

When she carried my baby, she carried me too

It's time to care for the caregivers

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One cold January day, I decided to go out for lunch with my 3-month-old.

I packed his diaper bag, coerced his little limbs into his warmest bunting, and then pushed him five blocks to an Italian place that was generally quiet around that time. After three monotonous months eating every meal in our apartment, I longed for new views, higher ceilings, and hot food prepared by someone else. I was willing to take the gamble of leaving home with a tiny, unpredictable human for the chance of experiencing any of them.

Augie and I made it there quickly, the Brooklyn winds pushing the door behind us shut as the waitress informed me that I could sit wherever I wanted. The place was, as I predicted, nearly empty.

I chose a seat by the window and gave Augie the view – watching passers-by would, I hoped, entertain him enough to give me a chance to actually enjoy my lunch, making this slightly extravagant outing worth it. Five minutes later the waitress put down a steaming bowl of minestrone soup and then, in addition to the more expected offering of parmesan cheese, asked me if I would like her to carry Augie around so I could eat.

I had never met this woman before, nor did I have any idea if she knew how to safely hold a baby who was just inching out of his sack-of-potatoes phase.

Reader, I said yes. Yes! Without asking her a single question.

Up until that moment I had felt deeply alone as a parent. I was isolated because of structural issues, like my husband's lack of paternity leave. After a quick five days post-birth he was back at work, leaving me to navigate first-time parenthood on my own. Also, post-delivery, I went from obstetric care during which people were regularly interested in me, straight to paediatric care in which the only concern was my child's wellbeing. I don't think the paediatrician ever bothered to learn my name. The deepest feelings of alienation came from those who were supposed to support me but only made me feel inadequate, like the lactation consultants who put my child's alleged need for exclusive breastmilk high above my need for sleep.

So when that waitress asked to hold Augie it not only allowed me, a new parent, to sit and eat an entire bowl of *hot* soup but also opened up a world of possibilities in which new parents can and should be supported by others. Until then, I had unconsciously taken my loneliness, isolation and second-fiddle status to my baby as inevitable.

The sense of possibility I felt that day can be felt in every piece in this year's *Early Childhood Matters*. All of the authors and interviewees are working towards a world in which caregivers are seen as worthy of

Introduction

attention and support rather than as a means to an end. They understand that such care for mothers, fathers and other caregivers benefits not just the whole family system, but society overall.

In these pages you will read about the latest research on the parental brain, as seen in the work of [Ruth Feldman](#) and [Darby Saxbe](#), undertaken with the goal of helping parents better adjust to parenthood. You'll learn about programmes in countries like [India](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#), which are making cities more caregiver- and child-friendly, and strengthening community ties. You'll also learn about a new generation of trauma specialists and [peace activists](#) who put the reality of life as a caregiver to young children front and centre in their work.

Together, these essays, articles and interviews are filled with plans and visions, a mix of practical suggestions and bold possibilities, all in service of a better future for parents, and the kids they take care of.

After Augie and I got home that afternoon we did our regular pre-nap ritual, which involved me putting him on a colourful mat and making funny faces and noises while shaking baby toys. This time, my gaze was less distracted, and my voice was a little softer. I enjoyed this little moment of connection more than ever, all thanks to the waitress. By caring for me, by giving me a well-earned break, she had expanded my capacity to care for him. As I put him in his crib and drew the curtains, I began to question, really for the first time, why I didn't expect more care as a caregiver, what care I needed, and how I would get it.

Care, I realised, is so often thought of as something that takes place between two people: the person giving the care, and the person receiving the care.

But that day I understood, intellectually and emotionally, that care is far too challenging and rich to be a two-person game. No, we shouldn't be caring in pairs, but in concentric circles, Russian nesting dolls of care, in which each person caring for another has people and communities who care for them, layers and layers of care that connect us all.

The good news? As the contributors to this journal make clear, we know what we need to do to build such a world. It's time to make it happen.



↑ A blurry photo that was taken at the Italian restaurant

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