



Linking Infants & Families to Supports

LIFTS

ANNUAL MAGAZINE • 2023

Stories from MT Families

ALL INSIDE!

Photo Essay: The Longest Shortest Year

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Know-how for New Dads

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Tips for Sibling Transitions

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A publication by HMHB



Healthy Mothers,
Healthy Babies
The Montana Coalition





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Contributors

Writers:

Kelly Rumney
Patrick Duganz
Claire Larson
Kendra Potter
Crystal Ascheman
April Lemieux
Cait McWilliams
Dr. Ariela Frieder

Photography:

Ashley M.
Photography
Lemon & Lilacs
Michelle Gustafson
Photography
Jenna Nord
Photography

Design & Layout:
WutzPossible

Ledger Art

Rachel Twoteeth Pichardo

Cover Photo

Lemon & Lilacs Photography

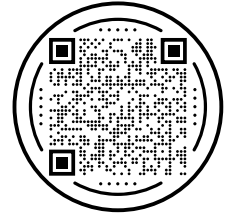


This publication was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.243 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and by CFDA 93.136 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The views and opinions contained do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA, the CDC, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, the Montana Coalition, Inc., or the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, and should not be construed as such.



Welcome

Welcome to Issue 3 of LIFTS Magazine. LIFTS was created to **Link Infants & Families To Supports** because, let's face it, parenting is hard! Raising little ones is indeed wonderful, but can also be very challenging. Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies— The Montana Coalition created the LIFTS Online Resource Guide to link Montana families to supports, resources, their communities. It takes a village, right? So, if you're thinking it's about time you found your people but aren't sure where to start, visit **hmhb-lifts.org**.



Now that you're here, I hope you'll find comfort in the words of other parents. I hope you'll see something of yourself in the images and realize that you are not alone in any of this. Not the teething, or the sleepless nights, or the piled-up dishes or the tiny beaming smiles that stop you in your tracks. Since much of what we do as parents happens "behind the scenes", I hope that this issue of LIFTS feels like an all-access backstage pass and that the stories of these everyday heroes help you realize that you are one, too.

To our contributors, thank you for taking the time to put words to your experiences. Reflecting on our early parenting days can bring up a lot and I am grateful that you've shared your stories so that other parents will feel less alone in their struggles. I hope that they'll feel seen and will give themselves permission to seek the help that they so deserve.

As a mom of two gorgeously complicated humans myself, I can tell you that what you do everyday matters. Every hug and kiss matters. Every spill you've wiped up and band-aid you've delicately placed over an invisible owie matters. Every morning that you've gotten out of bed and kept going when you didn't think you could, really matters. And, when it all feels like too much, or you're pretty sure none of it matters at all, asking for help matters. No one was meant to do this alone. You know what we were meant to do?


We were meant to lift each other up.

With love and warmth,

Claire Larson

Storytelling Coordinator, HMHB-MT





Rural Roots: Mothering Under the Big Sky

by Kelly Rumney

As Montana residents, we all have some sense of what rural life looks like. In fact, living in wide open spaces can be peaceful and rewarding; it's one reason many of us choose Montana as home in the first place. But, as a mother of a newborn, it can also be isolating and intimidating.

I live on a beautiful ranch 10 miles outside of Cascade, a small town of around 600 people. As soon as my husband steps out the front door, he's already at work, tackling jobs that require him to report for duty seven days a week, during most of the year. Living the dream! Except...I am 45 minutes from the nearest medical help or activities for my children. As a new mother, this definitely caused anxiety. Raising my children

here is sometimes comforting and sometimes lonely. Often, it's both. When they were little, I learned to get out and interact with other mothers because, through conversation, we shared similar worries, struggles and wins. Talking with them helped ease my anxiety and depression so much. But, getting up and out of the house and on the (long) road is easier said than done.

When I gave birth to my daughter, I was 22. I had never changed a diaper or interacted with babies other than our calves. Needless to say, I was unsure about motherhood. So, after she was born, the friendly nurses made sure the car seat was good to go and I was released into the wild – sore, exhausted, and terrified. I arrived home, a panicked mess, and



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Eventually, I realized I was not a bad mom. Like so many other moms, I was trying to live up to an unrealistic ideal that doesn't exist.

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tried to act like I knew what I was doing. Fake it 'til you make it, right? I felt so unprepared. Luckily, my mom stayed for a few days to help, and my mother-in-law lived next door. They both offered advice, but it was mostly conflicting and definitely wasn't what I'd read in the baby book. Visitors came, and they too would offer heaps of advice.

Meanwhile, no one warned me that I would continue to look and feel like a whale, or that nursing would be so darn hard, or that I would be so sore. Did I mention the baby was 8lbs, 10oz after 17 hours of labor? The cows out in the field make it look a lot easier! Eventually, things quieted down but, as soon as it did, I longed for people to come back and advise me. I was alone all day, every day with only my own panic for company. *Is she pooping too much or too little? Eating enough? Crying enough? Too much? What if she stops breathing? Why won't the baby stop crying? Is she fevered?* I swear I took her temperature 12 times a day.

Oh, the mom brain! I imagined horrendous things happening to my infant. I once spewed out all the thoughts in my brain to my husband, who seemed so calm in his transition to parenthood, changing diapers like a pro and unfazed by screaming or fussing. He asked how a person could stay sane with the thoughts I was having. Well, I wasn't! I was struggling with postpartum depression but didn't realize it until the birth of my son, two years later.

Everything felt so overwhelming. John would go to work, and I would worry about all the possible accidents he might get into. It seemed like I was faking it, but not making it. Even doctor appointments and grocery shopping felt daunting. Since we lived so far from town, we would try to fit in as many errands as we could into one trip. This meant long days spent trying to function in public.

Nursing in the car's not easy, and I constantly worried that people would hear my baby crying and judge me.

Finally, someone told me “Dumber people than you have raised perfectly healthy and happy children.” And, for whatever reason, hearing that made me feel better. In fact, 16 years later, I still remind myself of this. I came to understand that we all have strengths and weaknesses and despite, or maybe because of them, our kids will be okay, as long as we care enough to try. Let me repeat: TRY, not master!

