

Picturing Motherhood



A community development & visual arts project conducted by Women's Health Goulburn North East in collaboration with women in Mitchell & Murrindindi Shires and the Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership

Picturing Motherhood

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Published January 2003

Women's Health Goulburn North East

PO Box 853, Wangaratta 3676

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**Front page image: Ruth Worland and Molly
hold a photo by Fern Hames "Everyone wants
a piece of me ... Gimme some space"**

Photo by Julie Tyler



introduction

Picturing Motherhood arises mostly from the work undertaken by Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) via the Looking After Mothers Project (the LAMP). In that project, images and

ideals around motherhood were found to be very important factors in women's experiences of early motherhood.

Part of what we hoped to achieve via the LAMP was greater critical discussion about the socially constructed roles that women have in this society. This meant, amongst other things, challenging women to consider the myths of motherhood, and to discuss ways of mothering that promote wellbeing. We sought to inspire community reflections about the nature of existing connections and support in early motherhood, and to help to develop new initiatives to respond where there was a perceived lack or opportunity. The challenge was to work out how to do that in ways that were both achievable and sustainable.

During the LAMP, we commenced a pilot project of Picturing Motherhood across Mitchell and Murrindindi shires in the far south of the Hume Region.

Picturing Motherhood involved women who wished to find new ways to express their own experiences of early motherhood, and who wished to be instrumental in changing the prevailing culture. These women photographed for exhibition aspects of their lives that they felt are under-represented in mainstream portrayals of early motherhood. They worked collaboratively to put together an exhibition that they hoped would stimulate discussion about the missing pictures of motherhood, the images that don't appear in magazines, books or even photo albums. These were not necessarily negative or bad. Rather, they were wide-ranging in subject matter and intent, and thus gave a fuller expression of the complexities of women's lives during early motherhood.

We hope that this activity will be replicable in other local areas. The purpose of this report is to communicate the value and lessons of Picturing Motherhood, and to provide a how-to guide for other people who wish to embark on the process of Picturing Motherhood. The guide is based on the experiences of participants, the Project Worker and exhibition viewers. This information was gathered via:

- Notes by some participants about their hopes and expectations for the process
- Feedback at the exhibition (visitors' book)
- Records of number of participants, number of visitors
- Notes on impressions and experiences of the Project Worker
- Semi-formal discussions at the conclusion of the project with women who participated in Picturing Motherhood



what is it?

Picturing Motherhood...

Is a **process** in which women are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, ideals, impressions, questions, thoughts, wonderings and ideas about motherhood.

Is a **place**, embodied physically through workshops and group activities in which women came together to share and learn from each other.

Is a **space** for challenging the sterile, featureless images of mothering fed to us by media and reinforced by society's silences, omissions and (sometimes) outright lies.

Is an **opportunity** for each woman to engage her senses, intellect and emotion as a mother, as a woman and as a creator of works of art.

Is a **conduit**, a way for women to generalise and share experiences and thoughts that are (in this society) overwhelmingly individualised and privatised.

Is a **visual arts endeavour** that recognises that the pictures we carry in our heads are shaped by the pictures that bombard us every day ... on billboards, in magazines, on TV, in books.

Picturing Motherhood has **products** and **outcomes**, only some of which are tangible. At the end, we have a collection of very high quality, enlarged photographs that can be displayed individually or as a collection.

Yet the women involved in this process say that the intangibles – the friendships, the ideas, the new ways of looking at things, the opportunity to be involved in a creative process – were more important than the actual photos. For viewers of the photographs, the quality of the photos – fantastic though they are – was not as important as the underlying insights into motherhood.

The joy and the strength of Picturing Motherhood is precisely that it is a process, place, space, opportunity and a conduit. If it is to be replicated elsewhere, it is our fervent hope that (allowing room for improvement) that the intent and integrity of this original project will be maintained at all costs.



how is it done?

The purpose of this document is to report and reflect on our process and to provide a guide and suggestions for people who wish to use the Picturing Motherhood process in their own groups. In summary, designing and implementing this project involved the following steps:

1. Needs identification (the need arose in the context of the Looking After Mothers Project, and it is safe to say that issues around representations and experiences of motherhood are current and problematic everywhere in Australian society)
2. Development of process timelines and materials
3. Recruitment
4. Workshops – to enable women to discuss and share their ideas, experiences, questions and perspectives
5. A photography workshop – to enable women to develop their technical skills
6. Organising the exhibition (venue, launch, catering etc)
7. Processing and printing photos
8. Choosing photos for exhibition
9. Enlarging photos for exhibition
10. Mounting the photos on mats
11. Preparing titles, captions and accompanying text
12. Exhibition
13. Evaluation & where-to from now discussions (ongoing)
14. Follow up to ensure maintenance of the collection



why do it?

In times past, people learned about babies, children and the tasks of parenting from those around them. Extended families did not necessarily live together, but they generally lived nearby, and social contact between families (especially neighbours) was more frequent and more casual. There may have been a more communal or collective responsibility for child-rearing.

