

Being a mother is about more than biology

Giuliana Fuscaldo and Sarah Russell

Published: May 7, 2010 - 6:39AM

Sunday is Mother's day. Commercial cynicism aside, for lots of people it's a day of celebration. Many women will spend the morning in bed with their kids balancing toast and cups of tea, tearing at wrappings, admiring new fluffy slippers, complimenting the artistry of their home made card and pretending that a necklace made of pasta was just what they always wanted. They will adorn themselves with new trinkets and perfumes and prepare for the warm chaos that is the traditional Mother's day lunch.

Advertisement

But for some, Mother's day is not much fun. Some people want children and are not able to have them or not allowed to raise them. Some kids want parents and can't find them. Despite all the talk about the importance of family as a social institution, our laws and policies continue to exclude some people from family life and raising kids. Even after years of lobbying and parenting, same-sex couples are still prohibited from adopting children.

Mother's day can be a sad day for people without children or children with no parents. It's a day when IVF couples wait hopefully and others dream of that call from the adoption agency. On Mother's day some "step-mums" have to step aside and some children feel sad because they don't know their mum, or cannot be with her. It's a day when many mourn their loss or get angry about rules that exclude them. It's also a day when many people won't have their mothering acknowledged.

Mother's day is a day when we celebrate mothers and according to tradition, a child can only have one "real" mother – she's the woman with the right biological credentials. But you don't need biology to mother or to be mothered. Just ask the hundreds of people who adopt, blend families, donate embryos and share their homes with foster kids. Why must children have only two parents, and why must they be of the opposite sex?

Despite all our rules and social norms, most mothers know that there's much more to parenthood than biology and many wish that gender did not define who gets the "mother" jobs. Any Tom, Dick and Harry can drive the kids to ballet, get them to the dentist on time, sew costumes for drama club, supervise piano practice, read a bed-time story and decorate the birthday cake. All you need is love.

After all, motherhood statements are not just about mothers. How can one woman keep the home fires burning, love unconditionally, encourage potential, be a shoulder to cry on, a tower of strength, a port in the storm, a role model, a font of wisdom, always be there . . . and still have dinner on the table by 6.30. It takes a village.

What most "real" mothers know is that you can't do it alone. It takes a lot of mothering to raise a child and usually this mothering comes from lots of different people – from step-mums, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbours. Doesn't every family have a Mrs Dewar who sits with the baby, helps with school pick-ups, puts a roast on and dispenses advice about relationships? Or an Uncle Wayne who takes the kids for a driving lesson, and talks with them about sex drugs and rock 'n' roll. Most kids need lots of "mothers" and so do most mums.

With so many people mothering, why limit Mother's Day lunch to only one mum? By expanding our view of mothering, and by moving an apostrophe, we can share the celebration and make it a Mothers' day.

This Mothers' day, let's remember all the women and men who mother, or dream of mothering. Let's put aside tradition, re-think the importance of biology and gender, re-write the rules about what makes a mother and acknowledge that there are lots of ways to mother.

Yes we can't get by without our mum — but motherhood does not have to be an exclusive biological club and Mother's day does not have to be an exclusive celebration. Maybe we could start recognising the contributions that other people make to our children's lives by setting another place or two at Mothers' day lunch.

Giuliana Fuscaldo is a lecturer in health ethics at the University of Melbourne's Centre for Health and Society and Sarah Russell is the principal researcher of Research Matters. Giuliana has two daughters and Sarah, Geoff and Elly also mother them.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/society-and-culture/being-a-mother-is-about-more-than-biology-20100506-ueld.html>