I started to relax and let the baby cry for a few minutes in the crib while I showered. I napped when the baby slept. I went for walks, taking time to just breathe the mountain air and visited my 15-miles-away-neighbor who had a baby the same age and found that we shared a lot of the same worries and self-doubts. I saved my favorite show to watch during night feedings, so it felt like a special treat. And, instead of putting pressure on myself to keep the whole house clean, I just chose one spot (the kitchen sink) and focused on keeping that clean. The rest of the house might be a disaster but, if that sink was shiny and tidy, I felt like I was succeeding in life. These were small things, but they made a big difference.

Then, along came child number two and it seemed like everything I had learned up until then no longer applied. Depression hit hard. This baby did not sleep and, honestly, I can't share much about how I got through this time because I don't even really remember. We faced jaundice, ear infections and thrush (which made nursing excruciatingly painful). Labor was more complicated, so recovery was harder and took longer. I had intrusive thoughts that scared me and kept me up at night, but I also had thoughts that seemed so apathetic and disconnected they didn't even feel like my own. I'd say to myself, “What kind of mother thinks this way?”.

I felt like I was in an exhausted stupor most of the time; just running on fumes in auto-pilot mode. I'd forget things and miss things and was afraid of what that could mean. I no longer felt like a healthy mom, so I finally asked my doctor to help me with the curtain of apathy and exhaustion that had landed





between me and my world. The cowboy mentality of “spit on it and rub a little dirt in it” was not going to suffice here. I was isolated, sad, and tired, but none of that was my fault.

My husband was incredibly supportive and involved with the baby, which was great but, in some ways, made me feel worse. Why was this so easy for him? Eventually, I realized I was not a bad mom. Like so many other moms, I was trying to live up to an unrealistic ideal that just doesn’t exist. By taking the time to care for myself and allowing myself some grace, I was doing a much better job of taking care of my baby. I was learning to ask for help and that accepting help didn’t mean I was failing as mom; it actually meant I was rocking it!

As I look back, I realize that every parenting journey comes with unique challenges, and you have to just parent in a way that works for you and your family. Take the advice that helps and leave the stuff that doesn’t. Just because you don’t have a chore chart doesn’t mean your kiddos won’t grow into responsible adults. No two children are exactly the same, so no two parenting styles should be the

same either. What worked for my first born had to go out the window for my second born. In balancing a teaching career along with parenting over the past 10 years, I have spent a lot of time with other people’s children and, from what I can tell, the kids that seem to be growing into fully functioning citizens are the ones whose parents consistently try their best, but also allow for chaos, mistakes, and messes. They surround themselves with support so they can be reminded that one bad day does not mean the end of it all. So, give yourself some grace, find support, and just TRY!

To learn about statewide programs and resources designed to help support rural families in Montana visit:
www.frontier.care/beyondtheweather.html



Visit **hnhb-lifts.org** for local resources using the search terms “counselors” or “support groups”.



Items	Price	Store Price	Store Profit	Date Sold	Date Paid
1 Pair Earring PLO+B	1200				
1 Pair Earring PDQ BP	800				
1 Pair Earring PPQ Bynur	800				
1 Pair Earring PDQ OK	800				
Pairing Earing S Blues	2000				
Pairing Earring Horse Long	3500				
Pairing Earring Blues lot oky	1500				
Barrette BRO y	500				
Barrette Blue & Pink Red					
Barrette Blues with stick					
Key Chain Blues					
Barrette Brown					
Key Chain BK O. Toy					
Barrette Lav. Pink					
Key Chain Green					
Key Chain BLO					
Barrette					
Earring Shell Flower					
Key Chain G					
Key Chain G					
Key Chain					
BK & White C					
Key Chain					
Pair of Earrings					
Wrist Band					
Wrist Band					
Barrette Purple					
Pair of Earrings Green					

Melanie Richards 23



Rachel Twoteeth Pichardo is an enrolled member of the Little Shell Chippewa tribe and a mother of two beautiful girls. She developed her passion for art and beadwork at an early age crafting with her Grandmother Sharon. Sharon passed away several years ago and since then, Rachel has found her grandmother's ledger accounts from the trading post she previously owned. She uses the ledger papers as her canvas to tell a story, and to keep her and her grandmother's connection alive. Her designs are inspired by her culture, the joys of motherhood, nature, and what it means to be Indigenous in a modern setting.

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair, her eyes closed, gently holding a baby. The baby is wrapped in a thick, grey, textured knit blanket. The woman's face is in profile, looking down at the baby. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of greenery and a white surface.

The Becoming

by April Lemieux

My lips formed around
your name, little one,
long before I ever
held you close.
My body a living shelter
around the ember
of your essence.
And now here you are
living and breathing and
Oh....who knew it could
all feel so big?
This mothering.
This sudden vastness
of love that stretches
wide and deep
like the prairie sky.
Oh tiny being,
my child,
my heart.
You have undone me
and made me whole
in the space of one breath.
What magic.
What wonder.



A Letter to Mama

By Kendra Potter

Dear Mama,

It's here. Can you believe it? It doesn't matter how much you prepared, it's still new. Even if you've done it before, you've never birthed *this* baby. This singular birth is its whole own thing. It's surprising, isn't it? Maybe you've never felt this sensation, but isn't it strange how it almost feels familiar? If you're not at the moment of "I can't do this," don't worry. That moment will come, and in that moment, if I were with you in person, I would be the one who gives you a gentle smile and reminds you that not only can you do it, but you ARE doing it. Right now. You are giving birth.