Over the past fifty years, childbearing and childrearing have become increasingly privatised and individualised. Today, people parent in much greater isolation and lead busier, more complex lives. Social contact, especially that involving children, appears to be more structured. The media has become increasingly influential as a source of information and role models.

In the absence of opportunities to learn about the complexities of motherhood from real people, many women are unprepared for the demands of caring for a baby. The pictures we carry around in our heads often come not from reality, but rather from sanitised images in the media: models and actors portray clean, tidy, organised, thin, happy mothers who can single-handedly meet all of the needs of their clean, smiling, cute, beautiful babies. Events in the lives of real women are mostly shared as stories, told with hindsight and lacking the impact of witnessing the actual event.



Many women find that their own authentic experiences of motherhood do not match the pictures in their heads. They are rarely thin, tidy and organised. Sometimes they are tired, unhappy or ambivalent. Their babies aren't always clean, and often they don't sleep. Just getting through the day can be a challenge. Yet when this happens, many women are reluctant to speak about the mismatch. Rather than question their assumptions about ideal motherhood, their self-talk is much more likely to go along the lines of "I'm not getting it right".

Shame, self-blame and fear of judgement are powerful pressures on women to pretend to cope, and asking for support or help is seen as tantamount to admitting defeat. Many women struggle on alone, telling no-one of their difficulties, or making light of tough situations. This reinforces what is sometimes called "the conspiracy of silence", or what Susan Maushart calls "The Mask of Motherhood". This is greatly damaging to women's health and mental health. One in seven women in Australia experience postnatal depression; many more talk about isolation, lack of support and troubled relationships. When they are facilitated in safe and comfortable spaces, they speak of their feelings of loneliness, ambivalence, anger and frustration.

Yet women also talk about the joy and love they feel with and for their babies. They are passionate about their babies; their devotion is fierce and unyielding and often totally unexpected. Most women say they never anticipated the depth of love they would experience for their child. They feel that such love is not really spoken of.

In Picturing Motherhood, many women felt that society only sanctions mothers to talk about 'the safe middle ground'. They felt that extremes of emotion at either end of the spectrum are unwelcome.

Clearly there is a role for opportunities for women to share their experiences, confront the myth of the Perfect Mother, and find new ways of understanding motherhood.





recruitment

Saturate the area with flyers, posters and articles

Sites include playgroups, family day care, childcare centres, kinders, schools, churches, local papers, pharmacies, GP clinics, MCH centres, recreation centres

Don't forget to enlist key people like MCH nurses and childcare workers

We invited women who are mothering a baby or toddler to participate in the project. The materials we used are included as appendices.

We felt that the following points were important to emphasise:

- That participating was free of charge and that we would pay for film, developing and enlarging photos
- That women could put as much or as little time into the process as they were able to
- That we would try to make the location as central as possible for women from each shire
- That women didn't need to be "artistic" to participate
- That each woman would have control over her work
- That we would welcome contributions of other art forms (interestingly, this was not taken up)

Most forms of publicity yielded results. Some women responded to word of mouth, others to articles in school or family day care newsletters, and a few to ads in local pharmacies. A couple of women were already familiar with the project worker through other LAMP activities.

We anticipated that about 10-15 women would participate, however we ultimately had 25 women involved in some way.

The recruitment phase was also a form of preliminary advertising for the exhibition and offered an important opportunity to challenge contemporary images and ideals of early motherhood. In publicising Picturing Motherhood, we were simultaneously starting our critique of the myth of the perfect mum. Even if women didn't participate in Picturing Motherhood, many will have related to the ideas.

Of course, Picturing Motherhood could also be undertaken within an existing group: a playgroup, a new mums group, a camera club.



why participate?

Each woman had slightly different motivations for becoming involved in Picturing Motherhood; and each participated according to her time, energy and personal inclination. Common reasons for getting involved were:

- Get to talk about motherhood and being a mum
- Enjoy taking photos and/or want to develop skills in photography
- Would like to have some photos of self, rather than just be behind the camera
- Get out of the house
- Make new friends/connections
- Offer the public some alternative views on motherhood and encourage discussion

Many of the women from Alexandra are actively involved in the local photography club, and were keen to combine their skills in photography with their experiences of motherhood. Several women from the Mitchell Shire initially saw Picturing Motherhood as an opportunity to get out of the house.

