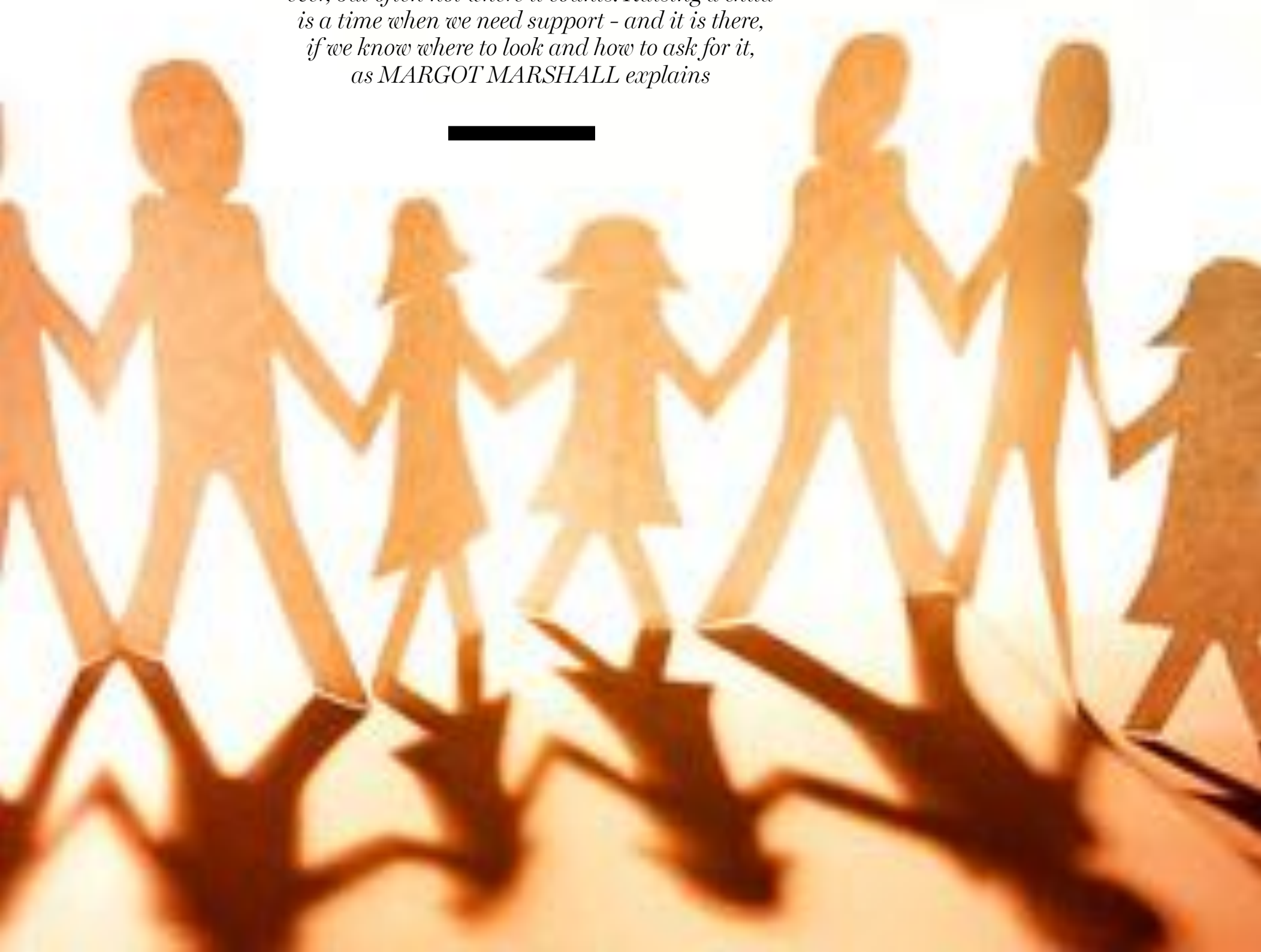


# It takes a VILLAGE

*In today’s busy world we are more connected than ever, but often not where it counts. Raising a child is a time when we need support - and it is there, if we know where to look and how to ask for it, as MARGOT MARSHALL explains*



You’ve likely heard the adage that it takes a village to raise a child – and it’s a given that having family around you after the birth of your baby is a blessing – but with life getting busier and many of us living in cities far from our families, where do we find our support systems and what does this village look like today?

