

Clementine Ford: If it takes a village to raise a child, let it have lots of men

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- **Clementine Ford**



There are a lot of cliches and sayings that get thrown around following the birth of a baby, but none are so apt as this one: *it takes a village to raise a child*. And hoo boy, do we really need that village. But you know who we really need in that village? More men.



Clementine Ford: 'I don't want my son to think the people he can turn to for help are Daddy and a million other women.' *Photo: Simon Schluter*

It isn't that men necessarily want to be excused from being a part of this village. In many cases, I think it's the result of a combination of social expectations, practice and the steep learning curve one parent – usually the mother – embarks on in the immediate days following birth that creates an automatic chasm between her capabilities and any male partner she may have. The early days of parenthood are tough, particularly so for the one whose body may still be recovering from birth while trying to rapidly adjust to its new role as caregiver, comforter and potential food producer.

Families are formed in a multitude of different ways, but it's fair to say that in the majority of cases the person

charged with the bulk of caring for a newborn will be a woman. Unfortunately, this disparity in domestic labour also creates a heady sense of resentment towards the partner whose relative freedom becomes suddenly far more pronounced under the spotlight of a clingy newborn.

I've been trying to counter this dynamic in my own small way, starting with the simple act of accepting help when people offer it and asking for it when I need it. Too many of us feel compelled to grin and bear the tough parts of parenting, perhaps to prove that we're capable and in control. But as Cerys Howell [wrote in *The Guardian* last week](#), "Humans evolved to care for babies as a tribe. Continuous mothering by the birth mother was a last resort for primates...In short, the exclusive mother-baby cult is a bizarre modern western fantasy that neglects the social, physical and psychological needs of women."

It's been a challenge to stamp down the part of me that feels obliged to do everything myself, but the benefits have been immeasurable.

But something I've been working equally hard at is asking men for the incidental help that is normally offered by or sought from women. I don't mean assistance with things like pram lifting, because men are generally very good at offering this help. I mean the more care-based help.

If I need to use the bathroom in a cafe while my baby's strapped into a highchair, I'll ask a nearby man if he minds keeping an eye on him while I disappear for a minute or two. I've deliberately asked men in the security queue at the airport if they mind holding my baby while I re-attach the baby carrier after it's gone through the x-ray machine.



Clementine Ford with her baby son.

I brought my son to a conference I was speaking at recently because sometimes we have no other choice but to bring our children to work, and was told a volunteer could easily be found to play with him for the half an hour I needed to be on stage. I asked if it could be a male volunteer. No problem.

I recounted this exchange with the audience shortly after. Later, when we broke for lunch, a different man stopped to ask if I wanted him to hold my son while I fixed myself a plate from the buffet.

I'm not suggesting this imbalance of care is men's fault. There are lots of reasons men are hesitant to offer this kind of support, and chief among them is the fear of being seen as a threat to the safety of children. Some families [choose not to involve external men](#) as caregivers because of these reasons. I can't direct them to do otherwise, but I do think it poses a wasted opportunity to diversify the way we perceive childcare in our communities.

Ultimately, I invite men to be a part of my child's village because I think there's value to be had both for men in recognising their role in this village and for children in seeing men in this role.

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I do these things not to inconvenience men in particular or because I assume my child and I are so important that we can just demand attention and time from strangers. I do it because child-rearing is hard and it does require support and outside help at times, but this help is typically just absorbed by women as more of the daily unpaid labour we perform invisibly for the benefit of others.

I do it because I am invested in creating a more empathetic community, and empathy involves helping other people when they need it. I do it because men are just as capable of caregiving for children as women are, but they are rarely called on to assist in the care of children outside their own immediate families.

And I do it because I want my child to see value in extending that empathy and care to people beyond himself. I want him to consider the gentle care of children to be as much a masculine trait as it is a feminine one.

As his awareness of the world grows at a rate faster than his own fortitude or independence, I don't want him to think that the people he can turn to for help are Daddy and a million other women. We can shape the villages we live in. This is how I'm shaping mine.