At our first workshop, many women documented their reasons for coming along: **Fun, creativity, meeting new people, having a project, sharing ideas & thoughts – even lifestyles? Take lots of photos ...** To show through the photos that 'motherhood' is not something that is only the responsibility of the 'mother' but that 'mothering' should be shared among everyone involved in the child's life. To show the celebration and wonders of being a parent; to learn photographic skills; to portray motherhood far more realistically than is traditionally done; to spend time and share experiences with others; to spend time working at something with Rebecca there (can't usually do that) ... **Rawness; exposure; vulnerability; perspective; celebration; pleasure; spectrum; power; change; dilemma; passion; power; understanding; sharing; strength; respect; love; new ways of finding peace ...** Sharing ideas; rewarding outcome; working on a group project together ... **Achieve: effective, powerful images which represent the full spectrum of motherhood; an array of images which inform (others) and affirm women's experiences of motherhood; involvement in a creative project which documents women's experiences ...** Support; acceptance; reframing; fun; sharing; expression; representation of motherhood as it is, not as the media portrays it ... **Encompass all facets of being a mum, mothered & mothering; sensual, touch love; compassion/empathy; body image; reflect with time, knowledge & experience; ceremonies; rites of passage; make friends; connection; older mums; laugh & cry; diversity; indigenous mothers; birth, miscarriage; myths; siblings, fathers; loneliness, isolation, not coping; reassess expectations ...**



the workshops

Many of the participants would have appreciated more time for discussion around the issue of motherhood

Six workshops is the bare minimum for this process. Preferably you would meet weekly or fortnightly. The ideal might be to meet weekly over a school term.

Mums & kids need separate spaces, although there's always a lot of overlap!

We conducted five workshops over the duration of the process. I felt that any more than five sessions would be difficult, given that the project was being conducted in a rural setting and many participants had a 45 minute drive (with small children) to attend workshops.

The workshops were intended to provide a forum for planning and discussion, in which women could share their feelings, experiences, ideas and visions for their photographs and the exhibition as a whole. One workshop focused on enhancing their photography skills.

It was important to be clear that the Picturing Motherhood process had the potential to be supportive, nurturing and fun. It could also be challenging, confronting and emotionally difficult. We took a number of important steps to acknowledge all of these possibilities:

- We made ground rules (as a group) for the process (see appendix)
- We created a circle of safety, with which we opened the workshop sessions (see appendix)
- We distributed the local resource guide for mums, developed as part of the LAMP
- I emphasised the possibility of difficult feelings arising during the process and encouraged women to discuss these – with myself, my colleague or someone else from the group, friends or family, or any of the professionals listed in the resource guide.

Venue

We chose a venue that was roughly equidistant from most townships. The Spring Valley Recreation Centre in Flowerdale was ideal for our purpose. It featured one large space in which we set up a kid zone in one corner and a circle of chairs for mums. It also had a kitchen, which was very useful for catering.

Workshop timing

We chose mornings because they were less likely to interfere with kids' afternoon sleeps. Morning sessions also meant that women could stay around for lunch or leave as it suited them.

We chose Mondays because this was the day that suited most women. These decisions were made in consultation with participants before the workshop series started.

Childcare

By definition, this project involved women with small children and there were philosophical as well as practical reasons to welcome children into the space along with their mums.

Most community based activities for adults are implicitly child-free. That is, no-one ever says kids are unwelcome, but the ambience, physical space and timing generally combine to preclude women participating with small children in tow. Often, women do not feel comfortable taking their kids into adult settings such as reading groups. Sometimes mothers of small children use adult groups as "time for myself"; but more often they are excluded because their kids aren't welcome.

Our practical consideration was that in many parts of the shires, occasional childcare is fully booked or simply not available and most women do not have reliable access to childcare.

Having a lot of children running round is not conducive to sustained conversation, especially when that conversation is about experiences and feelings. To overcome this difficulty, I approached a local woman from the area (Lily) to find some volunteers to help out with child minding. Ultimately, she ended up volunteering herself, although I suspect with a bit more effort on my part, we might have found some others to help out. Julie Tyler from WHGNE also helped out with childcare. On a couple of occasions, older kids were present and they were great at playing with the littlies and generally maintaining the peace. All up, there were about a dozen kids who attended at least two sessions. They ranged in age from six weeks to four years. The most we had was eight at one session.

We set up a kid zone with toys and fruit in one corner of the hall. The kids were welcome to come into our circle (and did!), however the fact of us sitting in a circle away from the kids made it a bit easier for everyone to concentrate.

If parents are on the premises, you don't need a qualified childcare worker

You could seek reliable female volunteers to help out with child minding ... just make sure you induct them properly and don't forget a gift to show your appreciation of their work



Options for catering vary with your budget

You don't have to have lunch, or you could ask everyone to bring food to share

At minimum, you need morning or afternoon tea

Always ensure there's fruit, milk & juice for kids

Catering

People might wonder why I have bothered to describe our catering in this report. I do so because people often don't pay enough attention to details like food and also because in the course of the process, every woman commented on how much they liked the food!

I wanted the workshops to feel like special days out. I hoped that the trip to Flowerdale would feel like a treat rather than a chore. I tried to ensure that the process would help the women who participated to feel nurtured and cared for. Providing good food was one of a number of ways to do this.

In rural areas, gourmet food is hard to come by, so I tried to ensure that we had plenty of 'different' food presented on nice platters. I catered for the workshops myself, bringing up supplies from Melbourne. Each workshop we had good bread, dips, salads and then something different each time as the 'special' food (eg smoked salmon and antipasto, gourmet vegetarian pizza, Turkish cabbage rolls & falafel)

Food was served buffet style. Fruit and biscuit/cake platters were made up at the beginning of each workshop and then topped up for lunch. We provided bread and spreads for sandwiches for the kids.