After working in the birth space for the last 12 years, the awe never leaves me. In this moment, someone is birthing a child. In the time since you began reading this letter, 259 new human lives began around the world. And right now, You are joining with all of those birthing people around the world. Your body knows what to do. No matter how you found your way to this pregnancy, and no matter how this birth is shaping up to be, no one had to tell you how to grow this child. No one had to tell you how to grow a placenta. Your body knows. And just because it knows, doesn't mean you may not want some support. There is work, and often the hardest part of the work of birth is surrendering. It is hard to surrender, whether it's letting go of your birth plan, or control, or

surrendering to the pain. No matter how this baby is emerging, via cesarean or vaginal birth, you are birthing your child. If you're laboring without medication, here are a few ideas of how to cope with the pain:

- **Ask to be seen.** Allow yourself to be witnessed by the people around you. Evidence shows that our perception of pain decreases significantly when we feel consistently witnessed.
- **Move about in any way your body is asking you to move.**
- **Howl about it – or moan.** Lower tones seem to work better for many people, but if you wanna scream about it, by all means.
- **Breathe about it.** Tune into your breath. Become curious about the inhales and fascinated by the way your body exhales.
- **Bathe about it.** Maybe get into some water. Showers and baths can be incredibly helpful.
- **Notice the breaks between the contractions!** You get breaks! Focus on those and utilize them. Rest or walk or shake it off between each one.

And if you find yourself with an epidural, or other pain medication, you are still working! You and your baby are both working to go from one to two (or if it's twins, one to three!). And if you are heading into

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*There is work, and often
the hardest part of the work
of birth is surrendering.*

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the OR for your cesarean birth, your child is coming through a crack in the sky rather than out through a cave, and that is its own gorgeous emergence. It is all work, and it can all be sacred.

Please remember that beyond the bodies in the room, there are the witnesses on the other side of the veil, too. Your ancestors are here, ushering this child as far as they can. Throughout your pregnancy, you've been moving toward a threshold, and on this day, you get to become the threshold. Your body will be a doorway through which, no matter how your child emerges, they will pass only once. It is an incredible and strange thing to transform from a body into a doorway. It can be scary, but it can also be sacred. In fact, it IS sacred. Whether this birth occurs in your home, a birth center, the labor and delivery unit, or the operating room, it is hallowed ground for the time you are here.

And also remember, you are never alone in this. While no one can do the work for you, you are not alone. Your baby is also here, having their own experience. They are sharing every squeeze of your uterus. They feel every mile-long millimeter of this process, too. They are your teammate in this. When the sensations become the loudest part of your experience, it's easy to forget your baby is sharing this with you. So, I'm here to remind you. How is baby doing? You can talk to them! Tell them what they're feeling, and why they feel it. Tell them what is happening, and what else is going to happen next. Tell them about colors and light and space. So much space will be here to welcome them once they're done being squeezed! Maybe tell them out loud. Maybe use your voice. Remind yourself by reminding your baby that there is another side to this experience.

You will, one day in the not-so-distant future, be digging in fresh earth with your child, worrying



a little that they'll get really dirty. You'll share a strawberry with them. You'll dip their bare toes into a lake and relish in the look of surprise on your sweet baby's face and mirror that look in an exaggerated way, a smile chasing both of you. You'll snuggle them and wrestle them and feel incredibly annoyed sometimes. You'll be on the other side of this, looking back, saying to yourself, "Remember when I was giving birth? That was so intense!"

This work is a lot. And I thank you for doing it. Thank you for bringing this bright light into the world. Thank you for doing it even though it is hard. Let's breathe together and use this breath and this attention to soften a bit into what (and who) is almost here.

You already knew you were giving birth to a baby, but you are also birthing yourself as a Mother. Two people will be where one once was. This is wild, and it is natural. Your body is amazing. You are amazing. This is hard, and you are doing it. So open up, Mama. Open up, call out to that Great Mystery, and marvel as you become a doorway.

I mean this when I say it, I love you.

Blessings,

Kendra

To find support and encouragement like this for your own pregnancy, birth, or postpartum period visit: **hmhb-lifts.org** and use the search term "doula".



To learn more about Kendra Potter's offerings and events visit her site: **sistermoonwellness.com**.



The Longest Shortest Year

Written by Claire Larson, Photos by Michelle Gustafson Photography



When soothing works, it feels like such a win. And when it doesn't, everything can feel doomed. At times when it seems like the crying will never end, it's okay for you to cry too. It's okay to take breaks just to breathe or call someone you trust. Most days, the messy moments collide with the beautiful ones and you learn to give yourself grace over and over again. You just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Your love doesn't have to be perfect to be true.

That first year of baths. Learning to cradle their slippery limbs and gaze into their curious eyes. Soft sudsy skin and bobbing yellow rubber duckies. Moments as tender as these will sometimes get lost in the constant shuffle and earnest work that is early parenthood. That's just the way it goes. But, whenever you can, try to be fully there. Splash with them. Kiss their soft fuzzy heads and nibble their tiny toes. We don't get to go back.



Nourishing our babies, in whatever way we choose to, is a full-time job. Sometimes, we forget about our own hunger. Or thirst. Or need for a shower and some fresh air. If you feel like your basic self-care is slipping through the cracks, ask a trusted friend to help you stock up on easy-to-grab foods. Keep full water bottles and bowls of trail mix near your go-to nursing or feeding spots. Find a way to shower, even if that means baby goes in a bouncer or safe seat and fusses a little while you let the warm water wash over and renew you.

Work and play. Good cop, bad cop. Laughing and crying. Bliss and agony. Total peace and utter terror. It's no wonder you're tired. Go easy on yourself, this is the toughest and most important job ever.



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Be KIND to yourself. Be gracious with each other. Parenting conflicts can rattle us and, when it's hard, it's really hard.

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Every bond with baby matters and each one is special and unique. When a new one comes into your world, life shifts in ways you never could have imagined. But that's okay. Things change over time; they're supposed to. We change over time; we have to.

The tension is real. The overwhelm is real. The trying-to-figure-things-out-together-and-not-being-able-to (over and over again) is real. Be KIND to yourself. Be gracious with each other. Parenting conflicts can rattle us (especially when we're sleep deprived) and, when it's hard, it's really hard.



Oh, so many firsts. The first lilac-sniff, the first lick of lemon, the first full-belly chuckles. Suddenly, your little bundle is staggering from couch to couch on their own and finding their voice. Getting to watch your child discover the world is the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. I promise.

