perfect and, if I don't do it and you don't do it, then who's going to do it? My children have developed compassion and empathy in ways they never would have if*

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Now might not feel like a good time, but things will never be perfect and, if I don't do it and you don't do it, then who's going to do it?

”

they hadn't learned to love those who need it most. They search for those people now on the playground, at the store, at the rodeo; they see those who need care and support the most, and they give it generously.

Today, our family (at least those who still live at home) is made up of me, my husband, our two biological daughters, ages 17 and 14, our two adopted sons, ages 9 and 7, and a 13-month-old foster baby who we're hoping to adopt as well. Plus, we have chickens, horses, ponies, dogs, ducks, guinea hens, and even a bearded dragon and snake. We may have another foster baby coming soon, which will make our house a pretty busy place!

I share my story because maybe if more people knew how rewarding this experience could be, they would be more likely to become foster caregivers themselves, which is what we really need. There are so many kids living in group homes or unhealthy situations. Most of them have never had the experience of having their own belongings or safe space. We've had nine foster kids come through our home. Being a foster parent has been an amazing journey, but not every journey has a happy ending. Some do end in heartbreak. But I believe it's worth the risk. You'll never know how things will go, but you've got to take the chance. We just can't know until we try.

Resources:

- Child Welfare Information Gateway information on supports for foster families at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/resources-foster-families/supports/>
- State of Montana foster care licensing information at <https://dphhs.mt.gov/cfsd/Fosterparent/index>
- Use the LIFTS online resource guide to find local health departments, car seat programs, and other resources.

Art Party!

By Elaine Dahl

HMHB recently invited some families with little ones to make art. And if you have a little one who is ready, you could too!

Here are some suggested “how to” steps:

1. Find a place. It could be a park, a family’s home, or a meeting place. Remember that, depending on the art you do, it could get messy.
2. Find a time. Keep in mind various work schedules, bedtimes, and mealtimes. This party lasted a little over an hour, and families had the option to arrive late or leave early.
3. Invite the families you would like to attend. Consider health protocols, such as telling families to stay home if they are sick, having the party outside, and/or offering masks.
4. Tell everyone to wear clothes that can get messy, if you are using materials like paint.
5. Decide on your projects. We had help from art teacher Em Thiessen, but you can also look online or ask your creative friends for ideas.
6. Gather the supplies and any snacks or drinks you want to offer. Look for non-toxic, kid-friendly paints, kitchen ingredients like flour and food coloring, paper, and other supplies. And make sure you have clean-up materials like towels and wipes.
7. When the time comes, welcome everyone and remind them that it’s not so much about creating great art, but about creating great memories!

And here’s why:

1. It’s fun! (Seriously, it’s important to have fun.)
2. It helps improve your child’s brain development, motor skills, exploration of things in the world, and visual understanding.
3. It’s a great way for you to bond with your little one and connect with other families.



A



B

For this party, Em planned four projects:

A. Plastic bag painting

1. Take a piece of paper and squirt three or four colors of non-toxic paint on it.
2. Carefully place the paper inside a plastic bag and seal the bag.
3. Allow your little one to smoosh the paint around, with their hands on top of the plastic. They can even try using a toy to move the paint!
4. When the smooshing is done, carefully remove the paper from the plastic bag and let it air dry.



B. Handprints

1. Each family member can paint their own hands with a brush, or you can paint each other's hands.
2. Once you have enough paint on your hand, press it down on the paper to transfer the paint. Your little one may need help with this part.
3. You can layer your handprints, or you can make other designs.
4. Sometimes, you may be inspired to make a more "avant garde" artwork!



C. Ball-in-the-box painting

1. Place a small amount of one color of paint in a cup, can, or bowl.
2. Drop a small ball in the cup, can, or bowl and make sure it's covered in paint.
3. Place a paper in the bottom of a plastic bin.
4. Drop the ball with paint into the bin.
5. Shake the bin so the ball moves around.
6. When you're ready for a new color, repeat all the steps above, using a clean ball and a separate small container for each color of paint.
7. Remove the finished painting from the bottom of the plastic bin.



D. Totes with bubbles

1. You will need several bottles of bubble soap with plastic wands.
2. Drop a small amount of food coloring or non-toxic dye into each bottle of bubble soap so you'll have a variety of colors. Label each bottle.
3. Get a canvas tote bag or a paper set up on a table or on the floor.
4. Blow bubbles in the direction of your "canvas."
5. You can pop the bubbles, or even stomp on them!
6. Switch colors as you see fit.



C

What do you do when your little one's artwork starts piling up? Em recommends repurposing a paper project by:

- Using it as wrapping paper for gifts;
- Cutting it up into small rectangular gift tags, which you can punch a hole in and tie with some twine to your gift; or
- Cutting it into small shapes (circles, squares, etc.) that you can glue onto gift bags, lunch sacks, or other items that need some decoration.

**We thank Em Thiessen
and the Martin, Petrik-Harris,
and Stumberg families.**

Throwing your own art party? Write us at stories@hmbh-mt.org if you want to learn more, connect with Em, or share what you did.



D

TELL YOUR DOCTOR



Are things not as you expected?