For drinks, we had tea, coffee, herbal teas, milk, soy milk and juices.

Participants were very enthusiastic about the catering and many commented that they felt very "mothered" at the workshops.



Workshop content & structure

Each workshop nominally started at 10am and finished at 1pm, with a break for morning tea. In reality, we started about 10:30 and finished at about 12:45 with rumbling tummies and increasingly noisy kids!

This wasn't much time in which to get things done, but we managed.

In workshop one, everyone introduced herself and her kids. We set our ground rules and talked about why Picturing Motherhood. We brainstormed some ideas for photos and the exhibition(s). Most women also wrote down their expectations for the process, so that we could evaluate at the end.

In workshop two, photographer Jan Osmotherly talked more about planning the photography process and provided tips on taking photos. She talked about film, cameras, timers, flashers, framing and composing photos. There was a real sense of inspiration and excitement at the end of the workshop.

In workshop three, we distributed the photos and made some preliminary decisions about which would be exhibited. Some women needed time and space to think about what they wished to exhibit; they took their photos away and brought them back to the next session. (This process is described more fully in the following section on the photography process.)

In workshop four, we started the process of titling the photos. Ideally this would take more time and would be based on more discussion. We had planned to start writing captions in workshop three, however the whole workshop was occupied with photo selection and we just didn't get to writing.

In workshop five (which was very small), we discussed the value and the process of Picturing Motherhood.





taking photos

There are lots of different ways to generate ideas for images ... brainstorming, looking at other people's pictures or at magazines (what's missing?), describing a scenario and talking about what it looks like, guided visualisation exercises, word games, sharing each others interpretations of images, sketches, free drawing ...

Allow time in the process for women to experiment with photography

They could take photos at each session

You could stagger the process so that they do two rounds (one film each time if you're cash-strapped)

We spent time in the first and second workshops and in the Wandong playgroup talking about what issues and images came to mind in the theme of Picturing Motherhood. Some of the themes included isolation; the incredibly strong bond of passionate, fierce love for your baby; the frustration; the changes in identity; the toll that parenting can take on relationships; the lack of personal space; the juggling of roles and responsibilities. Everyone felt challenged about ways to put these issues into pictures. We all feared that a picture might not tell a thousand words!

In the process of Picturing Motherhood, it was important to be clear that whilst some women might want to be involved as photographers, others may wish to be the subjects of photos. In our discussions, many women said that they were rarely (if ever) depicted in family albums because their role was to be family photographer. One important reason that women chose to participate in the process was that they wanted some good quality, natural photos of themselves with their child(ren).

This raised an interesting point for me: that mothers are generally the historians of their family, with responsibility for collecting photos and memorabilia, remembering birthdays and anniversaries, knowing the family tree on both sides. Picturing Motherhood simultaneously celebrates and subverts that role.

We had limited time available to the process, so the women did not have the opportunity to take some photos, consider and discuss them and go out for another round of photography. This is desirable for the future, as it would allow participants to hone their photography skills ("why did it come out like that?") and to play around with images and ideas. Many of the women said afterwards that they had many more ideas at the end than at the beginning.

My idea had been that women would take their photographs in their own (natural) environments. Some women have suggested that it would have been good to take some photos each session, and this could be a recommendation for the future. The whole group or a sub-group could conceptualise, plan and take a photo or series.

In the talking process, we acknowledged that there might be many different types of photos. They could include

- Snapshots
- Still life
- Posed portraits or group photos
- Places (house-scapes?)
- Mum in the picture
- Mum behind the camera

I encouraged the women to work collaboratively to achieve the images they wanted. In Alexandra and Wandong, where the women had pre-existing relationships, there was a great deal of collaboration in the photography process. Elsewhere, there was little collaboration, and most women asked a partner, family member or friend to take their photo. In some cases, this enabled women to have a discussion about their “mental pictures” and experiences with someone who is significant in their life.

You could form women into small groups (say three) or pairs to take photos. This maximises support for and beyond the process

There was a ten day period designated for capturing images on film. This was very short and some women felt pressured. However others felt that ten days or one hundred days wouldn't make any difference ... they would still do it at the last minute! For the future, I would suggest that a period of three weeks would be suitable.

Allow at least three weeks for the photos to be taken

Because of our concentrated time frame and the rural nature of the project, I asked each woman what film she required, and then posted it out to her with a stamped self-addressed envelope for her to return. Two packages were lost in the post, one outward bound and the other (sadly) on the way back. For this reason, I would not recommend using ordinary post in the future. If time permits, it would be better to distribute and collect film in the course of the workshops.

We offered each woman two rolls of film (24 exposures), colour or black and white, in any speed. Most women took one of each at 400ASA. Several women took only black and white, as this is often prohibitively expensive and difficult to have developed properly in rural areas.





pics for exhibition

Ensure that women have the chance to see their photos privately first

They need to be able to choose which photos they show to the group and to the world

Clarify ownership of photos at the beginning of the process

It was important that the women who participated in Picturing Motherhood could choose which photos they wanted to exhibit, and how to present them. Their decisions were mostly made individually, in consultation with the other women.