### Support systems

“It absolutely takes a village to raise a child, and the term ‘it takes a village’ references the scale of a difficult task – which I think we all agree, raising a child totally is,” says Kelly Banks, co-founder and co-creator of Support Crew, a free online platform that gives family and friends the opportunity to support loved ones, no matter where in the world they live.

“The problem is not that we don’t have enough people willing to help,” says Kelly, “the problem is that when we need help we are often overwhelmed, exhausted and stressed. We don’t know what help we need, and we struggle to ask for it. Support Crew aims to create a virtual village by allowing users to coordinate meals, transport, childcare or any other help needed from friends, family, colleagues, neighbours and the community. No mum gets through raising a child on their own without any help from anyone. And every mum that bravely asks for help is role modelling for the next mum and the next mum – so that we can create a ripple effect.”

“People say when you have a third baby you have to let go of something,” says Carly Flynn, mum to Tilly (7), Jude (5) and Freddie (six months). “But for me to feel great and on top of things I like to be ‘organised’. To have food in the freezer. Muffins in the pantry. The washing folded. The beds changed. And yet I found myself utterly exhausted. Working, (because I’m self-employed and I love it, and it fills my cup) but with no family support nearby, great friends who already do a heap, I needed to admit I needed an extra pair of hands some days. I had to let my guard down by inviting someone in, and I advertised for a ‘fairy godmother’.

“The challenges today are that we live further away from our families. We don’t know our neighbours so much. We typically live in cities. We have massive mortgages forcing us back to work quicker. We’re connected on social media and smartphones, which don’t help us switch off,” says Carly. “It’s busy and in 2017, unfortunately it would seem that we need to pay for help.”

### Which support do you need?

Clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Bell-Booth says that in the absence of a natural, comprehensive supportive ‘village’, some parents may need or choose to pay for support. “There are three dimensions of social support,” says Sarah. “Emotional support, characterised by concern, comfort and encouragement. Instrumental support, which includes money, time and practical help, and information support, which includes education and

advice.” Social support can come from professionals or from society and communities.

“Modern communities in general, especially in larger cities, are not often tight-knit, especially when compared with previous generations. As a result, parents can feel disconnected due to physical distance or due to the fast pace of modern life where families, friends and neighbours are busy and preoccupied with their own responsibilities.” Unfortunately, this lack of social support and the disconnect can negatively affect mental health in parents, says Sarah. “In fact, social isolation is one of the biggest risk factors for depression, which is shown to be prevalent in up to 20 per cent of mothers and 10 per cent of fathers.”

### Outside help

Caroline Fraser, mum to George (9), Sam (8), Harry (6) and Ted (3), says when baby number three was born, she and her husband found themselves with three children under three and a half. “My husband had a busy job in the city, my mum wasn’t in Auckland and my in-laws, although incredibly helpful, both worked full-time, so consistent ‘free’ help or support wasn’t readily available. Our third baby was by far our most unsettled baby, so when I came home from Birthcare and Gareth went back to work I found it incredibly difficult to maintain a good balance at home. With an unsettled baby and two pre-schoolers I wasn’t able to be there or enjoy any one of our children as much as I could or should, so it became obvious we needed more consistent help that would need to be paid for.

“In the first couple of weeks after bringing our third baby home, a close friend who had an au pair at the time gifted me some hours of ‘au pair help’

as their present to us for the arrival of our baby. This was the catalyst for Gareth and me to quickly realise this was our answer. We struggled through eight weeks until our German au pair arrived to save the day and that made for a happier mum, happier wife and a happier home for the next 12 months.” Fast-forward two and half years when Caroline and Gareth’s ‘bonus baby’ came along, and there were now four children in the family aged under six. “This time we made sure we had another au pair arrive and settle in prior to the birth,” says Caroline. “Our situation had changed slightly in that we now had one at school and one at kindy so had met a wonderful new network of parents who could help out with some kindy and school pick-ups and drop-offs, and play dates. That, in addition to the au pair help during the busiest times of the day, made life manageable – an interesting mix of chaos, craziness and fun.”

