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For Dads



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Becoming a parent is an amazing, life-changing experience. There is a lot written about this experience for pregnant moms, but not much for pregnant dads.

This page is for you, fathers-becoming.

Why am I in these prenatal classes?

Throughout my years of teaching I've noticed that some fathers-to-be arrive at their first prenatal class looking a little conflicted. During introductions, when asked what they want out of their prenatal classes, they candidly share that they don't really know (how can you know what you don't know?) The woman is giving birth, not them...aren't the classes going to be all about her? How do dads fit in? What role are they expected to play? Are they supposed to 'coach' their partner through a process they themselves do not understand and can't relate to?

Some of these dads joke a lot, especially in the first class. I think it's to ease their own discomfort at being in a class that may well end up being all about women's cervixes, breasts and other unmentionable body parts. The owners of these body parts generally take the first class far more seriously - during class break sometimes they confide to me that they have been putting pregnancy and parenting books in front of their partners for months, but "he just won't read them!"

Sounds hopeless, right? It's not. I've seen it frequently...usually by about halfway through the classes these same men are on-board and learning as much as they can about childbirth!

I've thought a lot about this 'lag'. I've concluded that the way that men prepare for childbirth is very different than the way women do.

How long is pregnancy for a man?

Most pregnancies are about nine months long. For a woman, those months are marked by continuous physical and emotional change and preparation. She is almost constantly aware of the fact that she is carrying and growing new life inside of her. The changes in her body (in the first trimester nausea, fatigue, breast tenderness), and later on the movement and weight of the baby in her belly are daily (and nightly!) reminders that eventually she will be giving birth.

Women focus on many issues during their pregnancies (for instance, getting a good diet, their baby's growth, their own weight, getting baby's room ready), but a deeper and more persistent preoccupation for many women is how they are going to get through labour.



For a man, the process of pregnancy is different. He's not carrying the baby in his body. He's carrying other, less tangible things, like his concern for and curiosity about what is happening to his partner, and thoughts about his growing responsibilities.

For him, the process of preparing for the actual birth takes up far less of the pregnancy...more like the last two months before the due-date. This, luckily, is around the time that most couples attend prenatal classes.



Paths to Parenthood

This difference in approaches can cause some conflict in relationships. Mom is frustrated because Dad doesn't seem interested in actually preparing for the birth. Dad is frustrated because his partner seems to be making unreasonable demands. He can understand that being able to give birth is important to her, but in the end, isn't the most important thing that the baby be healthy?

It can help to talk openly with each other about your concerns, keeping in mind that you are two different people, and thus your experiences are going to be different. Sharing respectfully can bring understanding. Understanding can help you become closer as a couple, and will empower you both to parent your child lovingly together.

Male pregnancy

It's an unavoidable reality that Dad is physically separated from the pregnancy. Other than placing his hand on his partner's belly to feel their baby kick and wiggle, and more intimately during lovemaking (and yes, you can definitely make love during pregnancy if it feels good for both of you!), he is mostly a 'witness' to the miracle that is happening - the growth of his and his partner's child.

So for many men, 'pregnancy' is pretty short, and is largely taken up with thinking about after the birth, not labour itself. Some men simply avoid thinking about the upcoming labour and birth, because lacking knowledge of and experience with it, the thought can be overwhelming.



Reality hits

When the couple starts their prenatal classes Dad is reminded that his partner will be giving birth soon, and he needs to figure out what his role will be in that process. If he is ready to, Dad may also become aware of the very personal journey he will be making beside his partner while she labours and births their baby: the emotional passage of becoming a father.

Many men are surprised to find out through their classes that they have a very significant role to play in the birth. Their partner may have specific requests and physical needs for during the labour, but the one very basic need she has is that he be there. She needs his familiar, loving presence to help create an emotionally 'safe' environment in which she can labour. And she needs him to witness (and thus participate in) this momentous transition in their lives as a couple.

Dad's role in labour



Fathers began attending the births of their children relatively recently. Here is a brief history of father's role in childbirth:

Birth in the 50's

In the 50's fathers were not expected to be present for their baby's birth. Dad's role was to drive his labouring partner to the hospital when she started labour. She was admitted, to eventually give birth, heavily medicated and attended by strangers. Dad would not see his partner again, or meet their baby, until well after the birth, which was often many anxious hours later.

Birth in the 60's

In the 60's, Dr. Robert Bradley introduced the radical concept of fathers in the delivery room. Women began to demand that their partners accompany them in their labours, and many fathers assumed the role of 'birth coach'. It became their responsibility to get mom through her labour, using newly popularized techniques like 'Lamaze' breathing or the Bradley method.

The fact that the 'birth coach' was also becoming a father was largely forgotten or ignored.

