

# hush, little baby

Ever wondered about hiring a baby whisperer? OHbaby! Deputy Editor Ruth Brown looks at what they do and how much they cost

**C**ooper is a lovely little boy and the apple of his parents' eye. But five months ago there was just one big problem — he didn't sleep. His mum Kirstie tried everything. She rang Plunket, took him to a Plunket family centre, read all the right books but nothing worked, particularly as little Cooper suffered from acid reflux.

Then Kirstie turned to all the methods parents are told to avoid, but which worked in the end: she and her husband rocked him to sleep, or sang to him. For morning and afternoon naps they took to driving around so he would sleep for longer.

Getting him to sleep at night could take a couple of hours, especially as Kirstie didn't want to take the "cry it out" approach. The pair would then tiptoe around the house, too terrified to brush their teeth in the bathroom or flush the toilet for fear of waking him up.

He was 15 months old and Kirstie was expecting her second baby before the couple sought help. By this time Cooper was waking up in the middle of the night and staying awake for two or three hours, often staging a temper tantrum. At 2am one night Kirstie started Googling for help. Her husband had already said he'd pay a fortune for a decent night's sleep. She came across baby whisperer Dorothy Waide and from the moment she arrived their lives changed.

## enter the baby whisperer

Dorothy drew up a 24-hour schedule that included all snacks, meals and sleeps at set times every day. She warned it could take 10 days to get results — in fact it took eight. That was five months ago. Cooper now self-settles in his cot every night. He even asks for bed and enjoys naps of an hour and a half to two hours.

Cooper is much happier and so are his parents. It cost them less than \$500 and Kirstie wishes she'd done it earlier, especially as it could have helped reduce the problems caused by reflux.

The one-size-fits-all approach didn't work for Cooper. Dorothy offered a tailor-made schedule after first asking lots of questions about the little boy and working out a scheme that took his personality into account.

"You could say it's very straightforward and you could get it out of a book. But it's actually what she says to you. It gives you confidence and makes you believe in it," says Kirstie.

She recognises many people might consider a baby whisperer an unnecessary expense.

"I don't think it's for everyone but when you need help it can change your life."

"Unless you are in this situation I don't think people understand. I don't know of anyone else who had as many problems as we did."

## growth industry

Five years ago few people had ever heard of baby whisperers and many are still wary of the concept. Yet the word on the street is baby whisperers can be a godsend. Mums on OHbaby!'s Facebook page who have hired one give an almost universal thumbs-up, with only one regretting the experience.

Many mothers think they should be able to do it all on their own but if you look back in time women have always had mums, sisters, auntsie to help out, not to mention nurses and nannies.

Sharlene Poole's appearance on TV One nearly five years ago earned her the title New Zealand's Baby Whisperer and she's been flat out ever since, barely spending two or three nights a week at her own home in Raglan.

She charges \$80 an hour with a minimum of four hours for an at-home consultation. She also does six, 10 and 12-hour bookings. But you'd be wrong to think she's making a fortune out of baby whispering — it pays the bills but not much more.

And far from being the preserve of the wealthy, her services are mostly used by middle-income earners who have saved up to hire her, maybe with parents helping out.

"The reason they get people like me in is that they are absolutely bamboozled by the amount of information out there on how to do it. They get advice from their mother, doctor, midwife, Plunket... My clients just need one person's advice to focus on and feel confident about," says Sharlene. "I go in and watch what the mum is doing and then give advice. It might be a complete overhaul because Mum has got herself into a pickle.

"There is no one solution for all — I first talk to the mum about her beliefs, such as if she's prepared to leave a baby crying, does she want her baby in a routine or not etc."

Then it's time for a demonstration of how to feed/settle the baby with Mum trying it out before Sharlene leaves.

## the secret of the whisperers

Sharlene has a background in early childhood education but now specialises in babies under one. A good 90% of the babies she sees are very smart and very inquisitive.

"They are very visual. They are born looking around and looking everywhere. They are so much more susceptible to being stimulated

and they are attracted to things but they can't cope with it emotionally."

One of the most common problem areas for her clients is keeping up with developmental changes which can affect sleep and feeding. "One of the main parts of my business is showing the natural progression of babies' developmental stages. Often mums can be a bit behind and unprepared for the changes."

Dorothy Waide has been in business in Auckland since 2010 after spending many years overseas as "baby guru" for the rich and famous, including Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. She was dubbed "Mary Poppins" for her uncanny ability to calm a crying baby.

But there's no real mystery to that, Dorothy says. When she holds a baby who has been screaming in his parents' arms, the first thing she does is avoid eye contact. And there's no jiggling or unnecessary chatter — she simply reduces all stimulation and baby goes to sleep.

Originally a Karitane nurse, she now works with both babies and toddlers and often finds herself in the role of marriage counsellor, support person as well as parenting adviser.

"The main part of my work is bringing in an aura of calmness and listening to the mother. I work holistically with the family in making the environment calm."

It costs \$300 to hire her for four hours, but she says this can involve a good six hours of her time, including follow-up calls and emails.

She warns against the "gadgets" parents use to get their children to sleep. Even a rocking bassinet can cause problems further down the track, when the baby has to move into his non-rocking cot.

Vicki Kirkland, based in Tauranga, but in demand all over New Zealand and Australia, sees lots of very tired babies because mums aren't given strategies on how to wrap them and put them into bed.

"Nearly 80% of babies that are said to have reflux don't have it. I think they're just over-tired or over-stimulated," she says.