### Embracing the parenthood journey

The transition to parenthood requires significant adjustment: emotionally, physically, financially and relationally, says SPACE (Supporting →

**‘I needed to admit I needed an extra pair of hands some days. I had to let my guard down’**





TIPS FROM SUPPORT CREW ON HOW TO EMPOWER YOURSELF TO ASK FOR HELP

Try to understand why you struggle to ask for help. If you understand this, you can more readily let it go. We usually struggle to ask for help because we:

- Don't want to feel like a burden to others
- Are people pleasers
- Have a sense of pride or stubbornness that we should do it all ourselves
- Fear that we'll look like a failure or fear that people will say no
- Are simply overwhelmed

Give yourself permission to ask for help. Asking for help is an act of bravery, so take that giant leap of faith. At some point, you need to realise that people want to help – and that you need to let them!

- Spend 10 minutes on your own and start writing down all the things you'd love a fairy godmother to do for you. Cook a meal, do the dishes, clean the house, do the laundry, make the beds. Now, this is your go-to list when anyone says 'What can I do to help?'
- Cast your support net wide and far. The more people you give the opportunity to support you, the more likely you'll get the support you need. Be brave.

Parents Alongside Children's Education) co-founder Leanne Dawson.

"Parenting today is very different from a couple of decades ago. Society is constantly evolving, which means various changes in the dynamics between parent and child and the role of the community. The traditional 'village' concept can be missing, which in turn can make parents feel more isolated and overwhelmed, so it is important to have somewhere parents can attend that normalises and celebrates parenting," she says. "When we first started SPACE in 2002 we saw a real need for first-time parents to be supported, valued and connected. The transition to parenthood is such an important time; a time to be supported as a person and a parent, a time to learn about parenting and child development, a time to build relationships – with your baby, and other

parents, a time to be connected, with others and to your community. This is key to parents recognising they are not alone and that there are many other parents who are experiencing similar emotions. SPACE recreates the 'village' as an enabler for positive parenting, as we connect parents with other parents and services and provide support, positive role modelling and practical tools for parents," she says.

"It is really important for new mums who do not have family support or a good support network to reach out for help and support – it is out there," says Kristina Paterson, founder of Mothers Helpers. "Sometimes you have to dig a little bit, try things and then try something else if it doesn't fit with you. Be persistent and don't give up."

Kristina founded Mothers Helpers after experiencing antenatal anxiety and postnatal depression herself. "Not only did I experience 18 months delayed diagnosis, I found that once I was diagnosed and wouldn't meet the criteria for Maternal Mental Health services, the only help I could access was prescription medication," she says. "I wanted to help mums to be identified and receive help as quickly as possible for anxiety or depression. I wanted to provide a really effective, holistic service that wouldn't just support mum, but help her to recover or become well, so that the impact it would have on her and her whole family would be reduced."

"A lot of the mums I see often do not have supportive family or they don't have family living close by," says Kristina. "That lack of support and isolation is a recognised contributing factor to developing postnatal depression. Poor family support and sole parenting are both known risk factors for perinatal (antenatal and postnatal) depression and anxiety."

Making your own village

Amy Williamson, mum to Hunter (6), says when her son was born she quickly realised life was very different to what it had once been. "The first six to twelve weeks post-birth were the hardest. I felt alone and isolated and even though I am ECE- and Primary-trained with years of experience, none it really helped me emotionally. I remember one night with a crying baby, just waiting for someone to knock on the door and say 'It's okay, I'm here, I'll take him off your hands for a while', and me just wanting to get dressed up and head out to town to feel 'normal' again. There were some low moments."