Birth in the 70's

By the mid-70's the pendulum had swung again, this time towards the middle. Most couples attended prenatal classes to help them prepare for the labour and birth, and Dad's role became more self-defined. He could simply sit beside Mom while she laboured. Or he could work actively to help her remain relaxed through contractions, and provide many other comfort techniques to help her deal with her labour pains.

Birth now



Thirty years later, there is increasing awareness that birth can be a profoundly emotional experience for dads as well as for moms. As in the 70's, fathers still define their own role at the birth. Not every man (or woman) can provide effective and expert labour support. But nearly every dad is capable of 'being' at the birth. Mom need not feel alone while she labours if Dad is there, even if all he does is hold her hand. So your presence is important, and you will have an effect on



your baby's birth no matter what you do (or don't do!)

Your role during labour should be considered in consultation with your partner. Find out what she is expecting you to provide. If you don't feel her expectations are realistic, discuss it with her. One option to ease pressure is to hire a [professional doula](#) (labour support person) to attend the birth with you. The doula can provide expert, continuous, one-on-one emotional and physical support during the labour, freeing dad up to just 'be' with mom, and experience the birth with her, free of rigid expectations as labour coach.

There is nothing glamorous about attending a labour - it is exhausting and challenging, regardless of how you define your role. But working together to bring your baby into this world can also be intensely satisfying. Making and sharing the memories of your baby's birth can bring you and your partner together as you assume your joint parenting roles of mother and father.

Insights

Going through some papers from a few years back, I found this class evaluation, written by a Dad who took a Weekend Workshop with me in Burnaby. The class took a total of 8 or 9 hours - not much time for a pregnant father to really prepare. But with eloquence and thoughtfulness this man describes the insights he came to in two short days:

I'm very happy that I attended these prenatal classes. Lots of men say "Oh, don't go...you don't need it, etc." But it was great. I especially liked the way you brought to the surface how birth is such an emotional and spiritual situation: MIND, BODY, SOUL. We didn't just receive the facts in these classes, but we explored human emotions, and you've given us ideas on how we ourselves (Mom and Dad) can look at birth in a spiritual way.

Maybe because the time is coming nearer I'm thinking about the labour and delivery more, and my role as a father. But I think it is more the fact that we have seen births on video now, and discussed in class just how important the Dad is to the experience of labour and birth. I'm really, really looking forward to the whole experience."

Defining who you are as a father

Many men about to become fathers want to build a relationship with their own child that is deeper and more fulfilling than what they experienced with their own fathers. With more mothers working outside the home than ever before, it has actually become necessary that fathers do things differently today. They cannot easily fall back on their own childhood experiences for guidance.

So where are the role models for these new fathers? How will they define their role? There are no easy answers, but if you would like to read a well-written article on defining father's role, see [Pioneer Thinking](#)'s website.



Complicating the question of father's role is the expectation that baby will actually want to spend time with Dad, when in fact the vast majority of new babies want nothing more than constant and reassuring physical contact with their mothers, and only their mothers. Most men have thought about their new role, and are ready to step into it, but baby doesn't seem particularly interested. There are some very good reasons for this.

Some simple math



Newborn babies do an astonishing thing in their first month of life: they increase their weight by as much as 25%. For a 200-lb man that would mean packing on 50 lbs, at a rate of 1-1/2 lbs per day!

To accomplish this amazing feat newborn babies have to nurse a lot - about every two hours, 'round the clock. Some babies have nursing sessions as short as 10 minutes, but most babies nurse for about 20 minutes each time they're at the breast.

Here's the math:

12 nursing sessions per 24-hour day, at 20 minutes each = (are you ready for this?)

4 hours a day at mother's breast.

Luckily this is exactly where most newborn babies want to be.

What do new mothers need?

Obviously fathers can't breastfeed - that is a uniquely feminine function. So what's left for a new father to do?

First of all, you can take care of your partner, so that she can take care of your baby. In the first few weeks after the birth Mom is recovering from the sheer physical exertion of giving birth. She is also adjusting to the huge changes her body is making now that it is no longer pregnant. Waking up at night to nurse baby can leave her exhausted and depleted. Becoming a mother is a major life adjustment, so there are also huge emotional changes occurring. Your baby's need to be with his mother can seem constant and never-ending, and can feel overwhelming for your partner.

So Mom needs your support. You can give it by being there as her loving companion (take at least a week off of work if you can). You can also make yourself responsible for some basic household tasks:

- Making meals
- Screening phone-calls
- Shopping for groceries
- Diapering baby
- Doing laundry

What do babies need?

There's lots you can do with baby, too. Mother's breastmilk is essential for your new baby to grow and thrive, but baby will also have other, very human needs: to be held and carried, talked and sung to, rocked and snuggled, as well as the more infantile needs of being bathed and diapered and helped into sleep.

Fathers can do all of these things with their baby. And most mothers will gladly hand over baby to Dad after an long day of nursing and changing diapers.