Expectations

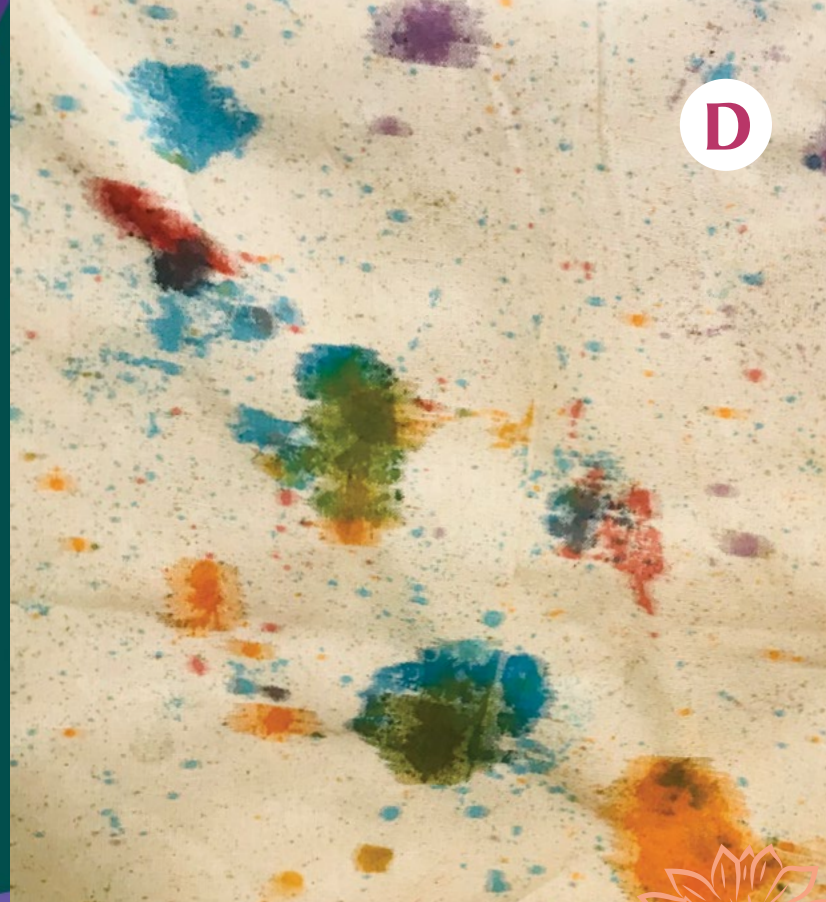
- Supported by friends and family
- Warm fuzzies while breastfeeding
- Endless love for your baby
- Sleeping when the baby sleeps

Reality

- ✓ Feeling more alone than ever
- ✓ Constant worry or scary thoughts
- ✓ Don't feel connection with baby
- ✓ Can't sleep, even when baby does

1 in 6 moms will feel this way.
You deserve to be cared for.