And, before you know it, you'll be lighting birthday candles and cleaning up wrapping paper and one whole year will have passed. It'll be hard to remember life before baby, and, in some ways, it'll seem like they've been with you all along. Every single day, all we can do is try and try again and be willing to grow together, one little moment at a time.



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Becoming a Dad

By Patrick Duganz

How can you tell a joke is a dad joke? It's apparent. For people, it's more complicated.

I don't think you become a dad when a kid is born. Lots of kids never meet those he people who provided their genetics. Therefore, a child being born does not make a dad. So, becoming a dad must be something more. There's a moment when a choice is made.

I was raised by TV in the 90s, so of course I wanted to be a dad. Sure, Homer Simpson was the most popular dad, but I also had Dan Conner, Uncle Phil, Jason Seaver, and Carl Winslow. Having grown up in a "complicated" family like I did, I looked up to these dad characters and how

it seemed like they always knew just the right thing to say, or do, whenever a problem arose.

So years down the road, when we considered starting a family, I was pro "let's have a kid". My son is the outcome of a meticulously planned pregnancy process. We read books and went to a several months long birth class where we were free to ask any and all questions. We found a duo of midwives who his mom and I liked and who would, eventually, facilitate the birth. I was at every appointment, tracking our mixed up RNA as it grew into something an ultrasound tech could identify. His mom wrote out a detailed and extensive birth plan and we carefully reviewed it with our midwives. We were going to go with the Bradley Method – a drug free, low intervention process.



If such a birth sounds intimidating to you, just understand that my son's mom is fearless, and has a pain threshold far beyond us mortals. That's how she was able to face 22 hours of labor starting and stalling before our midwife delicately advised that we might need to consider making a few changes to our very particular plan. From there, as is common, things got more complicated.

An annoyed anesthesiologist arrived in flip-flops to administer an epidural, and delivered a few doses of Pitocin. After several intensive interventions plus one final delay from shoulder dystocia, our son was here. It had been 25 hours.

The process of his birth was difficult for all involved. His initial Apgar score was low and his mom was exhausted. I felt useless and helpless as my son and his mom faced this incredible task of birth. Obviously, my experience pales in comparison to what she went through, and it feels wrong to say it was hard for me too. But it was terrifying to be that helpless when my family faced a crisis. I didn't even know what "Apgar" meant.

But both were okay.

My son was the largest baby born at Bozeman Health Deaconess Hospital in 2013. I know this because, in those days, the nurses kept a sandwich board of height and weight statistics just outside of the nursery. While holding my newborn, I watched our nurse wipe away the high score of some smaller baby and replace it with the new champion: Baby Duganz at 10 pounds, 11 ounces, and 22 inches in length.

I remember thinking that he was a miracle, and that he was terrifying.

I was 28 and in the hours after his birth, it began to occur to me that I had no idea how to handle a baby. No idea how to comfort. No idea about needs. No idea about cues. No idea about anything because most of the books told me to, "follow mom's lead." So, as the nurses took his mom to recover after her feat, I realized the awful situation unfolding.

"You're not leaving me alone with him, are you?"

"Yes," a nurse said. A door shut behind her, and we were alone.

Eight Things I Wish I'd Been Told Before Becoming a Dad

1. If you can sleep, do.
2. Parenting books don't have all the answers.
3. Mental health is important for everyone in the family.
4. Kids can bring up issues.
5. Headphones are your friend.
6. Keep up your end of friendships.
7. The advice people give isn't always worthwhile.
8. Take time for you.

He cried. I cried.

Eventually, he ran out of energy and fell asleep in my arms. I felt like I'd failed my first test as a dad. My baby had to exhaust himself to find peace. Oof.

As we sat there alone, waiting for whatever was next, I was nearing 48 hours without sleep and started thinking of random nonsense until my brain fell on lighthearted fare like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. It's a father and son story set in a post-apocalyptic world. There's a bit near the beginning that stuck out to me when I first read it: "[T]hey set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other's world entire."

Each the other's world entire. Heady stuff to consider, but that's what my anxious and sleep-deprived brain spat out as I worried about who I'd be as a dad. Is the role of a dad to be the leader after a calamity? Is it more? Changing diapers? Making Money? Baseball coaching?

"I'll get better," I said to my kid, just hours old.

Like most men, I didn't get paternity leave. However, my employer at the time did kindly lay me off for two weeks so I could go broke while learning basic parenting tasks like diaper changing and swaddling. The kid mostly breastfed and slept, with some interruptions from me to change his diaper, or swaddle him. I brought his mom water and snacks.



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**I try to be a better dad,
and a better man.
That's the choice I make.**

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Soon I was back to work. The two of them were alone at home. It seemed like he'd change between the hours when I left and when I'd return. He was a new person every day and I was missing it. I began to feel useless to my family's needs just as I was beginning to understand how to be useful.

This, of course, was a symptom of my own postpartum depression which is more common than most people want to talk about. I'd later learn that 1 in 10 dads experience similar thoughts and feelings during this time. Since I was still so focused on my time at work, I was ignoring these symptoms and was, unfortunately, unable to recognize that his mom was dealing with similar symptoms during the 10-12 hours I was gone each day.

When his mom returned to work a few months later, I adjusted my schedule to be home with our son on Mondays and Tuesdays so we could save on daycare. With her at work, the kid and I suddenly had 16 terrifying hours together. From what I'd been told, parenting was so good you could set a laugh track to it. Instead, mine felt like an episode of Lost, complete with decoding cryptic messages (infant cues) that were crucial but made no sense to me. It took weeks to even begin to understand just what the hell I was doing. I had missed a lot by going back to work.



Look **CLOSER**

LOOK PAST MY ADDICTION.

*See the mother
I want to be.*

**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.**

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.

But I had made a promise to him. So, I worked on it. It wasn't fun or easy.

All of this is to say that the question "When does a guy become a dad?" remains complicated. Maybe it was that first night, but to me it's waking up every day and making a choice to try and be better than yesterday. I try to engage with what he's into. I try to lead my son through the calamities of everyday existence – a rude kid at school, his parents divorcing, or the frustration of losing at Rocket League. I try to be a better dad, and a better man. That's the choice I make.

