



**Mamma,
Matka,
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Aiti,**

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Mothers.



Mothers Helen & Juvin

Parenthood is a huge milestone. Young people in particular can feel unprepared for this abrupt change, a change that comes with the inevitable transition from dependent to dependable. Children believe their parents hold all the answers, even when their parents are growing up too, leaving young parents at the crossroads between identity-seeking lost youth, and an authoritative role of their own. Then can come the feeling of passing the flame from your generation to the next, before your time, and succumbing to the domestic drudgery that comes with the label 'mum'. Though society is beginning to embrace non-traditional family setups, parenthood still brings to mind traditional gender roles. How do young modern parents consolidate these two worlds?

"I left my mum's house when I was 16, so I was already independent and pregnancy didn't move me out," says Juvin, 27, an account manager. We meet in her rented flat in Dagenham, where she lives with her 9-year old son, Given.

"The bread in the UK is already sliced. It isn't where I'm from," she says. She moved from Cameroon to London in 2005, not knowing English. "It's a simple example, but a lot of people have to make it from scratch. If I can't find bread, I could easily make it myself. Likewise, you go into the workplace and boom, things aren't so easy. If it's tough at work, it's not the toughest thing I've ever faced. You discover yourself when you have so many experiences, or when your parents had so many experiences. I live with my mother's strength."

Juvin grew up around strong women. "I was never surrounded by strong men. My mother had me as a teenage mum in Cameroon. Today she lives in London and has a masters in community development. She's passionate about helping people and attends loads of rallies, she shouts things like: 'free the animals'. My grandma lost her husband and brought up eight kids by herself."

Now a single mother, Juvin met her son's father when she was fifteen, and gave birth at eighteen. "I was like, yeah, I want to have this amazing, whole family," she says. "When you don't have your own perfect family, that can happen." Her partner at the time was twenty years old. "We suddenly started living together and to suddenly have this 'you're a real man, grow up,' thrust upon him, he was like 'I'm not ready'. I think it took its toll on him. We broke up when [our son] was about 2/3 years old. So we did try. He was a good dad. Sometimes I wonder whether he grew up to fast, so he wanted to go back and live that life."

Her boyfriend moved to Manchester and has a new partner and a daughter now. "He's not the person I used to know anymore," she says. "I think we have a base personality, but you're moulded through experience. I think it's worth asking whether you're going to change and adapt with the person in front of you as you grow up together."

Juvin was never the going out and partying kind of person, but pregnancy did isolate her from her peers. "I was completely blocked out of the whole crew, because we were young and cool. I was now going to be the big belly. Even my best friend, I lost her. I don't think it's their fault. Just so much changes as you become an adult overnight. It was a very lonely time."

"It's no longer about spending money on my own clothes or hanging out in Camden Town—you have to think about adult stuff: my baby's clothes; arguments with the baby's father—where am I going to live? You're not just you anymore—you have to become an adult, and adults have to (hopefully) think about others."

From pregnancy to giving birth, Juvin has found that society has tried to mould her. "I remember when I became pregnant I went to different organisations who kept telling what benefits I was entitled to. I told them I wasn't actually looking for benefits, I wasn't looking for a house. I wanted to know how I can go back to school and what you can do to help me look after my child. At the time they didn't really have real answers." She took a gap year from sixth form on the recommendation of her head teacher, only to return the following year. She graduated from university in 2014 with a degree in business administration. "I loved university. I went there with my son each morning, because they had a nursery, it was very easy to be a mum and a student. It was important for me to be able to carry on education as I wanted to show my child I wasn't going to just fit the mould."

To fill the hole, Juvin set up a community charity called Young Mummies. "Initially for networking purposes, I wanted young mums to not feel isolated. Teenage mums go through so much that most people can't understand. It was about empowerment. I didn't want to tell people they shouldn't have got pregnant, nor push young people to go out and get pregnant. I just wanted people to know if you are, it's not the end of the world and your life isn't over. You can still go out there and do more than what is expected of you—you can live your dreams."

"I'm not the same person I was 10 years ago, but I still have the base of who I was, and that's a girl with a dream. I think I found a lot more of 'me' being pregnant. I found a lot of my purpose. I was so much more motivated when pregnant, and after giving birth, because I wanted to give my kid the best life."

Juvin enjoys her life with her son, but she's also forward thinking. She aspires to set up her peanut butter business; "I need to buy a house because I'm renting this one. [In five years time], I wonder where my son is going to be. He'll be a few years older. It's important he knows how to express himself properly. I'm bringing up a black boy, and you have to be realistic, the world judges people. I feel a lot of connection with the whole of Africa, though I did teach my son to say he is

British, he has to take this country as his own. I don't want him to be confused. One day he'll want to know more about [his heritage]; his dad is from Kenya and I'm from Cameroon. So I just want to bring up a good son. Someone who is empathetic, a nice person. I took my son to the zoo the other day and he said, 'mummy, this is not where they're supposed to live, they're supposed to be free! I think my whole family are like that!'

I meet 27-year old film producer Helen in her home in a quiet North London borough, where she lives with her fiancé Charles and three-year old son Otto. As Helen and I speak, her son Otto interjects with an indecipherable hissing sound. Toys are laid out on the sofa. "I was at the very start of my career when I found out I was pregnant," she says. Her first film, a micro budget comedy titled "Chubby Funny", was in its final edit.

