

# A MOTHER OF ALL DILEMMAS

Personal stories and insights into how women juggle family, work and life

**F**IFTY years ago motherhood meant being married and building a family unit that included dad as the breadwinner and mum as the homemaker.

In 2007 most mothers want to work, or need to have a paid job.

Among the mothers of today are career women, gay couples and families with step-parents and former spouses in the mix – along with a growing band of foster parents.

Authors and sisters Diane and Sharon Evans – both working mums with husbands – have explored the varied worlds of modern motherhood in a new book, *MotherWho?*

A policewoman, entertainer, radio presenter, elite athlete and politician are among the 20 mothers who tell their story – with the common theme that it's been tougher than they expected.

## NOVA PERIS Athlete

**M**OTHERHOOD and elite sport generally don't mix, so how has Nova managed to combine an 11-year career – which has taken her to more than 60 countries – with being a mum?

"When I fell pregnant I was nothing other than happy and excited to be a mum," she says. "Even from a young age I had all my cousins on my hip. I'm the eldest of 38 grandchildren.

"I love kids and having Jessica at such a young age was the best thing that happened to me."

She was the first indigenous Aust-

ralian to win an Olympic gold medal, she is one of only a handful of Australians to compete in two different sports – hockey and athletics – at the Olympics. But perhaps her most remarkable feat is that she is one of just three Australian mums to have won an Olympic gold medal.

Nova's dreams of getting out of her hometown of Darwin to pursue

the Olympic dream meant that wherever she went, Jessica went too.

"Jessica was part of me. I breastfed her until she was 10 months," Nova says.

"When she was four months old I was back at work and going to training. I had no social life. You're committed first to your child, then your sports and your work.

"I would ride my bike to the hockey centre, put her on one side of the fence while I trained starting at 6am, then I would ride to childcare and drop her off, before riding into town to work.

"I was cycling probably 30km a day on top of training and looking after Jess. It just never crossed my mind that I would do anything else."

The already demanding regime got tougher when Nova moved to Perth where Australia's national training centre was based.

"Jessica was two and I was 21. It was do or die for me. I had to go to the next level so I could make the Australian senior team," she says.

"We lived with two other girls who were also playing hockey. They knew the situation financially. I slept in their sunroom. It had glass louvres, a single mattress on the floor and an electric blanket. That's where Jess and I slept for three months."

As much as Nova wanted Jess

with her, if she was to achieve her goal she had to concentrate on playing and training without worrying about caring for a toddler.

That's where her extended family stepped in; they provided her with a support network, so that Jessica had relatives around her while Nova was out of the country or competing.

Since those heady days she's added two more children to the family and a new husband.

How does she see the tumultuous times of single motherhood and the demands of elite sport?

"I've seen the view from the top of the mountain. I don't need to go back there," she says.

"I'd represented Australia at a senior level for 11 years. I was happy I had Jessica, Destiny and Jacky boy.

"And you can't ever trade your kids in for a sporting event."

And their values?

"I want to instil three things in my kids," she says.

"Number one: don't be lazy. Number two: don't lie. I hate laziness and lying. Number three is don't be a sook. Get up and have a go. It's amazing the number of times I've been at the track and my kids will fall over and other people will go, 'Oh my God' and I'll go, 'Get up'. That's the way that we were brought up."

It's a philosophy Nova has always lived by.

## KAREN HENNESSY Policewoman

**S**OMETIMES single, gay and changing career to join the police force – it doesn't get much more tangled than that in the lead-up to motherhood.

"I spent years thinking about it," Karen says.

"I went to counselling for two years before I got pregnant, just to sort out any issues I had. I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to mess it up.

"I thought about whether I was doing the right thing. Could I bring a child up to be an OK person? Would he or she be able to cope?"

She also had to consider her female partner, who wasn't keen on the idea.

Karen pushed ahead with her plan anyway. She approached her donor insemination with the clinical attitude of the scientist she had once been.

"I couldn't really afford to do it any other way," she says.

"I needed to shield myself from the whole emotion of it. Most people do it together.

"They have someone go with them to ultrasounds and things like that.

"I didn't. I actually got pregnant while I was at work. I parked the police car out the front, ran in and was inseminated."

Despite years of careful preparation and thought, Karen was stunned by her own reaction to son Cooper's birth.