Whilst I had initially hoped there would be time for everyone to get their photos before the workshop, this wasn't possible and so they were distributed on the day. This was a chaotic workshop!

I was adamant that the person who submitted the film should be entitled to see her photos before anyone else. I resisted the temptation for a peek!

We almost had a difficulty when the photographer (and friend) of one woman wanted to see the photos in her absence. Luckily this became a moot point when her friend arrived at that moment.

This situation did however raise an important point. Whilst in all of the materials, I emphasised that women would be the owners of the films and subsequent photographs that they submitted, I had not really thought through the complexities of ownership when an image was conceived by the subject and photographed by another woman. I wanted to challenge the popular convention in which photographers own their images, however the principle and rationale for this should have been discussed more thoroughly in the initial stages of the project.

After the initial excitement had settled down, women shared some of their feelings about their photos and then we decided to have a group viewing of the photos. Each woman set out her photos and then the group went around looking at one set at a time and discussing which photos were the strongest and why. There was a lot of discussion along the lines of "what does this say about motherhood?".

I felt that this had the potential to be a challenging process for some women. I felt that the nature of some of the subject matter might mean that some participants would need courage and support to show their photos. This was not just because women tend to undervalue or criticise their own creative output, but also because some photos may have challenging or confronting subject matter for the woman and for viewers.

Despite my awareness, the process of viewing and choosing photos was haphazard and chaotic.

The more experienced amateur photographers viewed their photos with a very critical eye. Others were more concerned with the intent, ideas and emotion behind their photos. This disparity did have the effect of making some of the less experienced photographers feel a little intimidated.

Some of the women who did not yet have their photos back (the late submitters!) were worried that their photos would not be as good as those they were seeing before them. (One of these women subsequently one the People's Choice award at the exhibition!)

All of the women in the group were very caring and respectful towards each other, however in the future, I would suggest a bit more structure and active facilitation of this part of the process.

There is no doubt that the images were far more powerful when enlarged. What appeared to be an average snapshot often looked totally different after enlargement and mounting. In future, it might be helpful at the beginning of the process to have some samples of proof shots enlarged and mounted. This might give women a better idea about how good their photos can look.

The time-limited nature of the project meant that we didn't really have an opportunity to look at all of the photos together and to reflect on images that were duplicated or missing. Whilst the exhibition came together beautifully in the end, this was perhaps more by good luck than good management.





technical details

**For most purposes
an everyday
400ASA film will be
fine**

Upon a recommendation from our photographer, we used professional quality film (Kodak Supra colour and Ilford B&W). This was slightly more expensive, and our lab has since suggested that ordinary quality film would have been fine for our purposes.

If you wish to use B&W film, you have two choices.

- Ilford C41 film can be machine processed, but tends to have a bluish tinge to the prints
- Other B&W film, which needs to be developed manually and is therefore considerably more expensive.

**You don't need a
good camera to
get a good photo!**

Cameras varied greatly. The group comprised some very experienced amateur photographers with manual cameras, through to less experienced women with 'point and shoot' style cameras. All produced excellent results. Several women used disposable cameras with considerable success, although the quality of the processing/lab work seemed to have a bit impact. The panoramic images taken on the disposable cameras worked very well ... especially for clotheslines of nappies.

**Build a relationship
with your photo lab
... they can do
wonders!**

We had our film processed and printed at La Trobe Digital and Photographic Studio in South Melbourne. Their support and advice was extremely helpful, and they were very accommodating with our to-ing and fro-ing. This is a commercial lab and the quality of the prints was extremely high.

The benefit of using a quality lab is that they will be very proactive in helping you to get the best possible print of your photo. This is in their interests as well as yours. If you like a photo but are not sure about the quality, discuss it with them. You will generally get an honest opinion about how well it will enlarge or what the possibilities are for improving the quality.

**A process like
Picturing
Motherhood is a
significantly sized
order, so try to
wangle a bulk
discount**

It is most certainly worth shopping around for the best quote you can get. You should always be able to get a discount for bulk (usually 20 or more of any one size). If your trade is potentially worth several thousand dollars, then businesses have a big interest in being very accommodating!

La Trobe recommends not trying to economise by using el-cheapo processing. The quality of negatives is an important part of getting a good final product. One way to slightly minimise costs is to get your processor to leave the developed prints uncut. This saves about \$3 per roll.

We chose to have many of the photos enlarged to 16"x12". This is about the size of an A3 page, but slightly shorter. This is the optimal size for exhibition, however the cost may be prohibitive for many groups.

16"x12" enlargements of colour photos are significantly more expensive than the roughly A4 size 10"x8". This is because photos up to and including 10"x8" can be enlarged using a machine, whereas the 16"x12" enlargements are printed by hand.

We chose to use matt finish for all photos as this is less likely to mark and to reflect light.

