AIMS For a better birth...

Being Nana

AIMS Journal, 2025, Vol 37, No 1



By Salli Ward

I chose to be Nana because I never had a Nana. I had Ordinary Grandma and Other Grandma but no Nana. My husband's mum was Nana to all but his kids (my stepchildren) so I did it partly to honour her. It's one of those things you get to decide on becoming a grandparent. The rest just happens.

We have eight children/stepchildren, so there was always a fair chance we would end up Nana and Gramps (we chose that for him) to a few. The first, now aged nearly four, came via our eldest, my daughter. I was proud that pregnancy (during the pandemic) involved hypnobirthing classes and plans to go into a natural birthing centre, but it didn't work out. On one of the longest most traumatising nights of my life, my daughter gave birth in hospital with interventions forced on her and leaving her permanently damaged. I didn't know that at the time, of course, but I knew she had gone into labour and that many hours later there was still no baby. My son-in-law probably thought he was keeping us in touch but he had other things on his mind and is very much not a worrier and so not driven by a desire to calm his mother-in-law's anxiety.

Eventually, beautiful, lovely grandchild 1 was born, healthy and unaware of her mother's – or my – trauma. I've loved babies from being a little girl myself and at first my love for her was not that much greater than for any baby – but my love, respect and concern for my own daughter loomed over me like a cloud of grey. Within days I loved my granddaughter fiercely too, but still I worried about her mum more. That thing we all do – checking a baby is breathing – I did it because I feared for my daughter more than for that tiny baby. Now, of course, she's chatting about my fat tummy, asking why Gramps hasn't got hair

and saying, 'Don't speak to me' if I won't let her have a third ice cream (no problem with the first two of course). We sneak ice creams together, bake together, bounce together, admire tractors together, and watch Frozen together – and my love for her is beyond measure. I miss her when I don't see her, though the day we look after her once a week exhausts us both.

Three years later we received grandchild number 2 and grandchild number 3 within weeks of each other. Number 2 is my stepson's son and is an adorable little smiler – he's enthusiastically taken to being weaned, is sitting up but not trying to crawl, and reaches for everything. I love my stepson and his wife but the absence of the umbilical tie between us seems to cushion me from the same level of anxiety. Grandchild 3 is my other daughter's – sweet, calm and discriminating in the distribution of smiles. Those two babies being so close in age means I get to calm myself with, 'If this was my grandson, would I be as worried?' No, which means it's not logical, it's too much, I'm being silly.

But the anxiety isn't just a niggling worry or an extra phone call to check, it reminds me of the depression of an addict – I can't rest or concentrate or look forward to anything until I've got my fix – that is, knowing for now that the baby is ok. Every phone call from one of the parent-children, as we are prone to call then, I answer with, 'Are you ok?', a dark hollow in my middle like the hole after something has been dug out.

My children joke that I didn't really want them because I once said I would choose not to have children if I did it again. They really are joking – they know how much I love them, and that the anxiety is what I would be rid of. With each grandchild it tightens its hold, and I pledge to get it sorted out. I worry about them tripping over, not liking school, getting bullied, getting ill, getting tired, getting too much - or not enough - ice cream; I worry about their lives in a Trump world, in a world of climate change, in a world where they will get anxious or depressed or just sad. Like Nana. But here they are – and more will follow.

My ambition now is to live until the youngest (as yet unborn) grandchild can remember me and process the grief – about 10? That means I have to bear this for possibly another 20 years. That's a lot of ice cream.

Author Bio: Salli is a charity fundraiser and consultant, a boat-dweller, a BSL-user and Deaf ally, a fan of natural birth and breastfeeding, and a believer in freedom, fairness and feminism. Also known as Nana.