

Writing for the Mother and Baby Press

By Caroline Deacon

At first glance, writing about parenting might not seem to offer much scope, but there are dozens of magazines on newsagents' shelves written specifically for parents, produced by small independent publishers as well as the big publishing houses. There is also a fast growing electronic market; on-line magazines and websites all require feature writers. For the freelancer, the mother and baby market can open up a world of opportunities.

While the readership may have one thing in common - they are parents or about to become parents, each magazine has a very specific reader profile and (they hope) a unique stance. It is just as important here as anywhere to analyse your market thoroughly. It is no good offering an article about starting school to a magazine such as *Expecting Our Baby*, for instance.

Then there is style. One magazine might use a jokey, matey style, assuming their readership have brains, others are almost patronising in the amount they assume new mothers need hand-holding. Get the subject matter right but the style wrong and your feature will still be rejected.

The pay is good to excellent in the market; expect a minimum of £120 per thousand, up to around £300 per thousand for the big circulation magazines. Even letters and fillers pages can pay well, in cash or big value prizes.

About You

Being a parent can help, but it is not essential. Most magazines are looking for some sort of professional qualification so that writers can speak with authority. Obviously a medical or childcare background is ideal, but if you don't have that, what do you have that might give you the edge? Did you do a degree - is it relevant? Do you know about complementary therapies, relaxation, even astrology could help you write an interesting article about babies' star signs. Have you travelled a lot and do you have good tips about different places that cater for babies?

Where to start

Don't despair if you haven't got an "ology" or particular expertise: many of the magazines offer true life stories every month, so if you know someone who is about to have a baby, or you have an interesting or unusual birth story yourself

(and who doesn't?) then start with that. Remember that once you've been published by one parenting magazine, all the others will look at you more closely - after all you are tried and tested.

Beating the competition - analysing each magazine

Each magazine is inundated with suggestions from would be writers, and most of the ideas will have been seen before. Start by trying to decide what age range the magazine covers. Some, like *Pregnancy and Birth* focus on pregnancy and the first few months after birth only, others might also cover toddler-hood, like *You and Your Baby*. A few ignore birth and early days but cover issues like starting school - *Junior* for instance.

Next consider whether the magazine focuses on lifestyle and investigative type features, like *Junior* or whether they prefer practical, how-to-do-it features - for instance *Babycare*. Is there room for humour? Do they like lots of real-life stories, or do they like expert attribution (quotes) throughout the text?

How to identify subjects to write about

What is unique about the mother and baby market is the turnover of its readership. Most tend to stay loyal for a maximum of eighteen months, and read the magazine only with their first baby, so bear this in mind when thinking of ideas. Sibling rivalry is interesting but not always relevant, for instance.

Look at how much scope your magazine has for covering a variety of issues. Magazines have to cover particular topics over and over again, but they like new slants on these. For example, one "non-expert" feature that nearly all the birth magazines will cover regularly is Naming Your Baby. As an exercise, consider how you could tailor this idea to the magazine's format while offering something a bit different. *Having a Baby* likes celebrities, so the focus here could be about choosing a name like Brooklyn while *Babycare* likes hand-holding, so for them you could talk through issues like resisting pressures to use traditional family names.

Be a good journalist

In parenting magazines, getting your facts right is crucial, especially if you are covering anything vaguely medical or dietary. Do you know the latest DoH guidelines on peanuts, for instance?

Steer clear of this type of feature unless you are bang up to date. However, if you do get a foothold in this area, consider joining the Guild of Health Writers - they organise lots of study days on relevant topics, though these are nearly always in London.

Guild of Health Writers: 12 Conway Walk, Hampton, Middlesex TW12 3YF. Tel/Fax: 020 8941 2977. E-mail: healthwriters@compuserve.com

The main magazines

From IPC - Practical Parenting and Expecting Our Baby. You probably won't be considered if you are an unpublished writer, but they have readers' slots such as "Meet my Family" which are suitable for people totally new to writing. Jane Kemp, deputy editor of Practical Parenting told me that although they get lots of suggestions, they do get around to reading them all. She is unlikely to consider people without any specialist experience, but if you think you fit the bill, write a letter with outlines and follow this up with a phone call after a fortnight.

From emap elan - Mother and Baby and Pregnancy and Birth. These are very stylised magazines, with features needing to fit into particular slots, written exactly to fit. If you get a commission here, expect a booklet telling you what to write. They are unlikely to consider writers who have not been previously published in the field, but their letters pages pay well, and they are always on the look out for true-life stories.

DC Thomson - Babycare and Pregnancy recently ceased publication, but DC Thomson are intending to launch a new baby magazine in spring 2001. Judey Struth, features editor, told me "Read the magazine first. Get an idea of our style and what features we carry. Then if you have an idea, it is better to send the whole article for consideration. We sometimes find that an idea is good but when it is written up, the author has the style all wrong".

National Magazine House - Prima Baby has now merged with Having a Baby. They are going monthly in April 2001 and so should have more scope for freelancers. They ask you to e-mail or write with your suggestions, and they do try to reply to everyone.

The independents:

Junior is one of the growing independent magazines and is now monthly. Catherine O'Dolan told me "We don't have a lot of scope for freelancers, as we have certain writers we will use. However, send in a synopsis of your idea -

if we think it is good we will get back to you. The best way in is to write a one-page funny and send it in on spec". Look at the back of the magazine for these slots.

You & Your Baby Alison Mackonochie, editor, says, "We have a very limited freelance budget, and there is little scope for outside work, especially as we are only bi-monthly".

Right Start editor, Lynette Lowthian says, "We are always looking for ideas. Write outlining your suggestions in two or three sentences, and send cuttings. Don't worry if you don't hear from us for some time, but we will read all submissions".

New Baby and Pregnancy - editor of both, Dan Bromage, says he prefers to see a synopsis or the whole feature, but can't return them or promise to get back to you, simply because he is so incredibly busy. He says he will consider ideas, but if you don't hear, assume you have been unsuccessful.

Moving on from mother & baby magazines

Once you're established, a whole new world can open up. The Sunday Times has a family life feature every week in the Style magazine, and most of the broadsheets have education sections which need quality features. Many of the best-paid women's magazines like *She* or *Good Housekeeping* will accept parenting features from established journalists.

Finally the biggest growth area is in e-zines or websites. Just do a search around the word "baby" and you will get millions of hits. Babycentre.co.uk which is part of Etoys is one of a number of new, expanding website magazines. These need a different type of feature - introductions and endings are not always so crucial, for instance, and being able to highlight links to other topics on the site can help. Websites can come and go quickly, so be careful that you get paid quickly if writing for one, but if you spread yourself around you shouldn't get your fingers burnt and, as you've seen, there are so many possibilities out there.

Caroline Deacon is a tutor for the Writers Bureau, having started her freelance career as one of their students. She writes mainly for mother and baby magazines, combining work with play - she looks after her unruly brood of three young children between writing sessions. She finds feature writing a superb career for people who need to work flexible hours to fit around school children, but says you must be disciplined about writing during the hours you set yourself.