As a rough guide, these are the kind of prices you're looking at:

Film \$7 per roll of 24

At a professional lab such as La Trobe Photographic & Digital Studio:

Processing \$30 per roll of 24 B&W

 \$30 per roll of 24 B&W

Enlargements (with bulk discounts)

12X16 Col \$40.15

8x10 Col \$13.20

6x8 Col \$8.30

12X16 B&W \$40.15

8x10 B&W \$25.00

5x7 B&W \$21.00

**Keeping your
colour
enlargements to
10"x8" or less will
reduce your costs
quite dramatically**



the exhibitions

"Wow, this looks like a professional art exhibition." (Picturing Motherhood participant)

Exhibiting the photos was a dilemma for this project. We were conscious that in most parts of the shires, there is not a culture of going to art exhibitions. As such, we doubted that there would be a large audience for the images if we hung them in a specific exhibition space. On the other hand, one of the aims of many women was to stimulate public reflection and discussion about the complexities of motherhood. Furthermore, we felt that such fantastic images deserved a big audience.

Seymour Picturing Motherhood and The Big Ask

We decided to bring the photos together in one place for an evening, so that friends and family could see the work. This event was teamed with a BBQ and trivia night, which we hoped would make the even more social and interactive.

Picturing Motherhood was exhibited in Seymour on the evening of Friday 29 November 2002, in conjunction with a trivia night called The Big Ask. Some 60 adults attended, all of whom were friends and family of the women involved.

The exhibition clearly surpassed the expectations of the audience and of the women themselves.

One woman's partner thought that we would be having dinner then gathering around to look at photo albums. Another asked his partner whether she was going over during the day to "blow up a few balloons".

Some women were disappointed that they had difficulty getting family and friends to attend the evening, however they did feel that the people who did attend appreciated and understood some of the underlying themes of the exhibition. "We didn't need to say anything; they got it".



The most common response from Picturing Motherhood participants on the night was that they felt proud and excited.

Whilst some of the women from Alexandra who had previously been involved in photography exhibitions had some idea about what the exhibition might ultimately look like, most of the women had not expected such the quality of individual photos or the exhibition as a whole.

My first thought when Caroline brought along the flyer was 'Oh yeah, I like taking photos and I could get out of the house'. If you had have told me when I first saw that purple bit of paper that we would end up putting together something like this, I would have said 'No way; we can't do that'. But we did, and I am so proud.

We used a comments book to record people's responses to the exhibition and to the Trivia Night. By all accounts, people enjoyed the evening and loved the photographs ...

It was a fun night. Lots of laughs. Has taken me back a number of years. (Shirley Evans)

It was a great night. Loved all the photos. Keep up the good work, you are doing a wonderful job. (Helen Begley, Erin's mum)

Congratulations to you all. Motherhood is a wonderful adventure with surprises at every turn. Keep a sense of humour at all times. It all goes in the blink of an eye. Enjoy while you can. (K Gillies)

Thanks for a great night the sponsors were great. Had lots of fun with the team "Media Puzzle" as we came last in the trivia questions. The photos were great. Congrat's to all the women involved. (Jo Palmateer)

I loved the trivia & the photos. It was a great night. (Jess Palmateer)

It's quite a long time since I was a new mum but the photos bring it all back! It was all worthwhile! (Judy)

Wonderful, Magnificent & Inspiring but it hasn't put me off having babies! (Felicity)

I'm not yet a mum but can identify with "Piss & Quiet" – the dog and the cat love getting cozy in the loo! Well done to everyone & thanks to all the mums, bubs & families for sharing it all! (Sarah)



Local exhibitions

The women identified a number of public spaces that might be suitable for hanging the photos. From these, we decided that two cafes (one in Alexandra and one in Broadford) would be suited to our needs, and the owners of each gave permission to exhibit the works.

Ultimately, with Christmas break and lots of other demands on worker time, only the Alexandra exhibition had taken place by the time this report went to print. A group of women in Mitchell Shire have taken the photos and are arranging to hang them photos in local public spaces such as pharmacies, MCH centres and hospitals across the shire.

At the end of the public displays, photos will be returned to their owners (some women wish to donate their enlarged photos and these will be permanently displayed in selected venues).

The exhibition of photos by the Alexandra contingent of Picturing Motherhood was launched at The Dairy Milk Bar in Alexandra on Sunday 1 December, with champagne and nibbles. Approximately 30 people attended, most of whom were friends and family of the Picturing Motherhood participants. A number of guests were moved to tears by the exhibition and all were enthusiastic about the concept and content of Picturing Motherhood. We placed a number of laminated copies of the Resource Guide on the walls and spoke with the café owner about where and how she might direct women wanting support or further information around mothering issues.

A comments box placed at the entry to the exhibition was stuffed full of comments, including:

What an unexpected delight to walk down this passage and see all these wonderful moments. Thanx. A mom, South Africa

I laughed, I cried. It's Christmas. My babies of 33 years are in USA. Memories – Sonya. 12/12/02

A delightful and moving exhibition. Thank you for sharing your private moments.

