AIMS For a better birth...

Grandmother's Day

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By Maddie McMahon

I am writing this on Grandmother's Day: January 21st. But sadly, no one is marking it. No chocolates or phone calls from grandchildren for me. That's because this auspicious day only seems to be celebrated in a couple of countries - Finland and France. We have grandparents' Day apparently. Google tells me it's the 5th of October. Did you know that? No, I didn't either.

We don't seem to value grandparents very much in the UK. Beyond the practical support we can be with childcare, we don't really seem to be on the political agenda. What I've realised since becoming a grandparent is that, just like motherhood, the immensity of the transition is often ignored and forgotten.

I became a grandmother by accident. My biological children haven't had babies yet, but my beloved stepson, who I brought up from the age of 10, had his first baby three years ago and a second daughter two years later. Biological Grandma didn't want the title, so it was offered to me and I accepted with glee. Grandmotherhood is an honour and immensely pleasurable but not without its complicated emotions.

As a doula of over two decades I have always wondered how it would feel when my babies started having babies. Would I be able to maintain that emotional tightrope of empathic connection with just the perfect amount of impartiality? Or would I break the doula code and start heaping unwanted advice upon the unsuspecting couple? As it was, I was able to maintain a certain distance and wait for them to ask me for support. I am honoured that they did.

What I don't know is if there is a difference in being a*step* grandma. Does biology play a part in the way

one feels as new members of the family appear? I suspect there is no easy answer to that and it will depend on the individuals concerned and the relationship you have with your step child. All I know is that when these little girls were born my heart nearly burst out of my chest.

Over the years I've had the pleasure of meeting many grandmas and discussing my clients' relationships with many more. It is common to have to explain why a grandma might be being overbearing or opinionated about the way my clients are choosing to give birth or feed and care for the baby. I find it can help to paint a picture of the time in history when these grandmothers gave birth - a time when choice and personalisation in maternity care quite literally did not exist and tacit consent was assumed to have been given by women merely walking through the hospital doors. I often find myself explaining that breastfeeding knowledge was sorely lacking in comparison to today and formula milk was often seen as a scientific advance on nature. And I remind my clients that older generations were often brought up to blindly do as they were told by teachers, doctors and policemen. Things really have changed so much in so many ways.

It can feel very discombobulating when your baby has a baby. For a start every mother-fibre of your being wants everything to be easy and pain free. If you see suffering, you may wish to fix it by offering up how you did things in your day. It can hurt when your advice is rebuffed and sometimes, somewhere deep inside, it can feel insulting that the younger generation are doing things differently. I have had opportunities to help new mothers and their mothers or mothers-in-law untangle some of these complex feelings but many families don't have that kind of support and muddle through, mostly successfully, in the end I'm sure.

I know I am privileged in so many ways, not least that, armed with the tools that my doulaing and breastfeeding counselling experience has given me, I could effectively support my daughter in law through two births and two very different feeding experiences. That relationship was only possible because of the close bond I have with my stepson. What has been interesting is the support I've needed for myself from other grandmothers - the highs are high and the lows are terrifying! It has made me sad to think that many grandparents don't have the kind of support that would help them identify how to effectively support their children through birth and beyond - without judgement and unwanted opinions.

What I didn't count on was what a transition becoming a grandmother would be. With the sad passing of the older generation, suddenly I am the matriarch of the family. Entering the crone years and being seen as the glue that ties the family together is a transformation much like stepping in motherhood was all those years ago. There are similar feelings of loss mixed with joy, uncertainty, fear and a growing realisation that a whole new sense of identity needs to emerge.

What I am realising is that grandmotherhood is as invisible as motherhood. The role we play is a vital, albeit shadowy one. Today's grandmothers were raised by mothers who inhabited a very different world, one in which the patriarchy ruled, when women were seen as 'the weaker sex' and may have been expected to stay at home with the children. Our sons and daughters are having babies in a whole new world in which many of the challenges and juggles are different and hard for us to understand. Even

younger grandmothers may struggle, not realising that the support they got from the NHS through birth and postpartum has, in many ways, been whittled down to almost nothing and the financial pressures to return to work are ever-increasing.

And so it is that we now need grandmothers and grandfathers more than ever. With ever decreasing psycho-social support coming from the state, the family has to step up. My hope is that we can support grandparents to learn how to be the very best grandparents - not just to spoil their grandkids but to nurture their parents by praising their efforts, acting as a sounding board when needed and providing non-judgemental, unconditional positive regard as much as they possibly can.

Grandmas are the story-keepers. Hopefully we have stories of the old days to pass down. We can tell our grandchildren stories about when their mummies or daddies were little. We spin the threads of the ancestors and pass that thread on, to be woven down the generations. Thinking about all this is helping me accept that my younger years are over and I am stepping into a new era. Women are told that once we are no longer young and beautiful that we are no longer of value. Becoming a grandmother is teaching me how untrue that is, and how beautiful old age can be.

As the wonderful Naomi Stadlen says in Why Grandmothers Matter:

> *"There is a beauty to old age. As a grandmother, many years have been given to her. We can see in a lined face, in worn hands, in an unsteady gait, signs of a life well used"*

Author Bio: After careers in teaching and publishing, Maddie McMahon became a doula and lactation specialist two decades ago. She is the founder of the doula training organisation, Developing Doulas, founder trustee of two breastfeeding support charities and has published two books in the Pinter & Martin *Why It Matters* series.