**Parenting is hard.
Sharing doesn't have to be.
Tell your doctor, midwife, or nurse today.**



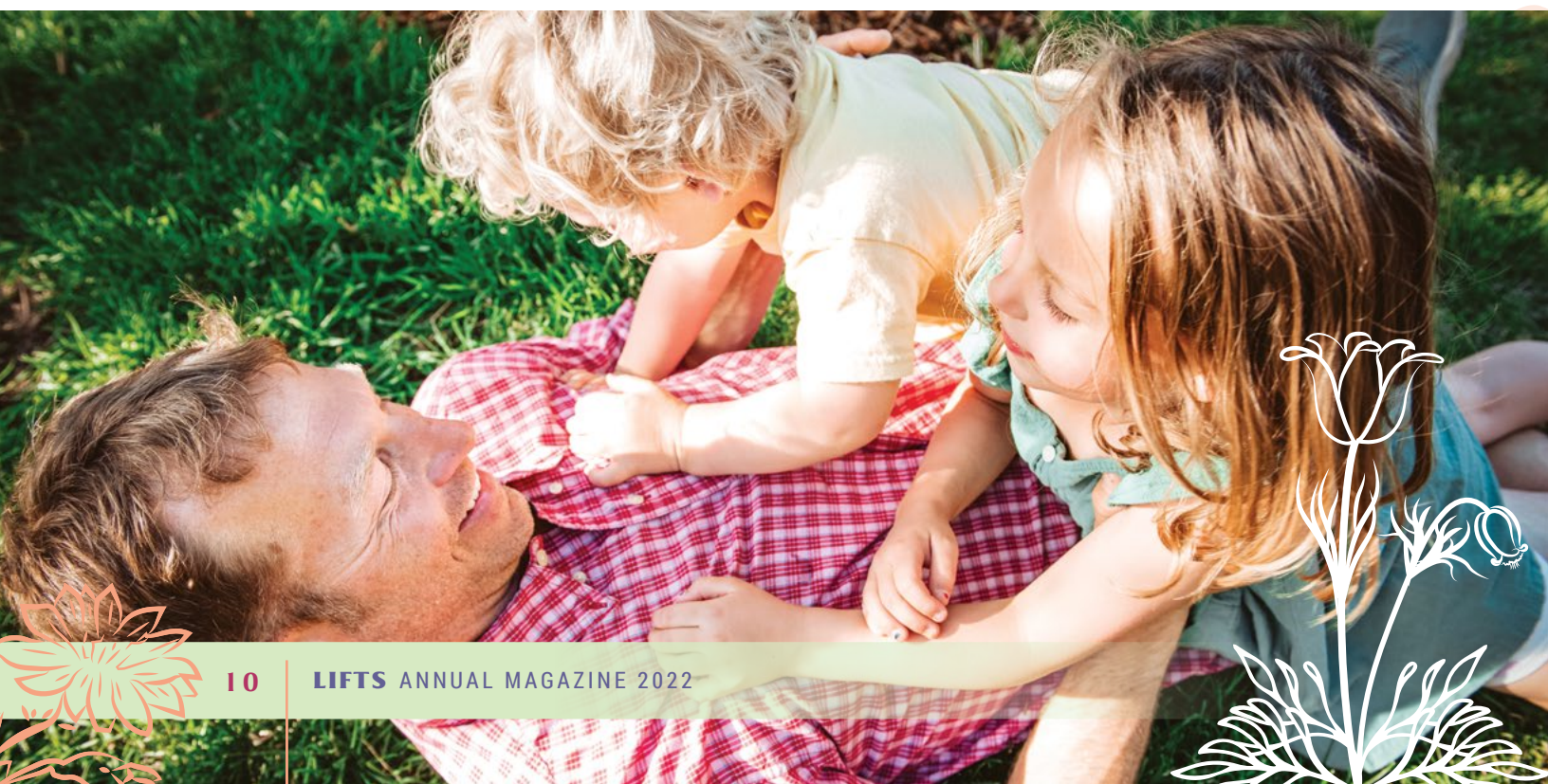
Active Father

By Erik Makus

My wife Jess and I are the parents of two amazing children, Cora (age 5) and Dane (age 2). We started a family later in life. We planned to have kids at some vague point in the future, but beyond that, we didn't have much of a plan. Because of this, we were well established in our lives when we had kids. We both have full time careers, and a lot of our time together revolved around being active in the evenings and on weekends with activities such as trail running, backpacking, or otherwise exploring the great outdoors. So it was a bit of a shock to our lifestyle when we chose to start a family.

I feel like I know what a good father is – a good role model who provides unconditional love and sets his children up to be successful in life. The challenge is how to consistently be that person. I certainly don't have it figured out, but I guess my approach has been to tell my kids I love them and spend time together doing things that I like or I want them to like. They get a different perspective on life when they spend time with me doing things that they may not do when hanging out with their mom – like fixing something in the garage or hitting the bike park.

For Jess and me, our recreational time is now vastly different, and I think that's been an important part of our mental health journey – realizing that it has changed (probably forever), and that you just have to get to a mental place where you accept different expectations. Our first camping trip as a family included a boring campsite with no mountains (falling hazards!) or lakes (drowning hazards!), and a 2:00 a.m. night terror from our daughter. As we finally got her settled back down for the night, we lay awake for hours, too shaken to fall back to sleep ourselves. (I can't even imagine the thoughts of our camp neighbors!) These days, getting in a short hike or an overnight camping trip with kids is a smashing success. It is and has been a challenge to stop focusing on the things we can't do together anymore, like a long trail run in Glacier National Park. But we try to focus on what we can do and create fun memories with our family, like camping nearby and doing a "trail ride" up Trout Creek with the kids. Sometimes it backfires and we struggle to keep a cheerful outlook, but I think that's just par for the course. It's also really cool to build a "new normal"



together with our children, and there are lots of great moments – like when we take our kids looking for insects and they are fascinated and want to learn more, or when we all “ran” a 5k race together - where it is profoundly rewarding.

Nothing has made me judge other parents less than having kids. It makes me realize that every family is different, everyone struggles to make parenting work, and there is no one size fits all approach. For us, getting out and doing the things we did before kids in some capacity or another is crucial to maintaining our sanity and providing some semblance of our former life. And the term “some semblance” is a key phrase. It is all harder and different now, whether it is running laps with a stroller around Centennial Park, or one of us hitting the gym early in the morning or late at night.

We both have supportive extended families, but they all live in other states, so we have always been mostly on our own as far as childrearing goes (occasional family visits aside). We really rely on each other to make it work. Through trial and error over the past few years, we have figured out that what it really comes down to, and the only thing it could come down to, is small breaks. Like every parent of small children, our days usually start at 6:00 a.m. when our son wakes up, and end when our daughter finally stops fighting bedtime around 9:30 p.m. In between, there is not much down time. So one of our main forms of support to each other has been providing the chance to get out and exercise when we can – even if the available time is short. We both try to be really cognizant of letting the other get a run or ski in, hit the gym, or take a hike or a mental health break. Sometimes it is alone, sometimes with friends or dogs. Sometimes it is a few hours, but sometimes only 20 minutes. This kind of break is a great stress reliever, as it takes the weight off my shoulders and resets my mental health and my patience. It definitely helps me to be a better parent and partner. That is what I think of as true love in parenting – helping your partner out when they need it and trying to be a good father to your kids.



That is what I think of as true love in parenting – helping your partner out when they need it and trying to be a good father to your kids.

For me, it has also been important to have fellow “dad friends” to talk to or hang out with. It seems like most fathers I know are truly parenting partners in today’s world. This is different from past generations, and I feel like societal recognition and support aren’t always at the same level as for mothers. So it’s been very important for me to have a few friends who are also fathers of young children to just hang out with. Sometimes our conversations revolve around parenting or marriage, and our single friends hanging out with us gag a little, but so be it. It’s an important support mechanism for me in my life.

I think parenting small children may be the best thing I’ve ever done. It is certainly the most difficult. I know I am so fortunate to have found my main “support groups,” and I look forward to the rest of the journey.