Where are the men?

A wonderful celebration of the diverse and difficult of women as they mother! Well done and thanks. Lee Fitzroy, Women's Theatre West

I was stunned – it affected me on a really personal level. I wish my sisters who have been battered and overjoyed by motherhood could see it too – thankyou, beaut idea. Y. Drouin 8/1/02

The exhibition remained in place until the end of January and will now be rotated through public spaces such as MCH centres in Alexandra and other towns in Murrindindi, in the care of two local women.



outcomes

Community

In both shires, Picturing Motherhood has helped to identify local women who are interested in taking an active role in discussing and challenging images and ideals of early motherhood.

In Mitchell Shire, a number of the women plan to offer support to local women who have new babies.

I want to say to women, "you're allowed to feel shit; this is really hard". Everything's magnified when you're within your own walls. We all feel like we have to look like we can cope. We pretend, even to our husbands and mums. We have to start helping mums ... especially after the first six weeks, when all of the phone calls and visitors and flowers have stopped coming, when their mum's gone home.

In Alexandra, one of the participants is encouraging Berry Street's Connect for Kids project to find volunteers to re-institute the 'survival meals' that Nursing Mothers' used to provide.

Some of the participants have taken the opportunity in Picturing Motherhood to develop or enhance their skills in organising a community event. A woman who single-handedly gathered most of the prizes for the trivia night, gained experience in fundraising and seeking sponsorship, and then taught herself to create a spreadsheet on the computer to record all of the donations. She said:

Elizabeth didn't specifically ask people to take a town each, but I thought 'I know a handful of people, I'm sure I can get something'. It kind of snowballed from there. I realised I know lots more people in town than I thought. It helped knowing people's backgrounds and the inside angle. By the end I had refined my spiel heaps, and instead of raving on for ten minutes, I just walked in and said this is what we're doing, and this is what we want. It was a real confidence booster. (Her friends all commented that she seemed to have had a ball; she herself thinks she may have found her calling!)

We hope that these skills will be readily transferable to other settings, and will prove a valuable asset to each community.

Communication

Picturing Motherhood was instrumental in stimulating conversation and sharing about experiences – within the group and also with partners and family.

One woman in the group had experienced four or five months of depression soon after having her child. Her partner and family have never really helped out, and she continues to feel isolated and unsupported as a mother. She has never confided in her partner or her mother about her depression, however she feels that her photos and writings in the Picturing Motherhood exhibition gave them some insight into her experience. She recounted an exchange between herself and her partner at the exhibition:

My partner read what I'd written and said, "it's great, but the comma's in the wrong place".

I said "What do you mean?"

He said, "Well it says here 'what once was a walk of total isolation and loneliness after having Sarah, has now become a time for each other and for teaching new sights and sounds to this aware and eager little friend of mine.'

But it should say 'what once was a walk of total isolation and loneliness, after having Sarah has now become ...'"

And I looked him in the eye and said, "No, the comma's in the right place."

He just looked at me and said "Oh", and then he just had to walk away. But I think maybe he gets it now. I think Mum gets it too ... This has started their awareness, maybe some time in the future, I'll sit them down and tell them exactly what it was like.

This "getting it" didn't always happen. One woman has taken the flyer home for her partner, whom she feels still doesn't really have any clue as to her experience or feelings.



Friendship and other qualities

Many women in the group feel that Picturing Motherhood enabled them to make or strengthen friendships with other local women.

Some women also commented that the process highlighted how brave and strong women can be. They noted that many women had come along knowing no-one or only one or two others, and that a strong bond had been forged through the process. Jenny T commented:

Normally I would never, ever have contemplated letting people see a photo like that, but I just said, yeah, that's fine. And then at the exhibition, I'd expected that my husband and kids would ask why I'd put that photo in, but they just seemed to accept it. They thought it was a good photo!

One woman's partner is well-known in the local community, and she was thrilled to have participated in a community activity in her own right, rather than as his partner.

Photography

Many of the women who participated in Picturing Motherhood have been inspired to take more photographs. They have a better sense now of what is possible, and feel more skilled to get the images they want. They are also reflecting on their photo albums and feel that they will now be more inclusive, especially of images of everyday life.

The experiences of women : in their words

Thank you. What a privilege it was to participate in such a wonderful project. It was fun, challenging and most of all rewarding. Every mother had so much to offer, women are so amazing. (Jenny Tayler)

I've so enjoyed being part of the amazing group of women in this project. It's been wonderful to be involved with something that I didn't know that I felt so strongly about! Elizabeth, I think I've found a new direction. All the best. (Carol & Jaden Smith)

What a wonderful night I had. I enjoyed our workshops together and made some new friends. A big thank you to Elizabeth and to the other girls involved for a great time. (Erin Hewitt & Liam)

It's been fun, & I'm reminded of what a great community of people we have here in Alex. Thanks for giving us an opportunity to be creative & work together. Well done everyone. Let's do it again sometime, to take on the ideas that never got a show this time. (Meg)