"I didn't know how much I wanted a child until I had Coop," she says.

"I chose between a partner and having him on my own, so obviously it was something I was passionate about. But I don't think you can understand how much you want a child – and how much they mean to you – until you have one."

Karen quickly learned that when children are involved, the best-laid plans can easily go awry.

"I was worried that I would do the wrong thing. It took me ages to dress

him and bath him in the beginning," she says.

"In hindsight he was really very good, except for breastfeeding. Both Coop and I had no idea about that."

Cooper struggled to gain weight in the first few weeks.

After numerous visits and tears at the Early Childhood Centre, they were sent for specialist help. Karen found having a shoulder to cry on was very beneficial.

"I really only needed to go a few times, but I kept going for more," she says.

"The woman there had been looking after new mothers for years and was like a mother figure. We would chat, I would cry and it would all be OK."

Karen had to resume working to support them both, but opted to go part-time; taking on two 10-hour shifts a week and being on call one or two nights a week.

She had worked full-time for 20 years. Now she wanted to focus on raising her son.

Since becoming a mother, Karen has changed the way she deals with difficult and traumatic situations.

Some things now make a deeper emotional impact. And a colleague's suicide became a reminder of the tragic toll the job can take.

"One of the guys I went through the academy with was working in child protection, and he recently used his police weapon to kill himself," she says.

"I've always cared, but some things get to me a bit more now. I think being a mother means I can do my job better. I am more understanding in general, particularly if children are involved.

"It can be hard, but the police force is pretty good."

## NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA Senator

**T**HERE'S a whole group of women in parliament now with children and babies," she says.

"It's a very different landscape now and hopefully as these people move through the system they will start to have an impact on policy.

"My choice was to become a member of parliament. I chose to become leader. I've been a senator for South Australia. I chose to become a mother.

"Now I'm choosing to do something else with my life, which will continue to involve me as a completely multi-faceted human being.

"I'm sure I'll be working in some capacity. I'll be spending time with my child, and I will not travel as much.

"I'm really proud of the way that I've managed and my family has managed over the last two years.

"Obviously there were sacrifices and difficulties and challenges involved and I'm sure that I could keep doing it, but my choice is to change my work/life balance.

"But that doesn't mean I'm giving up on being a working mother, or even giving up on politics."

Did any male MP have a day in parliament like this? "I remember one sitting day in 2005 when the Senate was sitting unexpectedly late," she says. "I had sent the babysitter home, and I was getting ready to return to my electorate with Conrad.

"I was in the middle of a nappy change when my staff member ran in saying, 'You've got to get down to the chamber straight away'.

"I ran downstairs, stood up and was angry at the way the government undermined Senate democracy by doing a dirty deal on an education issue I cared about. I was just finishing my outraged speech when I looked down and saw poo on my dress. I thought, 'This is literally a crappy day in the Senate!'"

**Edited extract from *MotherWho?* (rpb \$29.95) by Diane and Sharon Evans is published by Big Sky Publishing. It is available next month from good book stores or from [www.motherwho.com.au](http://www.motherwho.com.au)**





**VALUES:** Nova Peris with Destiny, 5, and Jack, 3 ... she tells them to “have a go



**CHOICES:** Karen Hennessy with Cooper and (inset) Natasha Stott Despoja with Conrad and husband Ian Smith

### **KATHLEEN KELLY, 51**

*Pooraka, psychiatric nurse. Two daughters, 33 and 24, and a son, 35.*

I think it's all the rushing around and feeling a bit guilty that you might be missing out on something because you're not there all the time.



### **CAROLYN PATTERSON, 33**

*Millswood, trainee psychologist. Son, 13, and daughter, 17.*

It's not being able to be there all the time – from when they get home from school to missing out on a sports carnival. I'd also like to help out at the school canteen and in other ways, but working makes it difficult.



### **LIDIJA BETROV, 49**

*Prospect, supervisor. A son, 22, and a daughter, 17.*

Not having as much time to share with the kids, particularly in a job where you work a lot of shifts, which I have done in the past



### **BOZENKA SUSILO, 49**

*Newton, supervisor. One daughter, 22.*

Putting everything together and trying to do a lot of different things at once can be hard. I think I always managed to do both OK.