Too many mums (90% of her clients, says Vicki) are told that babies often don't sleep and that's normal.

"But what's happened is that during the morning when babies are not sleeping or sleeping for only 20 minutes, by the time they get to 5pm they are over-tired from the morning. So if we get the mornings right, it shouldn't happen."

Colic exists but it's "really over-rated", she says. It's much more likely the babies are screaming from exhaustion.



I wouldn't like to think that mothers feel they've done it wrong. You can always fix everything. There's nothing that's not fixable but it needs to be done softly and with nurturing.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

US president Barack Obama is known as a baby whisperer after bringing smiles to the face of more than one baby on the media circuit. Kissing babies is a well-known presidential stunt but one that can easily backfire if junior starts screaming. So if the father of the American nation has simply to pick up a crying infant and say, "You okay, baby?" to work his magic, surely he can solve a mere financial crisis?

# Silent Night...



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In some cases babies are being over-fed and are screaming from having sore tummies.

Vicki started out in postnatal support nursing but soon noticed there were lots of mums feeling anxious about going home with the baby and lots at home dealing with sleep issues. So she went into business and that was nearly seven years ago. She deals with postnatal depression, allergies and feeding problems. It costs \$750 for a full-day session with Vicki but there are other packages offering phone/skype/email support.

Sleeping and feeding is often subject to change when babies reach developmental milestones so Vicki is frequently called in at six weeks, four months, eight months, 12 months and two years. It goes like this:  
Six weeks: Mums are exhausted and facing a range of feeding and sleep problems.  
Four months: Babies who don't sleep well during the day start getting unsettled at night.  
Eight months: Babies are often struggling with teething and night-waking.  
12 months: Babies are changing day and night routines and mothers get confused over sleep times and routines.  
Two years: These toddlers want to be boss and are expressing their own gorgeous personalities.

"You might go in about sleeping issues and find you are dealing with feeding issues and what's going on in the home. You need to be able to sit down and see the big picture."

She's not in favour of letting babies scream for long — it leads to anxious, unsettled babies. "I'm picking up the pieces after children have been left to cry. Sometimes there's a bit of crying because they're over-fired and they're getting into a new routine but they shouldn't be left to cry for hours."

Yet she says, "There's no right or wrong way to raise a baby. I wouldn't like to think that mothers feel they've done it wrong. You can always fix everything. There's nothing that's not fixable but it needs to be done softly and with nurturing."•

**Ruth Brown could have used a baby whisperer to help get her daughters, aged four and two, into bed at a reasonable hour.**

• Turn to Ask the Experts on page 134 to read Dorothy Waide's advice to mums seeking help about sleep issues.

## MUMS SAY IT BEST

Mums on OHbaby!'s Facebook page had lots to say about baby whisperers. Here's a sample:

• "No question, your children need sleep to function and develop/grow, the money is nothing compared with months, or more likely years, of disrupted sleep. We cannot recommend Sharlene Poole enough for parents struggling with children who don't sleep or are having other difficulties. Stop being martyrs and deal with it, and accept when you don't have the knowledge or experience that these wonderful people have."

• "Dorothy Waide is amazing! She helped me with my son with his feeding and sleeping, a godsend! Thank you Dorothy."

• "Ugh, I loathe the term. Listen to your instincts not someone who hasn't had a baby of their own (granted a very few have) I understand if you're at the end of your tether you might though... Just not for me please."

• "I think it would be great if you can find someone whose results with babies you like and if you can afford the cost. Like any professional they are there to support you, not to take away your role in baby's life. (I have just had lots of wonderful friends support me but if you don't have friends with babies yet, why not hire one?)"

## Lulu learns to sleep

When Lulu was 12 weeks old her mother Amy was seriously wondering why she'd ever had a baby. She was no good at it, she'd made a terrible mistake. Lulu was unhappy, Amy was stressed and severely sleep-deprived and her relationship with her husband had deteriorated.

The high-flying career girl was at breaking point by the time baby whisperer Sharlene Poole arrived for a 12-hour booking. Within five minutes, Lulu, who had been considered a rather serious baby, was grinning. Within an hour Amy realised there was nothing much wrong with Lulu, she simply had a mum who didn't know what she was doing and was unable to read Lulu's signals.

Lulu had been a terrible sleeper, waking after 40 minutes each time she fell asleep. Amy had tried controlled crying and the "no cry sleep solution".

"From letting her scream to attachment parenting, I tried what I thought was everything at the time. But I needed more structure and routine."

After keeping a feeding diary, she counted up 11 feeds in the space of a day for little Lulu, all at random times.

"I thought if she was upset comforting her was the answer but in fact she was tired. There was nothing wrong — it was a classic case of a new mum not having a clue but having read heaps and heaps of stuff. I got to the point where I was so tired I didn't know what to do next."

"The other part of Sharlene's success was that she read me very well. I like predictability and I like having a plan. So it was a case of, 'If this doesn't work try this, and then this, and then this.'"

Sharlene also taught Amy how to wind her baby properly after feeding.

"That was critical. Lulu did have wind but not colic. She spent the next 48 hours burping like a lion."

## BABY WHISPERERS

- Vicki Kirkland: [www.vicki-k.co.nz](http://www.vicki-k.co.nz)
- Dorothy Waide: [www.babyhelp.co.nz](http://www.babyhelp.co.nz)
- Sharlene Poole: [www.littlemiracles.co.nz](http://www.littlemiracles.co.nz)