In that way, I become a dad everyday.

Visit: **hmhb-lifts.org** services page and use the term "dads" for support groups and resources specifically for fathers and "counselors" or "mental health providers" if you or a dad you know is experiencing similar symptoms like depression or anxiety.



To learn about Patrick's work as a Fatherhood Engagement Specialist and read more of what he's written visit: **www.healthygallatin.org/family-health/for-dads/**



Tips to Help Siblings Transition When a New Baby Comes Home

By The HMHB Team



Welcoming a new sibling is a big adjustment for everyone! Here are some tips and tricks to help ease the transition:

Snuggle up and read books about what to expect when a new baby comes home. Take time to talk about the changes to come and what feelings might come up.

Look at photos and videos and tell stories about what it was like when they were born and first came home.

Ask them what they're most excited about and what they hope to teach their new sibling.

Take a moment to greet them by yourself and have a few minutes of one on one time before introducing them to the baby.

Give them a special gift (from baby) when baby comes home.

When taking care of the baby (feeding, diapering, bathing, etc.) ask them if they would like to help and give them a special task so they feel included and appreciated.

Before feeding baby, get them a snack/drink or interested in an activity.

Read to young children while feeding baby. Have child hold the book and turn the pages or play a "no-hands" game, "I spy something red..."

Teach other children how to get/make a special snack for themselves. This will help them feel like a big kid!

Set aside 5 minutes of focused, uninterrupted one on one time when they have your FULL attention the whole time. Even just a few minutes goes a long way.

Build forts or special nooks where they can retreat and let their imaginations run wild. Try a cardboard box with Christmas lights poked through so they can "stargaze".

Tell stories of what things were like when you were a kid. Our children sometimes forget that we were once



Photography by: Ashley M. Photography



little too and we can remember what that feels like. This helps them feel seen and understood.

Prairie Wolfe, a Somatic Therapist from Missoula, recommends these exercises to help you and your children process big emotions:

LET THEM FEEL POWERFUL. Press hands, palm to palm with your kid and then push each other across the room and let them win. Let them knock you over! Exclaim about their power, "Whoa! How did you get so strong?! I am pushing as hard as I can and you are pushing me across the room!"



As often as you can, talk to your kids about their strong emotions. Say to them, "I see you. I still love you and accept you, even when you're mad." This helps our kids learn that their needs for belonging and authentic expression can both exist and both be met, at the same time.

And, for you, recognize and honor when you're feeling activated, frustrated, and downright angry. Parenting is incredibly challenging and it's helpful to have ways to release intense emotions in safe and healthy ways.

Grab a washcloth or dish towel and twist it up until you can feel the tension between your hands. Wring it as tightly as you can and then let the tension in your jaw, spine, and shoulders really grind and release into the towel. Then, add sound. Try a low growl, like a "grrrr" sound so you can really give this anger a voice and a place for it to go. Stay present and FEEL the sensations in your body. When you're ready, release and breathe deeply. Check in with your body afterwards to see what has changed. Be curious about how your energy felt before and after this release?



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www.familyoutreach.org



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Raise Montana advocates for improving accessibility, affordability and quality of child care in Montana. Help us advocate for you by sharing your story!



SCAN ME



Rupture & Repair as a New Parent

By Cait McWilliams

Becoming “mama” was not a part of my plan. I didn’t have a spare room that I was planning to turn into a warm and welcoming nursery. My partner was barely a partner and more of a very attractive man that I had met in a bar. My kitchen had no food but plenty of booze. I wasn’t exactly taking my vitamins on a regular basis.

I had just moved halfway across the country and all the way out of a marriage. I was untethered and exploring my newfound freedom when, in the midst of my move, I met a man who lit me up and captured my curiosity. We threw caution to the wind and avoided conversations about a future together. After our initial connection, we went our separate ways and then, a few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant—with him living in Seattle and me in Denver.

A rigid schedule and stability had felt like death to me in my 20s but now I had to get myself out of the way so I could create a life that supported this cub. I told my gypsy self she was no longer invited to the party and tried to lock her away out of intense fear that, haunted by my own trauma, I would destroy this family. In my attempt to “do it

right,” I shut down parts of me that still mattered and was not able to allow myself to be human.

I was exhausted, depleted, fearful and in a new town without deep-set connections—including with my partner. From a nervous system viewpoint, I was in a state of constant survival. The feeling of being in a state of survival is one of intense stress and heavy burden on our physical beings – constricted muscles, tight jaw, chest breathing, constant startle, difficulty tracking conversations, insomnia, poor digestion, upset stomachs, inflammation.

This intense stress impacted my little as he was growing in my womb and for those first few months of his life, when attunement is key, but almost impossible when your system is filled with fear. I used the tools my parents had used, enmeshment and manipulation, to navigate my overwhelmed system. I fell back into familiar patterns of override and numbness. I rarely felt settled enough to rest and just play, and my attunement was primarily based in vigilance and not as much on connection.

At around sixish months, certain variables began to shift which allowed my system to start to release the grip of survival. My life, which had been ruptured by my unplanned pregnancy, began to repair and take on a new shape full of a deeper love and security than my younger self had ever known.

I began to build secure attachments (a foreign language to me before becoming pregnant). My partner and I found our rhythm and decided to make a life together. I met dear friends with babies the same age that I would gather with regularly for hikes, hangs, or just to fold laundry and compare notes. They brought playfulness and curiosity back into my life which are the opposite of fear and constriction. We learned from each other and gave ourselves permission to be imperfect.

My body became familiar again. That first year of mamahood, my body was unlike it had ever been in my life – large breasts and a split apart core. I didn’t know how to dress, and things that had physically come naturally to me in the past, were now impossible to access. As my core began to knit back together, I could feel my sense of self-worth building in potency instead of leaking out of me.



As I experienced the rupture that can happen during and after having a baby, I began to also witness the repair in my own life, which helped me begin to see the seeds that were planted in this cub during more fragile times. And, as I began to repair my own system and come out of survival, I began to provide him with repair as well.