Finding Our Footing

By Anna Semple

My son “Alex” (an alternate name for privacy reasons) just turned three. I can’t decide if his birth seems like yesterday or a lifetime ago, or maybe both. They say that your brain goes through as many changes when becoming a mother as it does during the teen years. I’ve long known this because of my job in early childhood, but didn’t really take the time to think about what this actually meant until after I became a mother myself. Comparing my childhood self with my young adult self, I see the same person in so many ways, but with different priorities, ways of thinking about the world, and levels of confidence and skill in navigating life on my own. Parenting has brought on the same sensation of feeling different, but also just the same.

Alex has Down syndrome. When I was pregnant, I shared this information quickly as a way to bridge a connection and set the tone of the conversation. I didn’t want people avoiding real conversation because they didn’t know what was okay to talk about. My partner and I were lucky to have incredibly supportive friends, with the wisdom to ask how we felt about the diagnosis instead of jumping to the conclusion that it was a tragedy. Even awkward comments felt supportive, as long as people were open to hearing how we were feeling at that moment. I knew that a month earlier in my life I would have been unsure of what to say as well, and I was okay with imperfect expressions of support.

“

***Like any new parent,
I can’t imagine how overwhelming
these first years would have
been for us without people
to turn to for help.***

”



My feelings were complex during pregnancy, and talking them through with my partner and friends was incredibly important. I often worried that I wouldn't know how to connect with my son. I leaned into the words I read from other parents, that "once your baby is born it will be fine, he will just be your baby." Before becoming a mother, I didn't know that love for your children grows out of thousands of tiny moments of nurturing, not because your baby shows up in a certain way. And when Alex was born, I could see the depth in his sparkly little eyes and knew I didn't need to worry about connecting. I'm saddened now that I didn't understand this before. People with Down syndrome are just people, and being able to connect really isn't surprising.

Now that Alex is older, I am slower to bring up this diagnosis with people who haven't met him. Mostly because there are so many other things to talk about, but also because some people's default is to focus on the differences. I need to start with the foundation that Alex is in many ways the same as any other kid. I want to share conversations about bedtime routines, picky eating, and hilarious toddler antics. I want people to know that Alex is a little charmer who loves to play games, whether he is catching my eye with a sly smile before tickling me, or giggling as he hurries down a path to kick pinecones in the park. Only after we connect as fellow parents do I mention the extra chromosome, or tell them that I'm sometimes overwhelmed with the added layer of thought that goes into every parenting decision, with juggling all the appointments, and facing the scary unknown of the long-term future.

These friends and acquaintances are an important support system, but I am also thankful our family has had outside help with navigating the extra considerations. Young children with delays and disabilities often qualify for early intervention services, which provide free parenting support and specialized services (like physical, speech and occupational therapies) until children turn three. We enrolled when Alex was two weeks old after one doctor gave us a laundry list of things that we couldn't do, including being worn in a baby carrier. After filling out a short form, we were able to get in quickly to see a physical therapist who determined that he could in fact be safely worn in some specific carriers. Walking in the woods is a big part of our family identity, and it was an enormous relief to learn ways to safely do this with our son. We worked with this same physical therapist until recently when Alex turned three and aged out of the program.

Our whole early intervention team supported us in setting goals for our son and our family. They worked with us all to help achieve those goals through therapy exercises and connection to resources in the community. Our family support specialist knew what paperwork or appointment needed to happen at different phases. They encouraged us to apply for and enroll in Early Head Start. Most of our experiences with doctors have been positive, but we occasionally received conflicting or confusing information at appointments. We knew our early intervention team couldn't give medical advice, but they did help us generate questions and research options if we wanted a second opinion.


When looking into preschools, we were referred to someone at our local Child Care Resource and Referral office who equipped us with information on reasonable accommodations and a list of questions to ask when we visited different programs. This helped us self-advocate and, ultimately, we chose a program that was open to adaptations and that valued my family as collaborators in Alex's education.



Linking Infants & Families to Supports



To find more supportive resources, visit the LIFTS guide on the HMHB website at hmhb-mt.org/lifts or by scanning the QR code.



Each person we've worked with throughout these three years has been a such a cheerleader for Alex. He warmed right up to each of them, and adored being the center of attention during appointments.

Like any new parent, I can't imagine how overwhelming these first years would have been for us without people to turn to for help. Friends who knitted blankets, left Tupperwares of food and stopped by to check in on us. Professionals who supported us in becoming advocates, and who began teaching Alex the skills that help him gain independence. Both helped us find our footing as we underwent the huge shift in perspective and lifestyle of becoming a family. We are forever grateful for the help we had welcoming our beautiful son into a whole community of people who care for him.

Resources:


Use the LIFTS online resource guide to search for "Child Development Information and Support" and find organizations that assist families in screening children and making appropriate referrals.

Do you have a story about pregnancy or caring for a child up to age 3?

Fill out our Online Form at

www.hmhb-mt.org/get-involved

or email your idea (not the whole story) to stories@hmhb-mt.org, and an HMHB staffer will follow up with you!



HERE FOR MONTANA FAMILIES.

WIC provides food and nutrition benefits to pregnant and postpartum women and children under 5. Moms, dads, grandparents, foster parents, and other caretakers of young children are **all** welcome to apply.



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SCAN ME



Grieving With Grace: A Bereaved Mother's Story

By Amanda Eby

Editor's Note: This story is about infant loss. HMHB feels it is important to share stories about grief and loss because they are an important part of Montanans' pregnancy and parenting experiences. That said, we also encourage you to take care of yourself. If this is a difficult topic for you, make sure you have the support you need before you read this article, or skip it if that's the right thing for you to do.

