

Fatherhood



The First **26** Weeks

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Introduction

Whether you're about to be a father for the first time, or are already a dad, I can tell you that with the coming of a new baby you're in for a huge, exhilarating, emotional rollercoaster of a ride!

Most fathers want to be involved in their baby's care but we are often not sure about what to do and how to do it.

So, this booklet is designed to help you care for your baby (or babies!) and your partner, and to feel comfortable about how you're doing it.



What it means to be a father is unique for every dad. The traditional view of families needing two parents to raise and nurture children is changing. And, there is no single right way when it comes to raising your children and helping them grow. Experiences and circumstances influence how we understand fatherhood and what it means to each of us.

Children benefit from receiving varying attention from loving parents and learn how to be adaptable because of this. Individual differences make us unique and part of the pleasure of parenting will be finding out what works for you and your own baby.

Whatever your relationship or family structure, your input as a dad will influence your children and help form their adult lives.

Expecting a Baby

Whether planned or unplanned, finding out you're about to be a dad can raise a combination of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Excitement, fear, worry, concern...

It's good to know that nature gives you a helping hand through this new experience. Your testosterone level will decrease immediately after your baby's birth (nothing to worry about - really!) and this in turn naturally brings on nurturing behaviour.

How am I supposed to feel?

For first time dads, great excitement might be tempered with uncertainty. On one hand, you may feel you're expected to be an expert about something which is new and foreign. And on the other, you may be wondering 'just how hard can it be'?

Reflecting back on your own childhood and experiences of being fathered is normal when we find out we're about to be a father ourselves.

Unreal?!

There can be a sense of unreality about the pregnancy for expectant dads. After all, we're not experiencing the daily body changes like our partners do. So it may take the first ultrasound, or when you first feel and see the baby moving, to make it become truly 'real' for you.

Coming to terms with the news of the pregnancy can be confronting. Many dads worry about the change of income and if one partner will need to give up work. There can be concerns about changes in your relationship with your partner. How much impact will having a baby affect your lifestyle and the things you like to do - as a couple and as individuals? Some women become very focused on the pregnancy to the point where it becomes the sole topic of household conversation. And we men can sometimes feel quite left out.

Pregnancy is a time of change and growth and it's impossible to predict how it will impact on individual couples.

But there are some things that you can do along the way to ease the adjustments and circumstances.

What you can do

Dads who play a greater role in supporting their partner during pregnancy tend to have stronger relationships with their baby once they are born.

Practical support

Here are some practical ways of supporting your partner that can help you feel you're really contributing and playing a role in the pregnancy:

- Ask her how you can help - there are a lot of things to be done in preparation for a new baby
- Support her efforts to eat well and get adequate rest
- Offer your help with preparing the nursery and organising the car seat
- Plan for a drop in income and do up a budget

- Go to antenatal appointments together and attend birth classes. Read up on the subject.
- Investigate your paternity leave entitlement at work, and how it could be maximised - perhaps you could work from home or by phone for a while? Try not to miss the early days with your baby - they can never be repeated.
- Discuss childcare arrangements if you are both planning on returning to work.

Emotional support

Many women see their partner as their main source of emotional support during pregnancy - which is great because you'll feel much more involved, with a valuable and added sense of responsibility.

Pregnancy can be an odd time when couples swing between annoyances with each other to being intensely romantic.

Over the three trimesters, most couples try to find a balance between the excitement and just getting on with their lives.

What about the baby?

Did you know that you can start developing your relationship with your baby before it is even born?

It's as simple as reading, playing music or singing to your baby while they are still in the womb. It may seem a bit odd at first, but in doing this your baby will be learning the tone and pitch of your voice.

So, from the moment your baby arrives, you're already a familiar and loving presence to him or her.

Birth

It can seem a long time coming, but no amount of planning can predict what any labour and delivery will be. Birth plans are not a guarantee nor an iron clad contract. Despite this, some dads can feel their job is to ensure the birth plan is carried through, and if not, they've failed in their task of overseeing the whole event. Not so! Try not to place this enormous and unfair burden on yourself - it doesn't allow for flexibility or the unpredictability of labour and birth.

Before the day, discuss with your partner if you should keep relatives up to date during the birthing process, or not.

And plan how any older children are to be cared for on the big day.

Attending the birth

It's pretty common to feel uncomfortable and helpless watching your partner in labour. You know it's important to be there and be supportive, but how to go about this is often unclear. The focus will be pretty much all on your partner and baby, which can make some fathers-to-be feel quite left out.

