

“Visiting Moms” Relieve Stress for New Parents

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When you hear about the “Visiting Moms” program offered by Jewish Family & Children’s Services, it might sound like a dream. Imagine having your own personal motherhood guide who goes to your house to discuss questions and concerns about your soon to arrive, or recently born, infant. “They’re volunteers – moms themselves, some are even grandmothers,” explained Laura Shulman Brochstein who coordinates JF&CS programs on the North Shore. “They visit moms for an hour each week until the baby turns 12 months old.”

The Visiting Moms are volunteers who go to your house because they want to help. And as volunteers, they’re not juggling lots of cases. “Each of them has one, or maybe two, moms who they’re working with,” Brochstein said. “The first four to eight weeks is the hardest period, and sometimes people need that time to themselves to get organized. But we also start with mothers when they’re still pregnant and answer their questions as they anticipate things.”

Best of all, the program is offered free of charge. “Not means tested, just free to everyone. That makes it really simple,” according to Brochstein.

Anxiety and isolation are two sensations that often add to the burden of becoming a mother – or father – and they squeeze some of the pleasure out of one of life’s most profoundly joyous experiences. “There are so many decisions that may not seem big that weigh heavily on new parents,” Brochstein offered.

“People tend to focus on ‘stuff’ when their relationship with their Visiting Moms begins,” she thinks, rather than on underlying

issues. “It’s sometimes easier to talk about baby gear rather than the hard emotional adjustments of becoming a parent. And it’s okay to focus on things for a while but it’s also important to find out what’s really impacting people, to discuss what’s really on their minds – like ‘Is my baby safe?’ or ‘Am I feeling confident in my new role?’” These sorts of doubts may be at the heart of concerns over objects like cribs or car seats.

Visiting Moms, most of all, are there to provide perspective. “When I was a Visiting Mom I would ask the moms I was working with questions over why they would choose one thing over the other and remind them, ‘Be gentle with yourself,’” Brochstein offered. “And maybe there’s not going to be one way that lasts forever, maybe try one thing and see how it goes.”

Some might think that Visiting Moms are playing a role that the baby’s grandparents would normally fill, but extended family members aren’t always available or even in the area. In addition, said Brochstein, Visiting Moms come without the emotional baggage that often accompanies familial relationships. And sometimes Visiting Moms can help sort out those family tensions. “I had one client who had a pretty conflicted relationship with her family with lots of arguments. Still, she wanted her family to have an active role in her child’s life. So that was something we talked about to help her carve a path.”

These types of problems exist even when circumstances are at their best. Imagine when there are unforeseen problems. “Some kids can be very demanding, they can have difficult personali-

ties or they may have disabilities, so at first parenting can turn out to be very different than what you expected, it can be a lot to manage.” Having someone to sort through issues with might be a great help.

“And lots of times people are back to work and they’re exhausted and they may feel guilty. They may also be home with their baby full-time and really miss work,” reminds Brochstein. “People have guilt about nearly everything, so a Visiting Mom is there to talk to and be a sounding board for parents.”

There are also deeper emotional issues for parents. “Some people have postpartum depression or some milder form of depression after having their baby, sometimes they may not feel comfortable leaving the house,” added Brochstein, a nod toward one of the benefits of having a Visiting Mom. “They may feel isolated and needing someone to come into their home and talk about some of these things.”

“But mostly we find people with some mild anxiety about what’s the right way or the wrong way to do thing, and having another mom to talk with can be very reassuring.”

To learn more about the Visiting Mom program, contact Debbie Whitehill at dwhitehill@jfcscboston.org or 781-693-5625.