I sensed hesitancy from the sonographer as she clicked incessantly on the keyboard. After hoping, waiting, and praying, I was more prepared for this pregnancy than I was for my first child, Olivia. But I was shocked when, as my bladder was near bursting, the sonographer exclaimed while she typed in all caps – “TWINS!”

My mother died three months before I became pregnant. I yearned to dream of her, to feel close to her again. When I finally did, it branded the creases of my brain. She came to my side, and in an uncharacteristically calm voice, she told me that one of my babies wasn't going to make it. I didn't share the dream with anyone, but I buried it in my shoulder like a quiet cross to bear. I couldn't let go of it because it was a precious visitation of my mother I missed dearly, yet I fiercely blocked it as a possibility. Her peaceful presence then would resurface later to comfort me when my nightmare came true.

“We have Baby A who is doing well, Baby B is pretty sick, but all the nurses and doctors are trying to help her now.” I awoke to these words from my husband, struggling to comprehend as I tried desperately to awake from anesthesia. I was in disbelief. I was almost 37 weeks. My co-worker had just joked with me that they were just getting fat now and could come out anytime. My specialist had told me I could “write the book on having twins.” We would say goodbye forever to our Baby B, Jacqueline, just eight hours later. For eight powerful hours, we held her.

The first year was numb as we maintained survival mode. One lonely twin didn't want to eat, an older sister didn't know how to grieve, and two parents mourned in their corners yet still occasionally found each other. I searched for answers and signs of my daughter gone from earth. I had sudden moments of sorrow and angst, remembering not all my children are with me. We celebrated milestones, watched a personality emerge, and witnessed the discoveries of young childhood - all while quietly acknowledging the persistent, sad void that coupled each of those milestones. I found solace when I focused on my mother holding my baby, rocking her, just as if they were with me.

Caroline, our Baby A, has always talked about her twin. She asked why her twin Jacqueline got sick. I tried explaining twin-to-twin transfusion to a 4-year-old. She listened and asked if that was why she died and why everything had to go to her instead of Jacqueline. Then she curled into my arms and told me she was sad. Repeatedly through toddlerhood, she asked: “Where is Jacqueline? Did she die? Why did she die? How did





she die?" While I strived for patience, I became robotic to maintain composure. I had moments of weakness where some days I just couldn't act out the Groundhog Day rendition of my daughter's death. Sometimes I was short with her. I was terse and shamefully irritated by her questions that seemed to lack concern for the gravity of the situation and my emotions.

Now, rather than verifying her reality, she recognizes and acknowledges it – when my tender heart least expects it. While planning her fifth birthday, Caroline said, "Wait, how are we celebrating Jacqueline's birthday?!" I reminded her of the pink lantern we sent to the sky, and she smiled and commented matter-of-factly that it's important because it's her birthday too. One day, she went to play with schoolmates – twin girls her age. She told me about their lunch and the backyard surrounded by lilacs. It wasn't until she was about to fall asleep that she elaborated. "Their room is so cool, Mom," she said. "I wish I had that room to share with Jacqueline."

I shared my story publicly a few times before Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day on October 15th and then I breathed a small sigh of relief. I was feeling, as Brené Brown puts it, a "vulnerability hangover." I had been holding hard space for my grief, carrying a

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I had been holding hard space for my grief, carrying a little suitcase in my gut, pulling on my heart with a comforting weight. And then I was ready to set it down. It was a ticket to validation.

”

SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH



BIG SKY GROUP PEER SUPPORT

CARING FOR YOURSELF IS CARING FOR YOUR BABY

Parenthood changes your life in big and small ways, but without the proper community of support the journey may feel demanding. **You don't have to do it alone.** Groups around the state are available to mothers, led by women with lived experience who are trained in the Group Peer Support model.

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A movement developed to give voice to the stories and experiences of mothers.



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little suitcase in my gut, pulling on my heart with a comforting weight. And then I was ready to set it down. It was a ticket to validation.

I do not believe things happen for a reason or search for reasons why they happen. I resist the urge to step into a dark forest of twisted trees of blame, shadows of "should've," screams of "but only," and cries of "what if." Grief overwhelms enough when my body aches as it cradles hollowness, it shudders with an insatiable hunger. No amount of blame, not an ounce of retraced steps, no spat of anger at broken systems or resentment of human error will fill that space that can't hold a child. It only sharpens the ache to anger.

I have learned about "grieving with grace." Our friends and family, or strangers in the supermarket, will inevitably make comments that sting. I try to extend patience, to recognize possible coping mechanisms of stoicism or nonchalance. I hope to teach them, wait for them.

Jacqueline shows up in our lives in many different ways. Amidst a stint of relentless bickering between Olivia and Caroline, we approached the store aisle containing a plethora of various gingerbread house kits. I dreaded yet another argument about which type to purchase as I listed them — Barbie, Mickey Mouse, and so on. Much to my surprise, they immediately agreed on a birdhouse with a red cardinal perched in front. A red cardinal can be a

sign of hope from a departed loved one, a sign of their peace. It was as if they knew.

I am happy for you and your pregnancy and children, and I'm sorry if the pain of seeing what I dreamt for overshadows that happiness. We are all mothers, and I always want the absolute best for every single one of you. That said, please understand that I may not want to go to your baby shower, or even shop for a gift. Don't ask me how many children I have; instead ask me about my family. When you talk with me, be prepared for discomfort. Please don't encourage silent grieving, but listen and support me. Bereaved mothers are part of the motherhood story that connects us all.