"[Charles and I] had only been together for 7 months, so it definitely wasn't planned," she continues. "We met on Tinder, but then discovered we had all these mutual friends. We both went to Cambridge but didn't know each other there."

Initially the couple were unsure about their next steps. Indecisive, they got swept along with the conventional response to an unplanned pregnancy, and ended up in an abortion clinic. "I threw up once I got there," says Helen. "I think I'd never been sure. We sat in a park talking about how we were going to

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afford this, how we were going to make it work. You don't hear about stories of unplanned babies, even though I heard that about one third of babies were unplanned. In the end I thought what will I regret the most. I read about how you're never going to regret your child once you've got it. There might be things you'll miss but you'll love them so much it doesn't matter."

Neither she nor Charles regret their decision. "Sometimes you think it would be nice to have more time," he says, "just one or two more hours where we could do something together, and go and do something four ourselves, or just go to bed at 10pm." "We do argue about some things, but it's more about tiredness. It brings you closer in a different way," says Helen.

Though supportive, their parents' (and everyone else's) main concern was their careers, a concern shared in the film industry. "There's a lot of sexism in film, so adding to it [pregnancy]... but I've actually found that all the stuff people try to scare you about doesn't actually happen. A lot of people said 'so you're going to have a child, you won't be interested in the things you were interested in before. You won't be so career driven! I've actually found the opposite. I'm more driven. I have to be driven for [Otto] to have a good life."

Motherhood has changed the way Helen feels and is perceived

by others in the industry, and mainly for the better. "As a young woman doing a job everyone imagines only Harvey Weinstein does, to being able to relate to people ten-twenty years your senior, because you're both parents, suddenly changes their opinion of you. Rather than being the same age as their kids, you're like them." But with friends she feels older. Being a mother means she can be less spontaneous. Usually a night in takes precedence over a night out or hen do. "I was never a big party person—it wasn't like I went out 5 nights a week to never going out. We still do get to go out, though we have more responsibilities. You realise who your good friends are."

Socially, Helen feels the idea of motherhood is too narrow. "You're the right age and you're married and you live in this borough and you're doing this thing. [At 24], I was in this weird middle ground - you're not a teen mum - you're not 16 and it's not scandalous. But you're also not at the age when most people in cities like London do it. At first I was very self conscious. We're getting married soon, but back then I wasn't engaged. I was suddenly really self conscious about not having a ring and looking like a teen mum. I've definitely had some comments about looking like a nanny."

For Charles and Helen, having a baby meant their relationship had to quickly be taken to another level. "We had to be very sure we wanted to be with each other, which we were, which

made it easier," says Helen. "But for a good while you were convinced we didn't need to live together while having the baby!" Says Charles: "I was still in shock a bit, so I was like, it's too soon. I'm not ready to ask you to move in!" "We'll just split duties!" she laughs. "We must have moved in together when I was 4 months pregnant. Everything has changed, but also not in the bad ways we thought. It's definitely made us stronger as a couple."

Outside their home, the couple have become more aware of sexism, as traditional gender roles have been assigned to them by strangers: the 'hero father' and 'reckless young mother'. "It just feels like every decision you make will be the wrong one," says Helen. "When I was breastfeeding in public, for example, but people are also like 'how dare you bottle feed!' "When he was younger, I'd get less of the judge-y stuff," says Charles, "but people would occasionally be a bit patronising; they would randomly complement me in the street, probably assuming I had no idea what I was doing. I still get that. I'd be like, that's not what Helen gets."

In parenting groups, Charles is often one of the few, if not only, father in the room. He felt more pressured than Helen to return to full-time work after Otto was born. "You were showing me that thing about Sweden the other day," says Helen. "The

way parenthood is set up here where it doesn't even consider whether a man might want to spend more than two weeks with his child. I think flexible working is such an important thing."

Early on, what struck Helen was the lack of role models for young parents. "For the first six months especially, I found the word mum weird. It goes from 'your mum' to being you. But I think I'm the same person. The image of what a mother is, either a frenzied mother falling apart at the seams, or the obsessive 'just a mum,' is so limiting. You think 'that's not me! It's always so black and white. You never read anything about unconventional setups or pregnancies and it turning out fine. Because those narratives aren't really out there, if you're in that situation you just imagine the worst, if you don't see yourself on screen or on social media. I listened to a podcast the other day, it was Dolly Alderton interviewing Jessie Cave, who had a

baby from a one night stand. She was the only person I could relate to: a young creative, mother still making it work."

"I think actually I'm who I should be now. I've definitely skipped some of those lost twenty years, perhaps because having a child grounds you more. I quite like that I don't have to be a party animal, not that he's an excuse. After a panicked time when I was pregnant, and when he was little and I thought I'd never sleep again, I think now I have a stronger identity, you're more purposed and your life becomes more well-rounded. I have a bit of an obsessive personality. In film, but also anywhere in the arts where you don't have a clear trajectory, it's so easy for your whole life to become about your work. I think having Otto has made me not sweat the small stuff as much, because it's not really the end of the world and he's more important!"

