

beware of the vampires

By Miriam McCaleb*

About the time my belly swelled to that pleasing stage where it's clearly 'Baby Bump' and not 'Too Much Dessert!', my wise midwife Lynda Dalton warned me that I was about to become public property. I can handle it, but how to fend off the thoughtless Baby Vampires?

There is, perhaps, no greater icebreaker than pregnancy (especially when accompanied by involuntary waddle). Except a new baby. And the newer the arrival, the more interested the world. Some of this attention is welcome - who doesn't love a little admiration of their babe? - but some we could do without. My mate Bridget calls intense strangers 'Baby Vampires', lured by the smell of fresh blood.

Have you met any Vampires? Those people who'll make a grab for your baby faster than you can say "pass the hand sanitiser". People who put their needs and desires ahead of your comfort or - worse - your baby's wellbeing.

Sometimes, it's shocking how bolshy the general public can be - my friend, Amy is a mother-of-two from Wellington. She was speedily attempting a weekly supermarket shop while her difficult-to-settle newborn daughter slept in her carseat in the trolley. As Amy bagged her onions, a random shopper pounced on her baby girl, "Oh, how cute. Does she have any hair?" With that, the stranger whisked off sleeping baby's hat, awakening and upsetting her. So began a cascade of stressful effects: baby awake, supermarket is overwhelming, shopping only just begun, still in fruit & vege section; chaos ensues. In those early days, a crying infant can often lead to crying mother. Meanwhile, random stranger wanders off, shops in peace.

Then there are the strangers who ask, "Can I have a wee hold?" One of the most influential thinkers in the world of infant respect, the late, great Magda Gerber (www.rie.org), encouraged adults to instead ask, "Would the baby like to be held by me?" Indeed.

People make demands of babies that they'd never suggest for older humans. Can you imagine a stranger saying, "I like the look of

your husband. Can I sit on his knee?" Or, "Your mother looks nice. Can I give her a wee cuddle?" What if that stranger were to approach you and say, "Your child sure has shiny hair. Can I touch it?" It's not just me - you'd shoo them off, right?

There's a good biological reason for this. We are, after all, Mama Mammals, programmed to protect our young. And little babies need our protection even more than our spouses, parents - even our children or adolescents.

In Baby's early days, when you need to go out into the world, be prepared for the Vampires: adults who prioritise their own desire to connect with cuteness, without regard for Baby's humanity. As the filter between the world and the baby, it helps to be able to recognise this, and know when to speak up in defence of our infants.

Think about how we all have systems that help us to process and makes sense of the world. Our brains interpret and file every smell, every sound, every face, emotion, sensation, every taste. So for new babies, the world can be really overwhelming. In the early days and weeks, it's helpful if Baby's life is as quiet, as simple, as predictable as possible. That means, we protect him from the overwhelming world. We allow as few people as possible to handle him.

"Can I hold the baby?" Well, I have a "Would I hug this person in greeting?" yardstick. If this is someone who I don't trust enough to touch, I am certainly not going to let them touch my baby. So that has ruled out all strangers. And with the others, I would ask myself, "Would the baby like to be held by this person right now?" This can be hard for us to manage sometimes - many of us have been socialised to please others and not to make waves, or perhaps



we're tired and a bit emotional, so we question whether we're overreacting. If this applies to you, give it some advance thought. Recognise when your (or your baby's) boundaries are being stepped over, and ready yourself with some phrases to knock those Vampires back.

Some phrases you might like to practice are: "Not a good idea", "No, thanks", or just "No". You don't have to say it aggressively. Strive for a tone between assertive and polite. If you need to practice, try: "She's just getting over a cold. I'd rather not" or (this was my husband's one) "Just family, sorry". Then segway into some neutral chat.

Now my baby is a bit older (7-months, as I write this) I need to upskill on techniques to repel those cheek-grabbers in the world. I get it, she's beautiful, and those cheeks are immense. It's tempting! But you don't see me grabbing the butt cheeks of random strangers, just cos I like the look of them, do you? So do me a favour - hands off my baby girl's face. Just family, sorry!

**Miriam is a teacher, a writer, a mother and a keen gardener. Lucky thing: extra garlic is necessary to ward off the Vampires from her two beautiful daughters. Come see her at www.baby.geek.nz*