To learn more about system **changes for good**, check out the following links or scan the QR Codes.



Meadowlark Initiative:
mthcf.org/priority/behavioral-health/the-meadowlark-initiative/

Montana Obstetric and Maternal Support Initiatives:
www.mtmoms.org



Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support Resources:

- Ramsey Keller Memorial pays for infant funerals in the state of Montana.
<https://www.kisses2heaven.com/>
- Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep provides the gift of remembrance portraits to parents experiencing the death of a baby.
<https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/>
- Still Standing Magazine is for all who are grieving child loss & infertility.
<https://stillstandingmag.com/>
- Various "angel gown" organizations that you can find online convert donated wedding dresses into infant burial gowns.



What's a SNAP-Ed Class Like?

By Sally Shields

At some point in our lives, we've all struggled with eating healthy. While scrolling through social media or talking with friends, I found that tips and tricks to eat healthy are abundant. But, like many others, I would always save these ideas in a folder in the back of my mind and seldom implement them. I found myself in a cycle of a desire to improve my eating habits, but the lack of motivation or knowledge to actually make a difference. When running into the opportunity to try out the six-week SNAP-Ed nutrition course (part of Montana State University Extension's Buy Eat Live Better program), I figured now would be as good a time as ever to take a step to not only learn more about nutrition and what we put in our bodies, but how to actually apply what I learn in everyday life.

Being honest, I was nervous. My apprehension came from the worry that everyone would know more than me, that the instructor would tell me I'm doing everything wrong with my diet, and that I'd leave just feeling bad about myself. Luckily, my stress and anxiety quickly faded away and turned to excitement and determination.

The nutrition course was more beneficial than I could've imagined. Not only did I learn much more than expected, but each class we made and ate a meal, did some fun and easy workouts, and got material to take home to read more in-depth information and further our knowledge.

We were able to have hands-on experiences such as looking at different types of whole grains, reading food labels, and ingredient preparation. The instructor, Havilah, met us where we were in our current habits. She didn't tell us that we were wrong or guilt us into better habits. She let us know that wherever we were was fine, and we were all there to learn and make improvements. She asked what we hoped to get out of the course and took our answers into account in every class. With everyone in the course having different schedules, home lives, and goals, Havilah did an amazing job giving us general information we could all benefit from, as well as information tailored to what would benefit each of us most.

With the incentive of receiving a free pressure cooker at the end, we were all excited to know how the contraption worked and how it could help each of us. Since the completion of the course, the pressure cooker has become a staple in my kitchen, and I always get excited to learn more ways to use it. (I can make some amazing chicken tacos now!) In addition, I am working out more. Plus, when I check labels of food, I actually know what I'm looking for rather than just staring at words, and I'm taking what I learned into account when making nutritional decisions. My diet isn't perfect, but that wasn't my goal. My goal was to learn how to make improvements, and that's exactly what I got.

If you have the opportunity to take a SNAP-Ed course or something similar, I highly recommend it. Sometimes, all you need is a bit of encouragement to make decisions that are healthy and doable for you and your lifestyle, whatever that may be for you. Happy cooking!



Interested in attending a class?
You can sign up by going to
www.buyeatlivebetter.org/classes.html.



You can also discover a variety of resources such as recipes and fact sheets at www.buyeatlivebetter.org.

These institutions are an equal opportunity provider.



Recipes

The following recipes are provided courtesy of MSU Extension's Buy Live Eat Better program.

Fruit Kabobs with Yogurt

Yield: 4 servings / Serving Size = 1 kabob and 1/4 cup yogurt dip

Ingredients:

- 2 small fruits (or more) of your choice, such as apple, pear, clementine orange, banana, kiwi, grapes
- 1 (8-ounce) can chunk pineapple
- 1 (6- or 8-ounce) container lowfat vanilla or fruit-flavored yogurt



Directions:

1. Wash fruit with cold running water and rubbing. Peel bananas, clementine oranges, and kiwi.
2. Drain pineapple juice into a bowl.
3. Cut fruit in wedges or chunks. Dip fruit that turns dark (such as apples and bananas) in the pineapple juice.
4. Thread fruit on skewers or toothpicks. Arrange on a platter.
5. Pour yogurt into a bowl for dipping. Refrigerate any leftovers.

Variation: Use plain yogurt and add 2 teaspoons of brown sugar.

Tips for preparing fruit: For longer storage life, wait to wash until just before eating, rather than as soon as received. Wash by gently rubbing the produce under clean running tap water. Wash fruits even when the skin and rind are not eaten, such as oranges and melons. Raw fruit can carry bacteria or viruses that will make you sick. The bacteria come from the soil, from people who handle the produce, or from the knives and cutting boards in your home.

Per serving: 90 calories, 30 mg sodium, 21 g carbohydrate including 2 g dietary fiber and 17 g sugars, 3 g protein, 99 mg calcium, 155 mg potassium.

Colorful Quesadillas

Yield: 8 servings / Serving Size = 1 quesadilla

Ingredients:

- 4 ounces cream cheese, fat-free
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 8 (8-inch) whole wheat tortillas
- 1 cup sweet red pepper (chopped)
- 1 3/4 cup low-fat cheese (shredded)
- 2 cups spinach leaves (fresh or 9 ounces frozen, thawed and squeezed dry)



Directions:

1. In a small bowl, mix the cream cheese and garlic powder.
2. Spread about 2 Tablespoons of the cheese mixture on each tortilla.
3. Sprinkle about 2 Tablespoons bell pepper and 2 tablespoons cheese on one half of each tortilla.
4. Add spinach: 1/4 cup if using fresh leaves or 2 Tablespoons if using frozen. Fold tortillas in half.
5. Heat a large skillet over medium heat until hot. Put 2 folded tortillas in skillet and heat for 1-2 minutes on each side or until golden brown.
6. Remove quesadillas from skillet, place on platter and cover with foil to keep warm while cooking the remainder.
7. Cut each quesadilla into 4 wedges. Serve warm.

