The contexts for becoming a parent are ever-changing, bringing new opportunities and new challenges. *Becoming a Parent* examines the transition to parenthood from diverse perspectives – it is about becoming, rather than being a parent. Drawing on a large body of theory and research, the book explores universal psychological journeys as well as the specific challenges faced by those whose pathways to parenthood are non-traditional or medically complicated. It also examines the unprecedented reproductive choices in contemporary society and provides a comprehensive overview of the personal and social impact of reproductive technologies. Pregnancy, childbirth, and early parenthood (the so-called “fourth trimester”) are discussed in detail and illustrated with case anecdotes and personal stories of people with “high-risk” pregnancies, fathers as well as mothers, adoptive parents, and LGBTQ as well as heterosexual adults. It concludes with social and policy initiatives that can better support positive adaptation during this crucial life transition.

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BECOMING A PARENT

Contemporary Contexts and Challenges during the Transition to Parenthood

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To my husband, my children, and my grandchildren
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Preface

Becoming a parent is transformative: life affirming, and life changing. Every expectant parent confronts the fundamental processes of life itself – joy, pain, fear, echoes from the past, and the challenges of a radically different future. The transition to parenthood provides a window of opportunity to promote adult mental health and wellbeing, and positive developmental trajectories for children. This book examines this monumental rite of passage from diverse perspectives. Universal psychological journeys are explored, as well as the unique challenges faced by those whose pathways to parenthood are non-traditional or medically complicated. The aim is to provide a contemporary, integrative understanding of the holistic processes involved in becoming a parent in the twenty-first century.

Human reproduction is in a state of flux and the human family continues to evolve. The development of the contraceptive pill in 1960 meant that women could reliably control their fertility for the first time in human history. In the decades since then, astounding advances in biomedical technologies, and radical changes in social values and demographic realities have led to unprecedented choice and unprecedented challenges when it comes to reproduction. Contemporary babies are generally highly planned, and long anticipated. A pervasive ‘risk management’ mindset casts becoming a parent as a ‘high-stakes’ undertaking, with prospective parents seeking certainty that the expected baby is normal, and that an optimal environment is in place to guarantee the child will flourish. Writing about becoming a mother is ubiquitous – blogs, memoirs, ‘how to’ guides. The process of becoming a father has received scant attention. Even less attention has been directed to those whose transitions to parenthood are not mainstream (single parents, LGBTQ parents, adoptive parents) and those with complicated and painful reproductive histories of infertility, medical risk, and loss. This book addresses these gaps.

Shared psychological processes (anchored in developmental theory) provide a coherent unifying framework. Different chapters explore variability.
and diversity – the ways in which the experience of becoming a parent can be influenced by gender, culture, and context (particularly mode of conception and medical risk). Throughout, the book takes a bio-psycho-social perspective, exploring the complex interactions of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural influences. Childbearing pits biological realities against the constraints, norms, and demographic shifts of developed societies, most striking in the well-established trend to delay partnering and postpone first-time parenthood. Technological advances have made it possible to bypass and overcome many biological barriers to becoming a parent, but these options are finite. In a world characterised by global mobility, traditional cultural beliefs about birth, mothering, and gender roles rub up against the lifestyle and career goals of contemporary women, and expectations that contemporary men will be involved in the day-to-day care of their young children. In high-income societies, workplace demands clash with a pervasive parallel ideology of intensive parenting.

While the book is grounded in scholarship, even the most rigorous research is selected and presented in a subjective way. My goal has been to present a broad and balanced ‘big-picture’ view of the transition to parenthood, integrating the perspectives of colleagues and scholars in different disciplines: sociology, feminist scholarship, psychoanalysis, paediatrics, among others. Inevitably, however, the book will reflect my own experiences and biases, my personal philosophy of parenthood, my cultural background (white, middle-class, Western), and my education and career as a developmental psychologist.

During my own transition to parenthood my personal and professional lives were intertwined. An early career as a developmental physiotherapist enabled me to appreciate the extraordinary commitment of parents of atypically developing infants, and the ways in which they supported their infants’ developmental vulnerabilities. I had no comprehension, as an ingénue at the time, of the scale of the challenges they faced. Participation in a classic psycho-analytically informed ‘infant observation’ was a rare privilege. I became a ‘fly on the wall’ observer of baby Rose for an hour every week for the first year of her life. This extraordinary experience activated a sense of wonder about newborn infants, a quiescent longing for a baby of my own, and a fascination with the parent–child relationship. Working as a Childbirth Educator during my childbearing years, I found myself enthusiastically advocating natural childbirth (very much the thing at the time), whilst enduring a traumatic instrumental delivery and subsequent caesarean sections with my own babies. I completed my dissertation on the transition to parenthood, whilst transitioning to parenthood myself. Fortunate in
Preface

having a settled first baby, I was an enthusiastic advocate of maternal intuition and baby-led mothering, convinced I didn’t need any ‘mothercraft’ advice at all, sceptical (indeed naïve) about postnatal depression, and intolerant and judgemental about expressed ambivalence. I had much to learn.

Decades later, I am grateful to countless research participants who have shared their experiences of becoming a parent. They have helped me to appreciate the variability as well as the common ground, the ways in which parenting adapts to meet particular social contexts and cultural expectations, and the importance of a perspective that neither idealises nor denigrates this extraordinary, yet ordinary life pursuit. Becoming a grandmother (a recent development) has enabled me to savour the rewards of renewed closeness with adult offspring, and to re-experience the anxious anticipation of childbirth, the delight and wonder of newborn infants, the fragility of new parents, and the unique feelings of helplessness a tiny baby can engender when she won’t stop crying, won’t go to sleep, and point-blank refuses to be strapped in her car-seat.

Men and women who have struggled with involuntary childlessness, infertility, perinatal loss, postnatal depression, have helped me to understand how context, life history, and grief confer vulnerability during the transition to parenthood, but also intensify the rewards. Researching educational and therapeutic interventions for prospective and new parents has confirmed the importance of a flexible, non-judgemental stance towards both parents and infants, and shown that a relationship lens can transform perceptions, build empathy, and promote self-compassion, self-worth, and confidence in parents.

Research has its limitations and its blind spots. There is a pervasive middle-class bias. In general, participants in published studies of the transition to parenthood are well-off, educated, white, heterosexual women who have choices and resources. While this book, like the research from which it is drawn, focuses predominantly on the experiences of English-speaking parents in high-income countries, each chapter acknowledges cultural diversity and the ways in which cultural values and beliefs challenge the assumptions of universality implicit in foundational theories of parenting. Recent interviews with new parents from diverse backgrounds illustrate how culture and context influence the experience of becoming a parent. The interviews were faithfully transcribed, word for word, with participating parents invited to review and comment. Most made only minor changes to the first drafts. I thank them all for their generosity and their candour.
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I am also indebted to many writers of literary memoirs on becoming a mother. I am especially grateful to classical pianist and writer, Anna Goldsworthy and to BlackInc Publications for permission to quote from her (2014) book Welcome to Your New Life. Thanks also to Academic and Writer, Charles Fernyhough for permission to reproduce his moving account of miscarriage from a father’s perspective; to Writers Jamila Rizvi, Annabel Crabb, and Amelia Lester for permission to quote from their work; and to Jennifer Senior whose wise and entertaining (2015) book on the paradox of modern parenting reminds us of the need to keep in mind the bigger picture – the deeper philosophical dimension to becoming a parent, that is so difficult to capture empirically. Special thanks are due to
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Permissions

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Black Inc Publications and Anna Goldsworthy for permission to quote from *Welcome to Your New Life*.
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