The way we men deal with this can seem a bit strange – even to us! Rather than risk doing something wrong, some of us do little and try to deflect attention away from ourselves. For instance, turning our concentration to the monitors and equipment - things which are somehow more understandable or familiar. If this happens to you, just know you are not unique. Seeing someone you love in pain can be deeply distressing and to feel powerless and overwhelmed is normal.

If complications arise, you may feel a sense of overwhelming responsibility and worry, or alternatively, absolute calm. It is alright to hand over control to experts when necessary. It's certainly not a sign of weakness or lack of caring.



Labouring with labour

During labour, some of us are so focused on our partners that we overlook the baby. Under stress, we tend to focus our energies on what's important at the time and cope with what we have to.

Many dads feel utterly helpless because they can't stop their partner's pain. This can lead to feelings of anger during the birth and even afterwards. However you respond, and whatever level of support you provide, your presence in the labour ward or operating theatre will help to cement even closer emotional ties between you, your partner and your baby. The value of this really can't be overestimated.

How you can help

It can be enough just to know you are there. The key is to be sensitive to what she needs and to stay as calm as you can.

- Some women like to be left alone and not touched; others like to be read to, be reminded of breathing exercises or have minimal input from their partners
- Help her when she's in the shower or bath and getting into comfortable positions for labour and birth
- Massage your partner's back or shoulders
- Providing heat packs might be helpful and make sure she is warm and comfortable
- Give in to what needs to be done. Labour wards are not places of control and there are no guarantees.
- Of course, be understanding if your partner doesn't want to hear about how you're feeling right now.



After the Birth

You'll probably be feeling immensely proud of your partner - childbirth takes courage and great physical and emotional strength. It doesn't hurt to tell her so.

Don't hold back your emotions if you feel overwhelmed. She will only value your reactions more if she sees that you really understand how hard she has worked to deliver your new baby.

Baby care - the early weeks

One of the most important factors in caring for your baby is about nurturing your relationship with your partner. Strong, united couples tend to work towards the same goals and free up their energy for what's truly important.

Your baby will benefit from your loving and gentle care more than you might think. Babies whose dads are involved in their bathing, feeding, changing and other physical care experience stronger overall development.

Fathers and mothers interact differently with their babies. Even at a young age babies are aware of the differences.

Although both parents bond with their babies, dads have a unique way of connecting with our little ones.

This time is as much about what you do in the way of physical care as what your baby will do for you, like bringing out your sensitive, nurturing side.

How you can help

Giving birth is a particularly draining experience for your partner, so your physical and emotional support during her recovery is important.

Helping to prepare meals, doing what needs to be done in the house and shopping when necessary are all going to reduce her stress levels and workload, which has now become pretty much around the clock.

It's worth remembering that when we take the initiative to contribute to household tasks, there is often a reduction in the general level of domestic tension between us and our partners.

If your partner is breastfeeding, your support and encouragement is vital. A father's positive approach to breastfeeding is one of the contributing factors for women to breastfeed and to stick with it.

Of course the physical aspects of breastfeeding are naturally limited to the mother, but you can help by;

- Getting your baby ready for a feed
- Changing their nappy, burping them and assisting your partner to check the baby is feeding well
- Providing your partner with healthy meals and drinks and the opportunity for rest. This will all help maintain her milk supply.

Sleep... I need sleep!

Tiredness and overwhelming exhaustion is a reality for most new parents. It's hard to imagine the depths of tiredness you are both going to feel.

It will help to cooperate and make plans with your partner about taking turns caring for the baby. Daytime rests, eating well, minimising stress and aiming for a simple life all help when you are exhausted.

Dealing with the family & friends

You'll probably get lots of offers of help and advice from well-meaning relatives and friends - and be inundated with visitors. Some dads may feel they need to be a filter between their partners and various sources of support.

It can be hard to feel you're not offending people by wanting to be left alone with your baby. But be honest about needing some time to settle in.

Common Baby Concerns in the Early Days

Umbilical cord

After birth, the umbilical cord is no longer necessary for your baby's survival. Though it doesn't look very attractive, the cord has no nerve supply and will not cause your baby pain. The stump tends to remain for around ten days after birth before it separates. Sometimes there is a spot of blood on the nappy from the cord stump as it dries out. As long as the stump is clean and dry, there is no need to be concerned. If needed, clean the navel with a cotton bud and water.

Feeding

As babies get used to feeding, digesting and eliminating milk, many seem to mix up this order! So vomiting and regurgitating small amounts of milk is common in the early days. It can be concerning to watch. Check with your early childhood nurse or GP if you are concerned.

Hormones

Newborn babies can have enlarged breasts and nipples in the first few weeks after birth. Newborn girls may have a mucous or blood stained vaginal discharge. While it may surprise you and your partner, these things tend to be due to the withdrawal of pregnancy hormones and are considered quite normal.