I was coming out of my fear body and, as my new life came into focus and I stopped being so damn scared, I began to find joy. It took time. It took making mistakes. It took being a mess and asking for help. It took moving my body, finding people who loved me even when my breasts were leaking and my BO smelled like french onion soup (a real thing). It took me doing my own work studying Somatic Experiencing while also doing personal work with a therapist. It took me forgiving myself while also holding myself accountable. It took me having the courage to admit my failings to my cub.

And, as we grew our family (having two more cubs and weathering other storms), the wisdom I gained by walking through the intensity of what felt like an explosion of self, has acted as a guiding light many, many times over the last decade.

So, dear birthing people, as you hold that new little, know that you are not alone in your fears. This is a time of great rupture—mind, body, spirit, relationships. In many ways, what you thought you knew will be turned on its head. But, repair is possible even if it's hard to imagine what that looks like in those early moments.

Reach out for help.
Connect with others.
Move your body.
Find permission.
You are not alone.
Repair is possible!

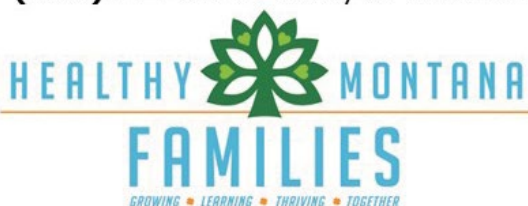
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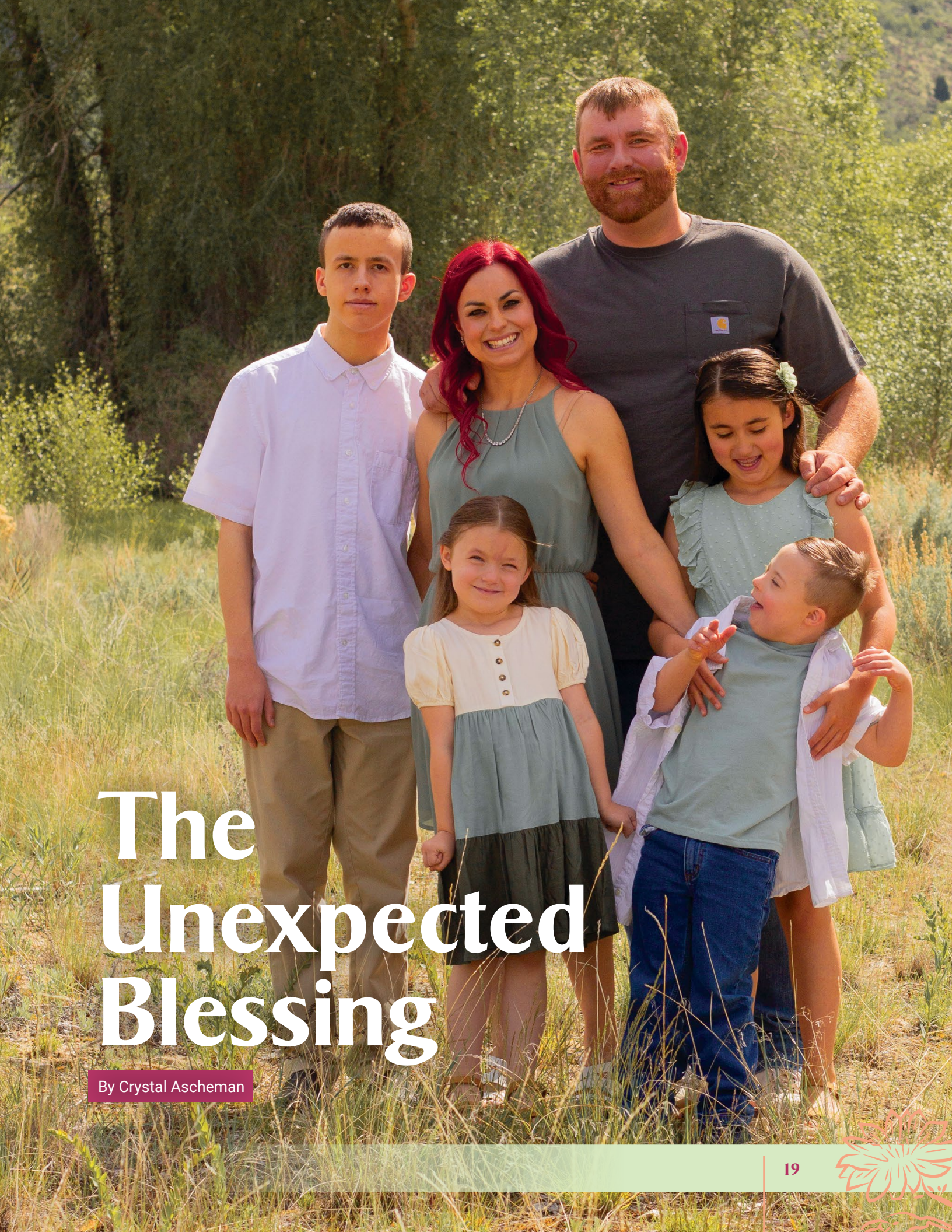


To find local supportive parenting resources visit: **hmhb-lifts.org** and use the search terms "somatic", "counselors", "mental health providers", "support groups" or "parenting classes".



To learn more about Cait's offerings visit her site: **www.thebodyiswise.com**.





