As they contemplate the birth of a new baby, parents wonder exactly what it is they will need to buy—after all, there is so much new parenting paraphenalia available. Yet one of the obstacles that can get between us and a full experience of mothering or fathering is stuff. Stuff abounds in our culture, especially where babies and children are concerned.

As the importance of attachment and bonding emerges, manufacturers scurry to keep pace. Advertisers and entrepreneurs relish the market that exists among parents who are seeking the very best for their offspring. They create products that claim to ease the work of parenting and contribute to intimacy. These products—bottles, pacifiers, cribs, baby chairs and swings, stuffed animals and “blankies”—are often nothing more than meagre and unsatisfying replacements for the real thing.
The advertisements—“Shaped like real nipples,” “Just like mother’s heartbeat,” “Soft as your touch”—play on the idea that you and your baby might do just as well, or even better, with these substitutes. Just recently, I saw an advertisement for a blanket that traps the mother’s odour in its special fibres, so the baby can smell the mother’s scent and feel less isolated when left alone. What a pitiful substitute for the real feeling of being held in loving arms and breathing in the warm scent of another living being.

It is in the immediate economic interests of all “mother replacement” manufacturers, and even many doctors, for women not to fully embrace their power as mothers and optimal nurturers of their children. Yet increasingly women (and parents in general) are doing just that. Mothers are rediscovering breastfeeding by avoiding bottles. Parents are giving up cribs and joining the millions around the world who co-sleep in the family bed. They are learning that when babies are carried in-arms, instead of spending their day in plastic baby containers, crying is reduced and a strong bond of affection and trust develops. They are learning to listen to their children and their hearts, and to trust what they discover there.

The need for diapers hasn’t been questioned until very recently. Yet diapers can become, both figuratively and literally, a layer between mother and child. Disposable diaper giants battle to create the thinnest, driest, most comfortable product: the one most like wearing no diaper at all. Going diaper-free is a concept they don’t wish to contemplate.

Slowly and surely, however, more parents are beginning to consider it. They are discovering that they can keep their babies clean and dry without relying on diapers. They are taking back their power and strengthening that precious and intimate connection with the baby and themselves.

There is no adequate substitute for a mother’s closeness at the beginning of a human life. She is essential and fundamental to her infant’s optimal well being and is largely undervalued in our culture. Replacing her with something or someone else interferes not only with the baby’s ability to bond, but also with her ability to be present to her baby. Fathers and other family and community members also play a vital role, of course, providing a strong support system for mother and baby.
Respecting and nurturing a mother and baby’s entwined attachment takes a courageous and compassionate commitment in our culture. Our economic, political, and social conditions provide meagre support, even condemnation, for families who choose to respond to the primal needs of their most vulnerable members.

Yet the solutions lie, not in replacing the mother with unsatisfying substitutes, but in sharing information, support, and encouragement, and in rediscovering community. They lie in mindfully choosing and living those practices that strengthen the attachment and bring us closer to our children. They require valuing people over things and relationships over products or outcomes. They ask that we be present to our babies’ needs in the moment, and trust the convenience and sustainability of the bigger picture.

There are some things that might make parenting a baby easier and more pleasurable: a good sling, a few wellchosen and supportive books, soft blankets, and cosy cotton clothing. But there is only one thing your baby really needs: you. There is only one thing to do: be fully present. The greatest gift you can give your child is yourself—your body, your acceptance, your responsiveness, your time, and your energy. Nothing could be simpler or more challenging, more vulnerable or more empowering. Nothing could be more freeing, or health- and life-enhancing.