Nappies

A fact of life for you for the next two years is nappies... and lots of them! Newborns can need changing at least eight times a day! Learning to do this properly is important, and while your first efforts may be a bit clumsy and ineffectual, with practice this very important new skill will improve.

Whether you use cloth or disposables is up to the two of you. You'll also need wipes to clean the skin and, occasionally, a barrier cream for redness.

Dressing

Dressing your baby may look easy but requires a little practice to get used to. Rather than dragging singlets and tops over their head, try widening the opening before you bring clothes gently down over their face. Feed your own hand through sleeves and leggings first, and hold your baby's hand or foot as you glide the clothing on. Take your time and talk to your baby as you dress them.

Many mothers are particular about clothing combinations they want the baby dressed in. We dads may not be as focused on these aspects and are genuinely unsure why it matters! Parental differences are a fact of life and not a sign of caring too little or too much.

Bathing

Bathing is a special time and lots of dads find this is a great way of connecting with their baby. Your touch, voice, hold and gestures will all help your baby learn that dad, just as much as ever-present mum, is a source of deep love and affection.

Warm water will help your baby to relax and your secure, firm hold will let them know you are near and they are safe. Don't rush; bathing isn't just about cleaning your baby. Your touch and talking will help support their development and add to their feeling of being loved.

Rashes

Facial rashes are common in babies in the early weeks. Hormonal withdrawal from pregnancy, combined with a general adjustment to being in an unsterile world, make this one of the many changes your baby will go through. After bouts of crying or after bathing, rashes can appear more noticeable and red.



Crying

Crying is the major way your baby will communicate. Babies can cry loudly and incessantly and it can be difficult to work out what's wrong.

Think of the basics first like hunger, tiredness, cold/hot, stomach aches, or if they are just letting off steam. Babies often calm when they are held close and can hear the rhythm of your heart. Massage, soothing, wrapping and going for a walk in the pram or sling can work to calm a crying baby.

Adjustments

Babies absorb enormous amounts of time and energy and most new parents are amazed by how much work they generate. For many couples, the “honeymoon” period after having a newborn wears off after a month or so. By then, the initial excitement and joy gives way to exhaustion, leaving little energy to adjust to new roles.

Even though a lot of dads take leave from their work, many don't have the luxury of being off work until the baby is settled and the household is calm.



What You Can Do

It's important that you decide between you and your partner what a fair division of household tasks will be. Make genuine offers of help and carry them through.

Avoid seeing your input into the children's care as being a favour to your partner or something out of the ordinary. Women can become very resentful if they feel wholly responsible for child care 24 hours a day, while their partners see home time as a chance to rest up after work.

- Offer to make your partner a drink, cook meals and clean up
- Organise take away dinner, or breakfast in bed
- See what washing needs to be done and take the initiative to do it, hang it out and bring it in.

Couple Time

Make time to do things as a couple that don't always center on your baby. Go for a meal, a walk or to the movies. None of these things need to be expensive but a break from the monotony of caring for young children can be very restorative to a relationship.

It can take months before women feel they want to have sex again. Recovery time from childbirth varies, while pain and discomfort could make it impossible for her to enjoy sexual intimacy for a while. When the time is right, should you need to discuss contraceptive choices with your partner. Speak with your GP about what's suitable for both of you.

Women can feel completely "touched out" in the early months, especially if they are breastfeeding. Give more cuddles and hugs without expecting sex.

Often new mums are a bit sensitive about their post-pregnancy body. A genuine compliment her way will be much appreciated.

Take time to nurture your relationship with your partner and be thoughtful of her. Avoid seeing her only in terms of her role as a mother but as a person with needs and wants. Everyone likes to feel they're appreciated for their efforts and hard work, so take the opportunity to tell her she's doing a good job.

Be supportive of her friendships with other women and don't feel as if you're being excluded; women seek and crave emotional support from other women when they become mothers. This doesn't mean she no longer needs you.

Tell her if you are feeling left out. If she knows how you are feeling she is likely to try and make efforts to help.

Riding an Emotional Rollercoaster?

You

As a new dad, some of us can feel there is such a concentrated focus now on our partner and baby that we're being overlooked, or suddenly have become 'unimportant'. Worse still, there can be a niggling sense that perhaps we're in the 'bad books' somehow.

If this happens to you, try not to take it personally. Be frank with your partner and ask if you've done anything wrong. It's a good time to be open and straightforward.

New mums tend to be almost totally absorbed with their babies. This is partly due to the evolutionary need to ensure our offspring's survival. Fighting primal instincts is always going to be challenging, so consider getting things off your chest with some mates or other fathers, or do a web search for new father blogs... we all tend to go through this! And it does settle down eventually!