The Unexpected Blessing

By Crystal Aschman



I remember it as if it happened yesterday, even though it's been seven years now. My husband and I are sitting in our 20 week ultrasound, excited to find out the gender of our second child together (the third of four children in our blended family). We're feeling so much excitement and joy and wearing the biggest of smiles. A boy! But then, our celebration is cut short as the ultrasound technician gets quiet while she takes typical growth measurements. As I look up at the screen, I see what has caused her sudden shift in mood. Having attended pre-medicine in college, before starting a family, I know that the measurements are not typical for the gestational age of our precious baby boy. She tries her best to explain the possible abnormalities to my husband and lets us know that she will be sending the image directly to our doctor for urgent review. I don't add to her explanation as I am still trying to process this unexpected new revelation in real time and am in complete shock. My two previous pregnancies had been typical; with no reason for concern. One week from that first ultrasound, we received a phone call confirming a 96% likelihood of a Trisomy 21 (Down Syndrome) diagnosis. And so began the unknown journey into the blessings of the unexpected. Reflecting upon that overwhelming time in my life, I sometimes wish I could go back in time, sit down next to my 7-year-ago-self, look her in the eye, and reassure her. Here are some of the things I would say:

"I want you to know that it's okay to feel all of these big emotions after the surprising news you've just received. It's perfectly normal. It's okay to not have all the answers right now. As parents, we will never have all the answers. Take your time to process and work through the whirlwind engulfing you. As mothers, we are the rocks to our families and we want to look strong and put together but, right now it's okay to ask for help. (You will need to do this regularly throughout this special journey). You are not inadequate or failing. Just the opposite! You are strong and brave. In being so, you need support right now for your own mental wellness and health, so you can be the best version of yourself and be the mother you want to be. Please don't suffer alone in silence trying to "hold it all together". Extend the same grace and

compassion to yourself as you afford to everyone else. Be kind to yourself. Little eyes and little hearts are learning from your example of self-care.

As you adjust to this new version of motherhood with a child with a disability, don't be afraid to ask questions and reach out to the special community of parents and organizations who share your concerns, struggles, and triumphs. They hold invaluable experience on this extraordinary journey. They will truly be the only ones who will understand just how you're feeling and the battles you will encounter. You are not meant to face these battles alone. You'll need a collective community full of compassion and understanding. These will be your "people" and your precious son's "people". Embrace them with a happy heart. Learn from their experiences because they will help you to find your voice (for your son) and don't be afraid to use it!

You'll need to speak up often along the way. And always trust your instincts as a mother—you can rely on them to carry you through.

As the weeks turn into months and months into years, you will encounter some hard days. On those days there will be many tears and doubts. Remember, they are but a moment in time and this too shall pass. There will be times when you feel like you've given your all and it's still not enough. But I'm here to tell you that it is. You ARE enough. I'm here to remind you you're doing a wonderful job, even though it's a tough one. I want you to know that all the effort and hard work you're putting in and all of the sacrifices you're making DO make a difference. You might not be able to see it right away but, the most important difference you will ever make will be realized in the quality of life you're giving to your children. There is no better reward in life than that. As you find your way through these hard days, you will also

There will be times when you feel like you've given your all and it's still not enough. But I'm here to tell you that it is. You ARE enough.





have days filled with a level of joy you've never experienced before. And, in the middle of all of it, you'll have the subtle realization that you never would have found all this joy and strength and grace if you weren't walking along this special path, holding his little hand in yours. While this journey is not one for everyone, it's the journey you never knew you wanted, and it comes with the best unexpected blessings."

To learn about statewide programs and resources designed to help support families like Crystal's, visit:
www.umt.edu/rural-institute/act-early-montana/resources/



Crystal also highly recommends:

Community Children's Pediatric Specialty Clinic:
www.communitychildrens.org/services/pediatric-specialists/



Butte's Special Riders program
www.buttetpecialriders.org



Visit hmhb-lifts.org for local resources and support using the search term "child development".



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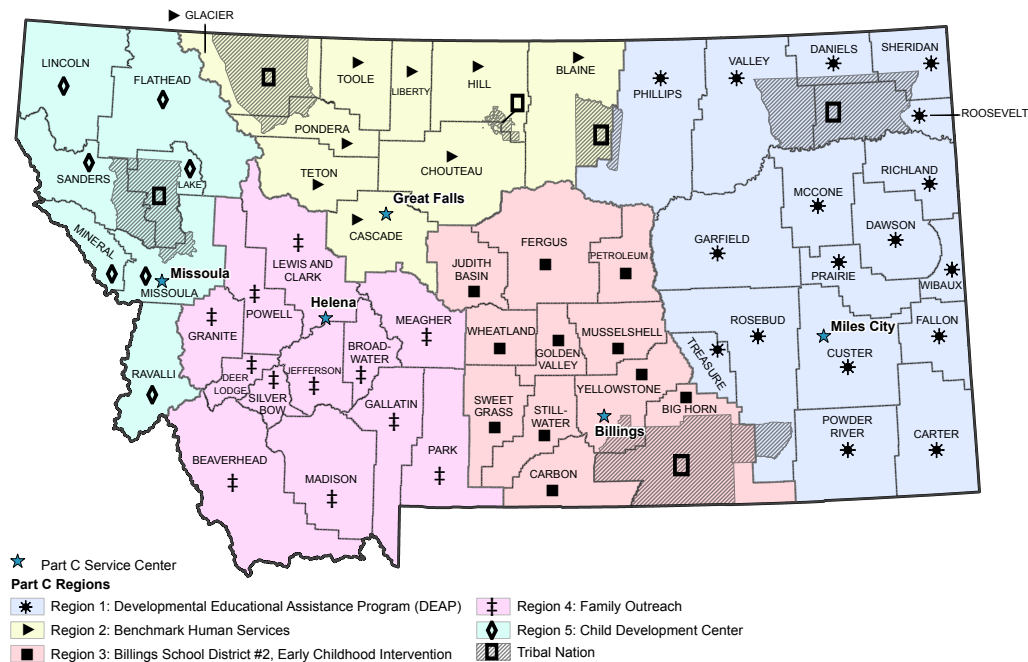


HelpSaveLivesMT.org



Early Childhood & Family Support: Montana Milestones Programs Part C

If you have concerns about your child's development and are unsure about how to move forward, the Montana Milestones Part C Program is here to help! We offer support for children, from birth to age three, who may have developmental delays or disabilities so that they can be active and successful during their early childhood years and in the future. We support children in a variety of settings—in their homes, care settings, and communities. Intervention services may include, but are not limited to specialized instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, family training, and care coordination. Early intervention evaluations and services are provided at no cost to families and there are no income eligibility requirements.