Sharing parenting

Even the most loving and dedicated mother can get 'touched out' caring for a new baby. Her body was 'occupied' for nine months to grow a baby. She is no longer pregnant, but now her body is providing milk to baby. Most mothers do not begrudge giving to their babies, but having some 'this-is-my-body' time can still be pivotal for keeping Mom's sanity.

So Dad taking baby for a while can be a win-win-win situation:

- mother gets some 'me' time,
- you get some 'baby' time, and
- baby gets some 'Dad' time.

You don't have to do anything amazing with your baby...if he/she is ready, you can just have a nice snooze together. Bathing together can also be very enjoyable for both of you. Wet, wriggly babies are very slippery, though, so arrange to have someone else (Mom?) take baby from you when it's time to get out of the tub.



When your baby is fussy

Not all babies will be happy leaving Mom for Dad. If your baby seems unhappy with you, try not to take it as a personal rejection. At his birth he had to leave the comfort and safety of his mother's uterus for the big, scary outside world. It's understandable that he wants to remain in her familiar presence as much as possible.



Many dads get most of their weekday 'baby-time' in the evenings. Unfortunately baby is often quite fussy and irritable then. Just like you, he gets tired and overstimulated from the activities of the day. And he expresses it the only way he knows how - by crying and fussing.

It can be quite stressful holding a crying baby, especially when you can't put him to the breast to soothe him. But by providing a calm, quiet environment and rocking and singing to your baby, you can sometimes soothe him. See Parenthood.com for more tips on how to soothe your fussy baby.

At times, despite your best fathering efforts, you may have to give your baby back to mom, because in the evenings he will probably want to nurse more often. It's a way of comforting himself. Again, don't take it personally...your baby knows what his needs are, and he can be very direct about expressing them. The challenge of being a new parent is figuring out what they are!

Some babies are 'colicky' - they have bouts of inconsolable crying that go on for hours, and they appear to be in pain at the time. This can be one of the biggest challenges of caring for a new baby. For tips and coping strategies see [Dr. Sears' website](http://Dr.Sears.com).

It requires patience to father a new baby, but the rewards are there...in time your child will go willingly and joyfully into Daddy's arms, and you will start to feel comfortable and confident in your role as father!

Priorities

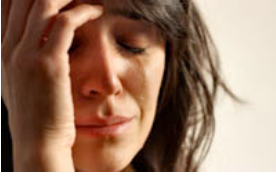
If you are a Dad that works outside the home, you may feel conflicted leaving Mom and baby at home while you're at work. Obviously it is now really important that they make an income for your family, but you also want to be home with Mom and baby. Everything feels like a priority.

Through this period, try to keep your sense of humour, be forgiving of yourselves, live one day at a time, and enjoy your baby and each other as much as you can through all the change, fatigue and confusion. At some point you will lift your head out of the parenting fog you've been in since the birth and realize that you and your new family are all doing fine!

When things feel 'wrong'

Postpartum Depression

Sometimes the time after birth never does start to feel 'right'. Sometimes post-partum depression has entered the picture. If your partner seems consistently disinterested in things that she used to take joy in, if she cries persistently for no reason that she can describe, or if she is 'flat' (i.e. not expressing any emotion at all), then she may be suffering from post-partum depression. See [symptoms of postpartum depression](#) for a full list of possible symptoms.



Sometimes there are pre-disposing factors that lead to postpartum depression, such as a past history of depression. But there are many other factors that can affect a woman's ability to adjust to being a mother, such as isolation, or a difficult birth. Giving birth is a major life transition, and one out of every six new mothers will experience postpartum depression going through it. It can be an extremely stressful time for a young family.

If you think your partner may be depressed, it is important that you discuss it with her and get her some help, to prevent the depression from deepening. If you are lucky enough to have a family physician, tell your partner you are making an appointment for her, make it, and then take her to it. Describe what you see happening (or not happening) so her physician can get the whole picture. Hopefully your partner will be able to open up at the physician's office and share her symptoms. Her physician may prescribe anti-depressants to get her through this time and should also refer her to a counsellor, to deal with the deeper issues that may be contributing to the depression.

It can be very difficult being the partner of a depressed person. But there are resources available. [Pacific Post Partum Support Society](#) is a non-profit agency providing telephone and peer support and information throughout the Lower Mainland. They offer advice for fathers living with postpartum depression on their [page for fathers](#).

Your relationship with your partner

Having a baby can put a huge strain on a relationship. If your relationship was struggling before you became pregnant, having a baby will not 'fix' things. It may delay the resolution of issues, but the issues will still be there. If you were considering getting counselling before the baby came into the picture, don't put it off because you are busy with a baby. For the sake of your relationship see one as soon as you can.

Links for Fathers

See our ['Links' page](#) for some great web resources for fathers.

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