Per serving: 190 calories, 5 g fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 600 mg sodium, 22 g carbohydrate including 1 g dietary fiber and 2 g sugars, 13 g protein, 247 mg calcium, 2 mg iron, 95 mg potassium.





Early Head Start: My Family's Experience

By Kayla Goble

Parenting is hard no matter how prepared you feel you are for it. I have always wanted to be a mom for as long as I can remember, but becoming a mom was not going to be an easy journey for me. Before I got pregnant with "Bugs" (my nickname for my daughter) in 2019, I had some health issues and I was not sure that my dream of becoming a mom would ever become a reality. I knew that there are other ways to become a mom, and I have two amazing "bonus children" that I love dearly. Throughout my pregnancy with Bugs, I lived in constant fear that I would lose her, as we did not have an easy ride. I was diagnosed with several medical conditions requiring medication, and I struggled to carry her to full term. Ultimately, she made her appearance at 36 weeks and 6 days, at 5:30 a.m.

Once Bugs was born, I knew that I needed to have support and a village around my family in order to help Bugs be the best that she can be. As someone who is going to school for Early Childhood Education (P-3) and Special Education, I know that it is important to provide gentle parenting and to guide children in life, and to help them have a healthy attachment so that they feel safe and secure to explore the world around them. When Bugs was three months old, we moved from Missoula to Anaconda, meaning

that my family and main support was an hour and a half away. Two months after we moved to Anaconda, COVID hit, meaning that we did not have time to build a support system there.

In March 2021, there was a fire in our building and we had to suddenly move again. We moved to Butte, where some of our friends lived and we would be able to find more services to support Bugs.

By the time that we moved, Bugs had been diagnosed with some conditions requiring many doctor appointments and hospital stays. Anaconda does not have an Early Head Start (EHS) program, so when we moved to Butte, we started looking at the process of getting her enrolled in AWARE's EHS program. AWARE runs EHS programs in Butte, Helena, Belgrade and Billings, while other communities provide EHS through different organizations.

In June of 2021, we worked with Family Outreach to have Bugs tested for delays and to see if she qualified for an IFSP (Individualized Family Support Plan). The results came back that Bugs was 25-90% delayed in all developmental areas except one, where she was 10% delayed. This showed that, while Bugs was advanced in many of the skills she had at a year and a half,

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***Some people might think
that EHS is just for the child,
but it's about all of us.***

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she had missed some of the key skills that she would need to be successful in life. She also was showing some concerning behaviors when she became overstimulated or was in social situations. When we enrolled her into EHS in Butte, I was not sure how it would go and worried that Bugs would struggle and not succeed.

For the first three weeks that Bugs was at EHS, she did not talk there, while she talked all the time at home. All of the other kids wanted to take care of her and would get her whatever she wanted if she pointed at something. Over time she came out of her shell and showed her feisty, independent attitude. Now, she loves going to “school.”

Each time we have had Bugs make a transition - first to another EHS classroom and then to Young Explorers, which is an EHS Community Partner - I thought that Bugs would regress and that she would not be able to handle it. Each time it has been the best move for her. All staff have been supportive of figuring out and dealing with her medical issues. When the doctor decided on two occasions that she needed to change her diet, EHS made each change within 24 hours. Nine months after she enrolled at EHS, she was retested and her development scores had increased dramatically.

Not only is Bugs supported, so are we as her family. Some people might think that EHS is just for the child, but it's about all of us. We have a team of 14

people who all help support Bugs, but also check in with us about our family's sleep schedule, my relationship with my husband, and other aspects of our lives. There is a therapist on staff that helps us deal with things that come up, such as Bugs shredding paper. There is also a Family Advocate that works with us on various issues.

As a parent, I have been empowered to join the Policy Council, which Head Start and Early Head Start are required to have. Policy Council is made up of parent and community representatives from each of the cities that AWARE EHS serves. We meet once a month and act as a “check and balance” for AWARE EHS. We go over the budget and things that are happening in the centers. As parents, we discuss ways to improve things or make changes. The parents that are on Policy Council also help organize parent committee meetings every month, which help parents connect and learn new information to help them be the best parents that they can be. I am glad that I chose to trust someone to help and support me with raising my daughter and would not change that decision for anything.

Resources:

Learn more about what AWARE can offer you and your child at www.Aware-inc.org/ecs. Or find out if there is an Early Head Start program in your community offered by a different organization listed in the LIFTS online resource guide.



To find a GPS group near you, visit: hmhb-mt.org/moms-and-families/parenting/bigskygps/ or scan the QR code.



Getting Help for Postpartum Depression

By Naz Sanks

I am a mom of two wonderful kids, a wife, and a clinical therapist, besides many other roles I play. As a little girl, I always knew that I wanted to be a mom. When I had my first child, I was expecting nothing but pure joy and happiness. At the time of her birth, I had a wonderful, supportive husband, great family support, and I was working a job that I loved. Seemingly, all the stars were aligning for us to have a perfect postpartum experience. And the first week of us having her home was great. I thought I was adjusting well, the baby was doing well, and we were working on figuring out breastfeeding.

