

Funny MUMMIES

Ever feel if you didn't laugh, you'd cry? Georgie Blaskey talks to the women who make a living from good humour



We've all heard the expression: "If I didn't laugh, I would have cried." Never is this more apt than during those early days of motherhood with your first baby. Wendy Wason, comedian, actress and mother, has lived through many desperate mothering moments and makes it her job to share with others the roller-coaster ride that is parenting.

"I'll never forget when I was late for a gig with a six-week-old baby and two-year-old toddler in the car, still expressing milk, trying to get to my show on time," Wendy tells me. "I was driving too fast and the police stopped me. The baby was crying, the toddler was screaming and my boobs were leaking... The policeman took one look at me, a sleep-deprived woman on the edge, and muttered: 'Keep an eye on your speed,' before he backed away."

We can all relate to that crazed, panicked woman in the car, and laughing with recognition is both an emotional and physical release. At Screaming With Laughter, a daytime comedy club where new parents can enjoy an adult night out (in the middle of the day), I watched as a packed audience of mothers (and some fathers) laughed, snorted, giggled and groaned while their babies gurgled, cried, fed and pooped through two stand-up comics' acts. Surreal, yes, but brilliant too.

The brainchild of comedian and actress Lucy Porter, mother of two, Screaming With Laughter was founded when Lucy had her first baby and wanted to work. "I couldn't go on set or on tour for weeks on end, so I created a way to work in the day with my baby. The life I was experiencing wasn't necessarily creating the ideal material for evening gigs, but here I talk about pregnancy, childbirth and all the rest of

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it, and it's lovely! I think Screaming is a social enterprise," explains Lucy. "It's a safety valve for mums, transporting them to an adult space, and hopefully staving off baby blues. Mums often feel like they're failing, but when they listen to us joke about the things we're doing wrong, it makes them feel okay."

Laughter is the best medicine, and a problem shared truly is a problem halved. Wendy, who performs at

the Edinburgh Festival as well as Screaming With Laughter, says: "Being on stage is like free therapy – I get to be the freak but, by the end, everyone's identifying with me and then we're all the freaks!" With three children aged between four and 13, Wendy has plenty to tell: "I like to explore the darker side of mothering. Children are dark due to their honesty, like when I told my son my father had died, he said: 'Did someone shoot him?' They don't spare your feelings!

"There are so many things no-one tells you, such as my newborn son having erections – why does no-one talk about it? Parenting is relentless and tiring, and whilst it's serious, it's important to have a laugh."

It's no secret that the new phase of motherhood triggers creativity in many careers and, for Lucy, it has given her newfound freedom. "Before I'd had to be laddish on the comedy circuit – more laddish than a lad! – and deny my sex completely. Now I am older and a mum, I feel more able to be myself," she says. With shows like Sharon Horgan's *Catastrophe* making that honest conversation mainstream, isn't it time we dropped the taboos and cut ourselves some slack?

Ellie Gibson and Helen Thorn, both mothers of two, known as comedy duo Scummy Mummies, have a podcast chat show for less-than-perfect parents. "I

LEFT Less-than-perfect parents can identify with comedy duo Scummy Mummies, Ellie Gibson and Helen Thorn



'We've all been there – fishing a poo out of the bath or smuggling wine into your mug at teatime'

ABOVE When she became a mother, Lucy Porter could no longer go on tour, so she founded Screaming With Laughter
 ABOVE RIGHT Wendy Wason makes a joke out of many mothering moments

formalised whinging and made a career out of it," says Ellie. "But when you tell a joke to mums and they laugh with recognition and relief, it's great." Helen agrees: "We've all been there – fishing a poo out of the bath with your bare hands or smuggling wine into your mug at teatime – we have to laugh about it or we'd go insane!"

As well as covering parenting issues, the Scummy Mummies have welcomed guests including Jane Garvey from *Woman's Hour*, *Glamour* editor Jo Elvin, columnists Suzanne Moore, Bryony Gordon, Lucy Mangan and Sali Hughes, author Kathy Lette, and comedians Sandi Toksvig and David Baddiel. "We also perform *The Scummy Mummies Show* live, featuring songs, sketches and stand-up. At the end we ask the audience to write down their scummiest confession, read them out and vote for the winner. It's often the funniest bit and everyone feels better for having

shared and laughed at their low moments."

Whilst we bond with other mothers over the trials of motherhood, it's the laughter that makes friendships stick. Seek out the lighter side at a live gig, online or on TV – in Channel 4's *Catastrophe*, Sharon was worried she wouldn't love her new baby as much as her first-born as it resembled an alien Gene Wilder and seemed "manipulative, like it was plotting something". See – don't you feel better having read that?

FOR MORE LAUGHTER

For more information on the Screaming With Laughter shows, visit screamingwithlaughter.com
 Listen to hilarious podcasts and more at scummymummies.com
 Read Wendy's blog and find out about upcoming shows at wendywason.co.uk