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The Role of Mothers in Family Health

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ABSTRACT

In many families the responsibility of family health falls mainly to the mother. There is a complex relationship between family health, care, and mothering practices that has not been fully investigated. The main aim of this research was to explore the complexity of the mother's role across all areas of family health including; food, sleep, exercise, medications, hygiene, health prevention such as immunisation, and safety. Multiple methods were used to uncover the embedded aspects of family health and to get rich and detailed discourses from stay-at-home mothers. Two interviews, household mapping, timelines of illness events and health diaries were used. The main finding revealed by analysis was that while family health was overseen by mothers predominantly it was practiced as a family, within a family health philosophy. This philosophy was a set of beliefs, ideals and practices, unique to each household, which were developed overtime and continually negotiated as a family. This philosophy influenced how family health was practiced across all areas in family health. The analysis also revealed that the mother's role as overseer of family health involved surveillance, provisioning and teaching. The mother positioned herself as the 'mother expert' in these processes based on her unique, embodied, historical and current knowledge of the family's health history, genetics, and illnesses. This expert position worked alongside the family health philosophy and allowed her and the family to resist health promotion, medical advice and healthisms. The 'mother expert' position empowered the mother with family health knowledge but it also constrained her into the position of 'expert' carer of family health. Surveillance played a key role in family health impacting on all areas of health, acting as a form of social control and leading to uncertainty over mothering practices, but conversely also providing reassurance. Provision of family health was a conflicting task that required balance, care of the mother, love and risk assessment. Teaching and modelling good health was embedded into mothering but also required a more formal process in teaching children about health and how to care for their own body. In summary, the mother's role in family health is complex, multifaceted and reflected in the family health philosophy.

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