However, after about ten days, I started noticing some signs that worried me. One was the overwhelming feeling of sadness that enveloped me like a black cocoon, such that I would get up and not feel any joy in my life. Here I was, having a wonderful life with a beautiful baby, and all I did was cry and try to hide from the world.

And my world was shrinking fast, as I had no desire or energy to communicate with anyone. I could barely manage to get up to care for my baby. Breastfeeding was becoming a huge issue, and my milk supply was minimal. That caused sleeplessness and hours of sitting at night, trying to breastfeed. For some reason, I thought I must power through, because not breastfeeding would be a sign of failure as a mom. So power through I did, trying to provide milk, care for my daughter, and learn about being a mom, while I was quickly descending into severe postpartum depression.

I know now that postpartum depression is the name of what I was going through, but back then I had no name for this monster that suddenly overtook my life. I don't recall any warning from, or even a discussion with, my ob-gyn provider about what to expect emotionally and psychologically postpartum.

If I could describe the postpartum period in one word, I would say I was "blindsided." Never in my life would I have thought that I would struggle as much as I did. I consider myself a pretty positive person who doesn't like to linger on negatives, but this was something beyond "thinking happy thoughts."

Growing up in Central Asia, I am realizing now, we never discussed mental health in the perinatal realm. We valued stoicism, not complaining, and getting through difficult times without bothering anyone. With that philosophy as my background, I think I tried to first dismiss that something was wrong and later just do my best to get through the day. My well-meaning mom suggested it was just a case of me being stressed and if only I could get outside more, and keep busy and smile more, I would be okay. I distinctly remember crying in

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Here I was, having a wonderful life with a beautiful baby, and all I did was cry and try to hide from the world.

”



the bathroom, head against the towels, and thinking "This is not okay! I need help!"

I reached out to my primary provider after much hesitation. Hesitation because I did not want to be labeled a "bad mom"...hesitation because in the worst moments of my postpartum depression I felt like I was the only woman in the whole world struggling with this. Ultimately, I described my symptoms: lack of interest in activities I used to enjoy, crying spells for no reason, feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety of being perceived as a terrible mother, compounded by low energy and a hard time just getting out of the bed. With my doctor's help, I learned about postpartum mental health issues, specifically perinatal mood disorders. I was prescribed an antidepressant and recommended therapy with someone who specializes in perinatal mental health.

It took me about six or seven months to truly feel that things were better. The feeling I would describe as seeing that there is hope, and that the combination of medication and therapy was working for me. Most importantly, allowing myself to be a human who is struggling was probably the best self-help I could get. I believe that in these situations, women tend to beat themselves up and feel like failures. It can be especially hard when combined with other issues such as difficulties in breastfeeding, a partner who might not understand what is going on, or pressure from society in general to "bounce back and be happy." Self-forgiveness and self-care were really the cornerstone of recovery in my case. I am honored to share my story of postpartum depression, in hopes that it will help another mom who may be going through something similar.

Resources

In addition to Group Peer Support (GPS) and other support groups in Montana that you can find on the LIFTS online resource guide, Postpartum Support International has several online groups available at <https://www.postpartum.net/get-help/psi-online-support-meetings/>.

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For a list of sites offering Meadowlark care, visit mthcf.org/meadowlark

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ASKING FOR HELP ISN'T A WEAKNESS. IT'S BRAVE.

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 - Support Treatment & Recovery
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The Top 6 Signs Baby is Sleepy

Not sure if baby is ready for bed?

Look for these signs:

- Fussy
- Rubbing ears
- Red eyes
- Crying
- Arching or jerking body
- Blank stares

If baby is showing signs of being sleepy, it might be time for bed.

Safe Sleep: Learn • Plan • Provide
Learn how to make it safe at hmhb-mt.org



This project is funded in whole or in part under a contract with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. The statements herein do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Department.



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LOOK PAST MY ADDICTION.

*See the mother
I want to be.*

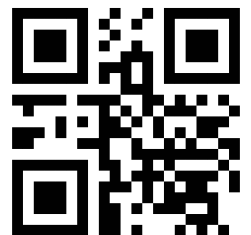
Addiction is a disease requiring treatment, not judgment. Recovery requires more than grit & willpower. When moms seek care, meet them with compassion. Never underestimate the power of one kind interaction. It could change a life... maybe two.

Asking for help is brave. You don't have to do this alone. When you're ready, help is here for you.

*Taking care of yourself
is taking care of your baby.*



**To find help, visit:
www.hmhb-mt.org/lifts
or call the warmline at
(406) 430-9100
for anonymous assistance.**



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Let LIFTS help with all the holding.
Tell someone what you need:
we are listening.
Let us LIFT you up.

Can you even count all of the snuggles, the feedings, the playful exchanges today? How about the spit ups, blow outs and tears of joy and exhaustion? How many times did you pick up your little one in order to keep them safe and secure?

Taking care of your family is a lot of work, but LIFTS is here to help. The LIFTS guide lets you find supports and services in your neighborhood for families and caregivers, all from the comfort of—well—wherever you find a moment. Whatever you're facing, you don't have to do it alone.



To find local resources and family-friendly community supports, call the LIFTS warmline at **406-430-9100** for anonymous assistance using the LIFTS resource guide.



LIFTS
Linking Infants & Families to Supports