

Could A Mother And Child Retreat Help Me Refill My Cup?



As a pandemic solo mum, grieving a parent, Polly Dunbar was exhausted. Could a few days away with her son really help restore her?

By **Polly Dunbar** | Published 16 Hours Ago

I'm sitting in a circle of women I met just two days ago. At its centre, there's a candle flickering, a small pile of crystals and some dried flowers; elsewhere in the dimly-lit 17th century barn, sage burns in a bowl. We've taken it in turns to describe what the weekend has meant to us and several of us – me included – have cried.

As a devoted sceptic of anything with even the faintest whiff of woo, I'm surprised to be here. I'm even more surprised to find that I feel calmer and stronger than I have at any point over the past few years.

This is Soul Sanctum, a three-night retreat for mothers and children in the stunning Sussex countryside – the only one of its kind in Britain. Alix Wenmouth, a former music publicist, launched the retreats in 2021 to offer the nurture she had found lacking when she became a mother to her daughter Lyra back in 2018.

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The idea of matrescence – the profound physical, psychological and emotional changes women experience after the birth of a child – is becoming more widely known, thanks to Lucy Jones' brilliant book of the same name. Yet there remains very little in our culture to mark or even acknowledge this monumental rite of passage, let alone hold our hands through it.

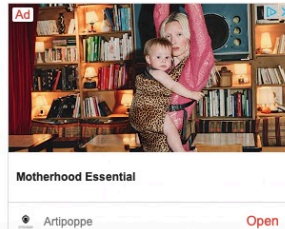


I gave birth to my son Nat in April 2020, at the height of the pandemic. For women like me, new motherhood brought with no sense of community whatsoever: no in-person NCT meet-ups or opportunities to distract ourselves from our sleep deprivation with a chat over a coffee. As a solo mum who conceived Nat on my own using donor sperm, I craved that connection, and although I was lucky to spend lockdown living with my parents, I struggled emotionally.

Then, in 2021, my beloved mum was diagnosed with a brain tumour. She died in November of that year, leaving me grappling with overwhelming grief while I took care of a then-18-month-old alone. Two years on, my resilience has deepened, but I feel battle weary.

When Alix got in touch to ask if I'd like to come to one of her retreats, I leapt at the chance. Perhaps the hardest part of mothering without a mother is the sense that you're always looking after someone else, and nobody's looking after you. And, as any mother juggling work with parenting and everything else life entails knows, looking after yourself comes a very distant bottom of the list.

If Soul Sanctum could give me a sense of being cared for, even for a weekend, it would be a relief akin to sinking into a warm bath after running an extreme marathon (or several). The only catch was that I'd be accompanied by a three-year-old for whom the concept of rest is utterly alien. Could a retreat with a



toddler really feel restorative?

Our base for the three nights was New House Farm, a collection of converted barns and stables clustered around a handsome Grade II listed farmhouse in Etchingham, East Sussex. One glimpse of the glorious landscape surrounding it, with rolling fields dotted with sheep and alpacas, and I could feel my shoulders lowering. Nat, nicknamed 'Nature Boy' at nursery for his love of foraging for sticks and stones, was in his element exploring every secret nook and cranny of the vast, beautiful garden.

Alix and her co-founder, yoga instructor Brydie Rowan, believe passionately in fostering a sense of community among their guests. The first night, 12 mums and all our children – ranging in age from tiny babies to six-year-olds – ate delicious vegetarian food prepared by chef Sharon Smith together in the bustling, homely kitchen. When I realised the lengths to which she'd gone to accommodate Nat's various food allergies, I was touched. Despite the ridiculous amount of interruptions involved in eating with kids – getting up for water for them, then piles of napkins when they spill it – conversations between the women flowed easily.

As I was to learn over the course of the weekend, everyone had a fascinating story that had brought them there. Several other women had lost parents, like me, and similarly felt they had been soldiering on, coping well, but hadn't had the space to fully process their loss. Some had escaped bad relationships, while others were highly successful career women badly in need of a bit of headspace. All were refreshingly warm and open and immediately, the retreat had the air of a slightly chaotic but very accepting commune.

Part of the genius of Soul Sanctum is the balance of time. On the Saturday and Sunday mornings, the children decamped to a separate barn, where they were looked after by a highly qualified and very kind childcare team. Meanwhile, the mums convened in the Long Barn for yoga with Brydie. Even the least yogic among us – yes, me – enjoyed moving my body gently and calmly, in sharp contrast to my usual

exercise, which consists of racing from nursery to home to the playground to the Science Museum, lugging enough paraphernalia to sink a ship. I also had a massage and facial, which were blissful.

In the afternoons, there were activities with the kids. As someone constantly racking my brains to think of new three-year-old-friendly things to do, I found simply turning up pleasantly relaxing. Nat loved the group yoga session, but his favourite by far was the 'potion-making', as he called it: a 'Wildling Medicine Making Workshop' by Laura Hart Swann, a 'wise Elder' who brings together an expertise in the healing powers of plants and a calling to support women through transitional stages in their lives.

Again, it sounds 'woo', but the lesson itself was actually intensely practical: Laura showed us how to make elderflower tonic - dubbed 'nature's Calpol' for its immunity boosting properties - by boiling the berries with herbs and honey. Watching Nat so engrossed made me feel proud. Maybe, I let myself think, I'm doing a good job.

After putting the children to bed in the evening, there was a listening service for them while we were lulled - some to audible snores - by a gong bath. On the last night, we came together for that circle, where several of us felt able to share feelings that we'd never shared before. At home, we all feel a sense of needing to keep the show on the road. Here, in this genuinely safe space, we could just be honest.

Before arriving, I'd wondered how much of a difference a single weekend could really make to my state of mind. By the end, though, I felt something had shifted. The beautiful location was part of it, as was the chance to relax while Nat was being looked after - something I've never experienced at the weekend since he was born. It

turns out that it is possible to feel calm and peaceful, even with a rambunctious toddler in tow. But it went deeper than that.

It made me realise I need to try harder to incorporate self-care into my life: regular activities which calm and soothe me, rather than just the occasional pedicure or rushed drink with a friend. Most of all, I found it inspiring being surrounded by other women, all facing different challenges but all trying their hardest to create lovely lives for their children. It reminded me to nurture my bonds with my female friends, and seek more - build the so-called 'village' it takes to raise a child, because feeling part of a community is a powerful antidote to the loneliness and isolation motherhood can bring.

'My hope is that mums can incorporate their retreat experience into their normal lives,' says Alix. 'When a mum's cup is full, she is much more able to fill everyone else's.' I'm even looking for a yoga class to join - and if that's not an endorsement, I don't know what is.

Choose between a 4-night mid-week retreat or a 3-night weekend retreat. Prices for mama and child start at £1500 and include holistic morning childcare, yoga, circle, a complimentary treatment, afternoon activities for all, an evening listening service for sleeping children so guests can enjoy evening sessions such as a sound bath, plus three plant-based meals a day (all stages of weaning are catered for.) Retreats run for children aged 0-7 and 5-11.

www.soulsanctumretreats.com