Path: G:\Maps\ECFSD_Leg2021\All_ECFSD_Programs\ECFSD_ECSB\ECFSD_ECSB.aprx

Part C Services Contact Information

**Montana Milestones
Part C of the IDEA Early
Intervention Program**
 MontanaMilestones.mt.gov
 partchelp@mt.gov
 406-444-5647

Child Development Center
 childdevcenter.org
 Missoula: 406-549-6413
 Kalispell: 406-755-2425

Benchmark Human Services
 benchmarkhs.com
 406-403-0087 | 866-235-4700

**Billings Early
Childhood Intervention**
 www.ecibillings.org
 (under maintenance)
 406-281-5885

Family Outreach
 www.familyoutreach.org
 Helena: 406-443-7370
 Bozeman: 406-587-2477
 Butte: 406-494-1242

**Developmental Educational
Assistance Program**
 deapmontana.org
 Miles City: 406-234-6034

Perinatal Mental Health 101

By Dr. Ariela Frieder



I am an OBGYN in Argentina, my country of origin, and a Perinatal Psychiatrist in the United States. Since the beginning of my career, I have been interested in understanding how maternal physical and mental health, and pregnancy complications affect the health and life of the mother and her children. Prior to moving to the U.S., I used to work in a city hospital in Buenos Aires, Argentina. There, I witnessed how socioeconomic adversities experienced by pregnant women impacted the relationship with, and the development of, their children. Since then and throughout my career in psychiatry my mission has been to help women with psychiatric illnesses and/or those with disadvantaged circumstances to improve the outcomes in their lives and for their children.

As a Perinatal Psychiatrist in the field for the past 17 years, I have had the opportunity and privilege to meet and treat women/birthing people during an important moment of their lives: pregnancy planning, pregnancy itself and postpartum. There is a common misconception that these periods of life are the happiest. Those of us who work in this field know that such is often not the case. It is extremely common for people to feel sad, depressed, anxious while planning for, during and after pregnancy. The profound hormonal, physical and the emotional changes throughout a pregnancy and postpartum can have a significant impact on an individual's mental health.

For years it was believed that pregnancy was protective against mental illness. However, we now know that having a new episode of mental illness or a recurrence in a person with a history of it is extremely common during pregnancy and postpartum. Well, how common, one might ask? Nationally, Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs), a group of symptoms people can have during pregnancy and postpartum, affects one in seven pregnant and postpartum women. After the Covid-19 Pandemic this rate increased to one in five perinatal women. Some of these symptoms include, but are not limited to, feeling depressed,

anxious, worried, panicky, hopeless, worthless, having repetitive intrusive thoughts that are scary or that may not make sense, feeling like life is not worth living, not sleeping even when the baby sleeps, feeling irritable and angry.

PMADs are the number one complication of pregnancy and childbirth. Throughout my career I have witnessed the difficulties faced by those with psychiatric illnesses during pregnancy and postpartum. These individuals suffer, many in silence, trying to make sense of their thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, many experience devastating consequences to themselves, their children, families and society as a result of stigma, the lack of social resources, financial constraints and the lack of specialized psychiatric care available to them.

Depression is one of the leading causes of maternal deaths, often through suicide. Pregnant women with PMADs frequently think about suicide. PMADs can be severe and disabling, often requiring hospitalization. Suicide accounts for approximately 20% of deaths in the postpartum period. It is the leading cause of maternal death in the first year postpartum usually by violent means. It is estimated that less than fifty percent of cases of perinatal depression are identified in routine clinical practices. Fifty percent of women with perinatal depression do not get the help they need!

Psychiatric illnesses during pregnancy and postpartum can cause considerable distress to mothers, families, and children. Postpartum depression tends to be long-lasting, and can certainly last more than a year if untreated. Short and long-term developmental, cognitive, and behavioral effects on the child have been seen when mothers suffer from PMADs. These include difficulties sleeping, feeding, being colicky, irritable, having lower IQ, having anxiety



and depression themselves when they grow-up. Moreover, psychiatric symptoms in the postpartum can lead to reduced interaction and irritability towards the child and therefore impact bonding.

Many people stop their psychiatric medications during pregnancy and postpartum thinking such will be better for their child. Many times, their psychiatric symptoms come back making it hard to function in life. It is important to learn when and how you can stop your medications and when and how you should continue them. Today we have large amounts of information on psychiatric medications during pregnancy and many of them can be taken when needed and under the right circumstances.

The good news is that PMADs are treatable. And one can feel better with the right treatment! As such, it is important for one to know what to look for and how/where to ask for help. One does not need to suffer; there is help here in Montana!

How do I know if I may be suffering from a Perinatal Mood & Anxiety Disorder?

- 1) You are irritable, frustrated, on edge.
- 2) You are feeling down, hopeless, helpless, worthless, you do not enjoy the things you used to enjoy.
- 3) You are feeling panicky, with physical symptoms such as chest pain, chest tightness, shortness of breath, palpitations, tremors.
- 4) You cannot sleep (for postpartum people even when the baby sleeps) or you oversleep.
- 5) You have no appetite, or you are overeating.
- 6) You are having intrusive scary thoughts.
- 7) You do not want to live anymore, you want to hurt yourself or your baby, or your other children.
- 8) Your mind is playing tricks on you, and you may be hearing voices or seeing things you usually do not see.
- 9) For postpartum people: it is hard to feel the bond with your baby.

How can I find help?

- 1) Tell someone close to you how you are feeling.
- 2) Tell your doctor or your baby's doctor how you are feeling.
- 3) Look at the LIFTS guide. You will find great resources here: <https://hmhb-lifts.org/>
- 4) Ask your doctor to call PRISM for Moms, a specialized perinatal consultation line that is state funded, for frontline providers that take care of perinatal people. PRISM for Moms can help your doctor find the right treatment for you.
- 5) If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself or hurting someone else, go to the nearest emergency room.
- 6) Ask your doctor or your baby's doctor to help you find a perinatal therapist and/or psychiatrist.

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.
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