

HEALTHY LIVING

Helping raise babies

New parents find help and get advice from Moms on Call

BY JIM THARPE

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Two metro Atlanta moms have figured out how to turn cranky babies into a thriving business.

Laura Hunter and Jennifer Walker never thought of themselves as entrepreneurs until about five years ago, after a little advice from country crooner Kenny Rogers. Today they are published authors, Web site operators and sought-after consultants in a big niche market.

The two moms — they have eight kids between them — run Moms on Call LLC, which offers real-world advice and counseling to newly minted parents.

“We partner with people on their parenting adventure, and it is an adventure,” said 37-year-old Ms. Hunter, who lives in Kennesaw, Ga. “We saw a need, and we set out to meet that need.”

Their consultation business has exploded — it grew 600 percent in three years. Their book, “Guide to Basic Baby Care,” has sold more than 20,000 copies and been

translated into three languages. They recently started online courses in child care on their Web site that take parents from infancy through age 5.

In the process, they have begun what amounts to a small-scale revolution in the child-care business, reinventing the swaddling blanket and reducing reams of child-raising advice into a simple set of how-to instructions. Stuningly, all of their success so far is due to word-of-mouth recommendations. They think they know why.

“The key that was missing was the reality of the day-to-day care,” said Ms. Walker, 39, who lives in Woodstock, Ga. “The swaddling blankets were too small, nobody talked about a regular, day-to-day routine. Nobody had a real plan to get a baby to sleep through the night.”



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Jennifer Walker, left, swaddles 6-day-old Anna Kate in a blanket as her, mother Lesley Stamper, right, is instructed on the technique by Laura Hunter, center, in Ms. Stamper's home. Ms. Walker and Ms. Hunter help new parents adapt to life with a newborn.



Hunter practices bathing the infant, demonstrating a technique for Anna Kate's mom.

Music has the power to affect our moods, emotions

The effect of music on human emotions and behavior is both profound and fascinating.

From the earliest history of mankind, music has been a part of every culture. In primitive cultures, people used extended sessions of singing, chanting, dancing and drumming to induce altered states of consciousness, such as frenzies and trances.

Background music in motion pictures often creates emotions like happiness, sadness, anger and excitement. Music in stores is said to create a “mood” to buy things, while the store's elevator music creates a background in which to make the shopping experience more pleasurable.

Both educational and work settings have long used background music to create the right environment for learning, safety and production. Musical therapy can be useful in the treatment of loneliness, depression, anxiety and other emotional problems.

It has been said that language can communicate information while music communicates emotion. A famous composer once said: “Music should be felt rather than heard.”

The following scenarios give more examples of how music affects emotions and behavior.

- A special hymn used during a funeral provides comfort during a time of loss and

grieving.

- A soothing lullaby sung by a parent while rocking an infant to sleep.

- A college band playing the school's fight song to excite fans during a sporting event.

- A spirited song played by a military band that inspires patriotic feelings for one's country.

- A classical symphony that provides musical background for creative thinking.

- A love song played while candlelight and a glass of wine are being enjoyed in a romantic atmosphere.

- A triumphant wedding march up the aisle that reflects joy and happiness on the faces of the bride and groom.

- A nostalgic melody that creates a smile on the face of an older adult as he or she reminisces over the past and that, perhaps, triggers forgotten memories.

People's response to music is mediated by a complex mosaic of both psychological and physiological mechanisms that filter through their experiential and cultural background.

The next time that you are feeling stressed, lonely, bored or in need of entertainment, consider listening to your favorite music. It may be good for your health and just what the doctor ordered. ■

'Baby whisperers'

Ms. Walker and Ms. Hunter believe a good part of their success is due to the fact that modern moms often live hundreds of miles from their natural support network — the mothers, sisters and aunts in traditional extended families who aided in child care.

Hospital classes pass along the basics. But once baby is home, there is often no one to advise new parents on the finer points of day-to-day child rearing.

Dr. John Knox of North Atlanta Pediatrics Associates said the two women have filled a glaring gap in the baby-raising business. Parents tend to ask doctors pointed questions about children's health, said Dr. Knox. But physicians rarely enter the home environment to see what's going on between parent and child.

“I look at Jennifer and Laura as ‘baby whisperers,’” Dr. Knox said. “They have a knack for reading a baby's temperament and knowing what to do.”

The ultimate testimony to their skill, Dr. Knox said, is the fact that several metro-Atlanta female pediatricians he knows have used them for in-home advice with their own children.

Their efforts have not been universally applauded. They've been criticized by proponents of “attachment parenting,” and gotten nasty e-mails from women who believe babies should only be breast-fed. Ms. Walker and Ms. Hunter say that they try to remain flexible as they help new parents build confidence.

“You can be a good mom and breast feed, and you can be a good mom and bottle feed,” Ms. Walker said.

The two pediatric nurses admit that a lot of people have stepped up to help make their business a success. One of the first was singer Kenny Rogers.

About five years ago, he called Ms. Hunter to consult with him and his wife, Wanda. The couple had twins when Mr. Rogers was 65. At the time, Ms. Hunter was doing consultations using a few photocopied sheets of instructions.

“I was getting ready to leave, and Kenny was flipping through (my) folder and he said: ‘It's not copyrighted.’ He said: ‘You've got something here. You have to copyright this.’ His attorney ... called the next morning.”

Ms. Walker and Ms. Hunter chuckle at

Mr. Rogers' early advice on their enterprise. It sounded a bit like the lyrics to a country song.

“Kenny said: ‘You can't hit a bull's-eye if you don't throw a few darts,’” Ms. Hunter recalled.

There were more than a few misses in the early days. Both were still working as nurses while running the business on the side. They were also wives and moms who suddenly had workweeks of 80 hours-plus.

Ms. Hunter's husband, Jim, a tennis pro, offered financial advice. Ms. Walker's husband, Tim, an editor for a curriculum-publishing company, helped them with marketing.

A lawyer whose wife had used their in-home services offered product-liability advice. Another helped them incorporate.

They found commercially available swaddling blankets too small and heavy, so they hired a woman who could make large, lightweight blankets for them. An aunt helped design the Web site.

“We pretty much made it up as we went,” Walker said. “There were no road maps to follow. But we brought something unique; we brought a mom's perspective to this business.”

Building the brand

Neal and Lesley Stamper of Johns Creek, Ga., used Moms on Call for their first child, Madeline, now 18 months old, and again for their latest addition, Anna Kate.

“We were at our wit's end with our first child, Neal Stamper said. “They came in and answered some very basic questions. Before that, we were flying by the seat of our pants.”

They have flirted with the idea of franchising, but for now are training other moms in their methods. By expanding their presence online, “we hope we can reach women around the globe,” Ms. Walker said.

Getting children to sleep through the night is the most common question they get. Sometimes, the calls and e-mails are just strange.

“I had one e-mail that just said ‘hit on head by chicken,’” Ms. Hunter said. “I called and the kid was screaming and the dad was panicked. He was standing by the freezer and dropped a frozen chicken on his child. It all turned out fine, but that was what was worrying that dad at that moment.” ■