Her

You may find your partner is more teary, emotional and moody in the first few months after having the baby. Becoming a mother is a huge shift and will affect every facet of her life (and much of yours, of course, but thankfully you haven't got the massive hormone changes that she is going through).

When she's upset, avoid feeling you need to find solutions and 'fix it'; instead, listen to her and look for ways to provide really practical help. It may be that just your ear and a hug could be enough.

As time proceeds, most men find their partner's mood stabilises and becomes more predictable.



Postnatal Depression

Postnatal depression is a more complex condition, which occurs in around 16% of women in Australia. Though symptoms vary, they can include sleeplessness, lack of appetite, withdrawal from social contact or overwhelming anxiety.

Your partner may be moody, angry, withdrawn or uninterested in looking after herself or the baby. Try not to interpret your partner's moodiness as a personal attack. You have a unique insight into her usual moods and temperament, and fathers are often the first to notice a change in their partners. Trust yourself and your ability to see differences in her which others may not be able to.

It can be frightening to see someone you love experiencing depression. Talk with her about your concerns and reassure her that you will be there to support her and the baby. Maintain her confidentiality and trust by not talking with others about how she is, unless she wants you to.

Be involved

It's important that you support your partner in seeing a healthcare professional if she needs to. Correct diagnosis and treatment is crucial. Making appointments, transporting her on time, caring for the baby to allow her to have uninterrupted time to talk and generally being present and available, all help. Postnatal depression is a treatable illness with a fast recovery rate if treated early. It can, however, take time to treat effectively and recover fully. Your united support for each other can only help.

What you can do

If your partner is depressed or just feeling low, your practical support in caring for the baby and around the house will be valuable.

- With your partner's OK, accept all reasonable offers of support from family and friends with childcare, cleaning and meal preparation so you can share the load. Don't feel as if you need to do everything yourself.
- Find out about support groups, online discussion groups and forums and source some reading material on depression you both could find helpful
- Avoid making major decisions while your partner is depressed. Try not to be discouraged if she is withdrawn or quiet.

Postnatal depression and you

Some of us feel overwhelmed by the added sense of responsibility of caring for a depressed partner and a new baby as well. The transition to fatherhood can be challenging. There is a higher risk of depression in fathers after a new baby is born, particularly when there is a previous history. Research shows that around one in ten new fathers experience post natal depression so it's not just limited to mothers.

Like many men, you may not like or want to discuss your feelings with others. Men often put off getting support because they feel they need to be strong.

Be assured feeling 'blue' is quite a common situation – after all you'll be extremely tired, juggling a changed relationship and partner, there's added home duties and added responsibilities all round. You are not alone, we men need an ear sometimes and this is one of those times.

So here are some suggestions on who you can contact for support.

- Your General Practitioner
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Mensline 1300 789 978
- Beyondblue 1300 224 636
www.beyondblue.org.au
- Panda 1300 726 306
- www.raisingchildren.net.au

It's also worth checking out blogs from other fathers, to hear how they're dealing with things.

Long term investing

Many of the rewards from parenting are not seen in the short term. Effective fathering is based on many hours of being available to children and being truly involved in their lives.

Making time for them, being involved right from the start, showing your affection and genuinely enjoying them are not just great for your children, you'll find it's immensely satisfying for yourself.

This booklet won't have answered all of your questions but I hope it goes some way to helping you with your new, very important role! As dads, we play a vital part in helping our babies learn about the world and their place in it.

Be proud of your unique ability to father your baby. Believe in yourself and what you can do.

You've got yourself a wonderful new life - literally!

The brochure was not written by a father, but written from a father's perspective. Our special thanks to Jane Barry, Registered Nurse, Midwife and Child Health nurse for her contribution. (March 2015)

Important Statement:

Breastfeeding is the normal method of infant feeding, and is best for babies. It has benefits for the infant, such as reducing infection risk, and for the mother. It is important to have a healthy balanced diet in preparation for, and during breastfeeding. Infant formula is designed to replace breast milk when an infant is not breastfed.

Breastfeeding can be negatively affected by introducing partial bottle-feeding, and reversing a decision not to breastfeed is difficult. Infant formula must be prepared and used as directed. Unnecessary or improper use of infant formula, such as not properly boiling water or sterilising feeding equipment, may make your baby ill. Social and financial implications, including preparation time and the cost of formula, should be considered when selecting a method of infant feeding.



Aspen Nutritionals Australia Pty Ltd. ABN 31 160 607 509
34-36 Chandos St, St Leonards, NSW 2065

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