

# Rent a sister

Catherine on map reading for motherhood

I'm a doula of sorts, which is a birth support person. It's a little bit like 'rent a sister'. If you haven't got a sister or a mum that's comfortable with birth, then a doula fills that gap. Doulas support the partner also, to learn about what to expect during the birth,

I facilitate this by helping people put together a plan of action called a 'birth

map'. A birth plan feels rigid, like a house plan, it has to follow particular instructions, which can cause people to be quite anxious if things don't quite fit what that plan is going to be, but a 'birth map' gives you detour points, gives you options. If there is a road block you know which way to go.

You might be planning a natural birth but at some point something crops up

CATHERINE WITH ELESSAR, ANARION AND ELANOR.



that means you have to deviate from that path, but it is OK because you understand what that road block means, and you have already worked out what that detour is going to be, so you can accept intervention on your own terms. This kind of preparation means that the risk of postnatal depression is significantly decreased. I call myself a 'birth cartographer' because of the mapping side of things.

**[BWD] How long have you been doing this for?**

[CB] I started in 2010, so it is just over five years now. I've developed from being simply a birth support doula, to seeing that the real benefit comes in the preparation.

Often women aren't given all the information and all the options, so that's my job. I make sure they know all the options, and can make an informed decision. This process is really important because people feel respected which lowers the risk of postnatal depression and increases the chances of breastfeeding and bonding well with their children.

Becoming a parent is a seismic shift, particularly if you are a full time working person, and switch to stay-at-home — whether it is for a few months, a year or a complete change. It's a massive shift; society tends to look at you differently when you are not working and that can come as a real shock to some people.

Their sense of self worth can feel affronted: "suddenly I'm not important enough, I am not earning any money, I am not contributing to the tax system; all of a sudden my opinion doesn't matter." But it does, because you are raising the next generation.

Motherhood is such an important role, but if they haven't felt respected through that transition it can be very difficult for them to find that role as a comfortable place. The birth preparation process supported by a doula helps people find their feet. I like to spend time making sure they get ready for beyond the birth.

One of the best things you can do for a family is take them a meal or fill their freezer with healthy meals. It is really awesome to take out that meal and heat it up, then the whole family can enjoy a nutritious meal. And they remember they are surrounded by support, and have people they can call on for help.

That's really important, and it makes a massive difference. It's little things like that often are not thought about, because you usually get about fifteen minutes with your midwife or your doctor — the appointment is very much about measuring your tummy, measuring your blood pressure, measuring this and measuring that.

It is all about numbers, and then the day comes and you are on the clock.

They are measuring how long it is taking you, your dilation, your heart rate, numbers, numbers, numbers.

Once the baby is born you cannot measure how much a baby is taking, so a lot of people will turn to bottles

because now you have got numbers, and this reliance on numbers takes away a woman's ability to trust her instinct as well. My job is to make sure women understand normal biology and have a way to find other resources as well.

Here in Braidwood, often you have to travel to get to the support places, usually Canberra or Queanbeyan, and that's inhibitive — it's a long trip, especially if you have a baby who hates the car.

It once took me four hours to get home from Canberra; that was big, because I am not going to let him cry, so you stop, you have another cuddle, then you go for another five minutes, OK you stop and have another cuddle and you get there when you get there, but that's also stressful.

**Are you attending to women post-natally or are you just preparing them prenatally to be able to cope better after?**

Mostly I am preparing them prenatally, but what I also offer is breastfeeding support, usually that is over the phone but here in Braidwood it is so easy to get together and have a cuppa or have a play at the park so the older ones can run around. Just have a chat about what's happening, what

options you might have. It might cover things like normal sleep, is what is happening normal, is this teething or is there something else going on. I can then suggest specialist services if needed.

What I'd like to see in Braidwood is a parents group with a difference; one that you can join during pregnancy and access through your early years as a parent. As you become more experienced you become a mentor for the other parents in town — creating a community in a constructive way.

It would be great to have a meeting place, somewhere where parents can just drop in and hang out together throughout the day. The library is a good option but if you have got older kids, and they are having a restless kind of day it is not always so good.

The park is great for hanging out once you have got older kids. Our park here is better for three or four plus, it is not a very good toddler park, because there's a lot of the things that are too high to get to but they can still run, they can still get around, there are shady trees in the park so in the summer you can at least get out of the house and connect with other mums, and that's really important, so I'd like to be able to facilitate something like that.

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