It's been a lot of fun doing this project. All the girls have put a heap of time and effort in & I think we've all found something special to keep in our hearts forever. Ta Elizabeth for the opportunity to have a go ... (Donna & Tex)

Thanks Elizabeth! Thanks for the opportunity to explore all these ideas, to discuss them with friends, partner, family, ... (and in doing so enrich my friendships and relationships in so many ways), to be part of such an inspiring creative process & project, to develop ideas & ways to express them. It's been a hoot, it's been fun, it's been challenging, and you have helped us create new bonds in our community too. So many ideas!! What's next?? With love, Fern

Elizabeth – thank you so much. For all our individuality & STUFF! ... we got to ask ourselves a lot of questions. One thing that came up was the lack of reference to our own Mothers, now Grandmothers. ... & our relationships with them. How they were brought up & how we were, the changing ideals & how we should, through it all, remain friends. This would be a great aspect of Motherhood to explore. Try NICAN – they have an Annual national photo competition on a theme which exhibitions around the country. (anon)

Elizabeth, you did a great job. A good night out! My favourite photo disposable nappies on the line. I love the concept. I have in the past felt guilty about using disposables. All the photos were amazing. Thanks for the experience. (Kathrynn Robinson)

So what's next?? (anon)

We would like to say "well done Elizabeth" on providing us with the opportunity to explore our mothering lives. (Debi, Yasmin, Tiger & Indigo)

Great to see a lot of ideas, work and fun come together. (Chris & Sarah)

From partners ...

How does one express the joys, fears, tears, frustrations, trials & pleasures – This exhibition has provided a fantastic window of insight into "that" world of mothering. When is the one for "fathering" going to happen? Thank you for sharing. (Steve P)

What a wonderful way to express so much that is so hard to say or write. The ideas, images and dedication shine through. Thankyou for a wonderful inspiring insight into your lives. (Tony Pammer)

As the partner of a mother it has been interesting to hear about the project and then see the results. Congrats to Elizabeth for your hard work. Well done all of the mothers who have put in so much time. The exhibition is one that you can all be proud to have been part of. The images give a wide variety of emotions that define motherhood. (Dale Wakefield, partner of Bev, father of Sienna)

Picturing Motherhood Congratulations. It is certainly an enduring vocation. Best of luck to all mothers. (G Palmateer)



time & money

Picturing Motherhood was an initiative of Women's Health Goulburn North East, conducted as part of the Looking After Mothers Project. This was the source of funding for the project officer's position. A second staff member, Julie Tyler also devoted considerable time (approximately 50 hours) to the project. All in all, there were approximately 60 worker hours involved. In addition, the workshop by photographer Jan Osmotherly was paid for from the LAMP budget.

Picturing Motherhood was possible only with a generous grant of \$5000 from the Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership. This enabled us to pay for our materials (film, processing & printing).

We are grateful to the work of Carol Smith, Chris Bates and Kathryn Robinson for gathering donated prizes for The Big Ask.





participants

We thank each of the following women for her ideas, creativity, courage, respect and enthusiasm in the course of Picturing Motherhood:

Chris Bates

Kylie Beauchamp

Jenny Buckingham

Jenny Courser

Bev Dick

Lucy Filor

Cindy Garner

Fern Hames

Erin Hewitt

Melinda Hobson

Meg Holmes

Lisa Linton

Donna Merrilees

Caroline Morris

Marita Murray

Sharon Neil

Kathrynn Robinson

Jacqui Sims

Debi Slinger

Carol Smith

Jenny Tayler

Natalie Wischer

Ruth Worland



thank you!

Picturing Motherhood benefited from the support and enthusiasm of many people. We wish to acknowledge and thank the following people:

Elizabeth Wheeler – Women's Health Goulburn North East

For coming up with the idea and being brave enough to put it into practice

Julie Tyler – Women's Health Goulburn North East

For calm, patience and practical & moral support

Lily Rattray

For childcare at our workshops

Carol Smith

For securing a zillion prizes

Ruth Worland

For cutting a zillion photo mounts

Sharon Neill

For putting together a video of the exhibition

Jean Farrington – Women's Health Goulburn North East

For affirmation, listening and trust that it would all come out right in the end

Mark Amos – Lower Hume PCP

For moral support at a tricky time

Thanks are also due to the following people who took or appeared in photos:

Alex, Anastazia, Angus, Bec Bessant, Caitlin, Cathy Olive, Chloe, Christijana, Claudia, Eiligh, Emily, Gabriel, Hannah, Indigo , Jaden, James, Jirri, Jodie, Kate M, Kate N, Katherine Maher, Kimberley, Lachlan T, Lachlan W, Leisha, Liam , Linley Miller, Maggie, Meg Holmes, Mikaela, Mitchell, Molly, Peter, Sarah, Sharon White, Sienna, Tegan, Tiger, Tilly, Vince Van Der Zee, Wytze Kylstra, Yasmin, Ynte Kylstra, Zach

We also appreciate the contributions of the local businesses towards prizes for The Big Ask.