Amy says feeling isolated in the early weeks after her son was born inspired her to set a goal to get out for coffee or a walk each day. "So I did, but I felt lonely. After a couple of weeks, I thought I would look for a coffee group to meet some other mums, but I found all the conversations were around their husbands and how great these mums' lives were. I felt embarrassed and ashamed that I hadn't been able to keep my son's father around and that I wasn't in a loving, nurturing relationship either, so I didn't go back.

"As a single parent from when my son was born, even though I knew I was a strong and independent woman, I also knew I couldn't raise him alone. Towards the end of my pregnancy I decided I needed to be in a warm, safe and secure environment, and I ended up →

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speaking to my parents about moving home with them. They welcomed me and their future grandchild with open arms and this immediately alleviated any financial stress and allowed me to prepare for the birth of my son.

“My parents have been the most amazing support and sounding boards for me. I have my moments, as we all do as parents, but with their unconditional love and support I have become the parent I am today. I also decided to get a dog and he has opened up even more doors for my son and me; we get out on adventures and he has really helped complete us as a family. These people, this dog – they are my village.”

Maintaining connections

Midwife Sharon Weir says antenatal classes and coffee groups, while typically very supportive, occasionally disintegrate when women return to work or don’t gel with others. “There are still women who are lucky enough to have amazing family support in the first few weeks and months after having a baby, but many grandparents are themselves still working or not in the same part of the country as the new parents, and therefore not always available for more than a very short time.”

Alexandra Austin, mum to Henry (3) and George (6 months) experienced first-hand raising children without family support nearby. “Living in Australia we don’t have either of our parents in the same country and it is challenging at times, especially when you just want to say, ‘Mum, can you pop over and help me out for a couple of hours?’ and it’s just not possible,” she says. “I relied on good friends back home in New Zealand for mental support and advice and I also started going to a mothers’ group, which I didn’t really think of as a good support network until a few weeks in, when I started making some close friendships in the group. Once I had established these friendships, these women became my Australian family and my village. We were all in the same situation – living away from home with no family support. We all understood what it was like and would offer to help each other out if an extra pair of hands were needed,” she says. “There are definitely times when I have felt isolated and lonely, but the way society is so connected by technology now has also made it a lot easier – being able to Facetime or join WhatsApp groups has provided great mental support for me.”

Online connections

Blogger Maria Foy, who founded Happy Mum Happy Child, says when her first child was born she didn’t feel she had a lot of support. “My parents were living overseas and other family weren’t readily available,” says Maria. “I had an extremely ‘spilly’ baby and couldn’t bring myself to go out because every five minutes I’d have to change her clothes. I felt scared, and very alone, so turned to Facebook. This is where I made a lot of ‘friends’ and received a lot of support during this tough time. I met many mothers who felt a similar lack of support, for whatever reason, and found online forums a great place to ‘hang out’.”

Maria says she started her blog as a way of sharing activities she did with her children, and now cites her main motivator as helping parents feel less alone in the parenting journey. “I know there are many things about the internet which are negative, but for me personally, it was a godsend,” says Maria.

It’s no secret that social media can leave us feeling isolated. “As much as technology has been brilliant for so many aspects of our lives, it also has the ability to only show the perfect ‘show reel’ of our lives and not the ‘real reel’, which can often leave new mums feeling like they are the only ones who aren’t coping, or don’t have the perfect ‘new Mum’ life,” says Kelly.

“Social media can be both really good and really bad,” agrees Sharon. “There are some amazing mummy bloggers who tell it like it is! However, it is also very easy to hide behind a façade and pretend that all is well with the world, because ‘celebrity’ mums have got it all together, when in reality it is the complete opposite.

“It is important for women to be honest with themselves and others around them with how everything is going, good or bad, so that people know how to support them through the tough times.” ■

HELPING HANDS

In addition to the one-off assessment offered to all mums, Mothers Helpers also has two courses available. The ‘Preparing for Parenthood’ workshop focuses on preparing psychologically for the arrival of a new baby to the family, and ‘Perinatal Depression: Steps to recovery’ is a 12-week-long programme that includes two one-on-one sessions and incorporates talk therapy and peer support. [mothershelpers.co.nz](http://mothershelpers.co.nz)



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