

Enhancing Understanding of the Transition to Fatherhood

by Pamela L. Jordan

It has been a privilege over the years to be able to listen to the experiences of hundreds of men as they made the transition to fatherhood. There is an accompanying responsibility to give them voice. Statistical analyses or formal qualitative analyses are not always appropriate to communicate the message. The purpose of this paper is to share serendipitous findings on the transition to fatherhood to help elucidate the experiences of and larger context for this major life transition. Discussion includes conception, pregnancy, labor and birth, early parenting, and the bigger picture of concurrent events. An important caveat: the source studies have been of men who were either married or in committed couple relationships, were the biological fathers, and intended to be the social fathers of their babies.

CONCEPTION

It would be highly unusual for a woman to have a child without being aware of it. Yet men depend on women to inform them that a conception has occurred. The seem-



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ABSTRACT

The journey into fatherhood is important to men and has a profound effect. Men have their own unique experiences of conception, pregnancy, labor and birth, and early parenting, all in the context of a larger life experience. Understanding their experiences is essential to anyone who works with childbearing families in order to be more sensitive, respectful, and effective caregivers.

ingly innocent demographic question, "To the best of your knowledge, have you ever fathered a child before?" elicited interesting verbal and nonverbal responses. Men often stated that they now realized that any past acts of intercourse could have resulted in a child, and the only way they would know would be if the woman chose to share that information. The possibility of having children somewhere without their knowledge was unsettling (Jordan 1995). Likewise, now that they were having a child that they intended to keep and parent, men often emotionally reflected on past pregnancies that had been terminated. As a man comes to grips with the announcement of a pregnancy, now that he is a father, he may also be grieving the loss of prior children, including those whose existence may never be known to him.

Many men begin their journey into parenthood feeling that the rug has been pulled out from under them. They may have talked with their partners about having children in the future, but, suddenly, the future is now. Often a man learns he is a father when his partner shares the hieroglyphics on a home pregnancy test. These men felt they had been left out of the process of a major life decision. Conception typically elicited mixed emotions.

PREGNANCY

Because men do not have the privilege of being pregnant, giving birth, and lactating, they are dependent on their partners to invite them into and share their experiences, thereby reinforcing the reality of the pregnancy and child (Jordan 1990). Men do not have the bodily changes or sensations that serve as constant reminders to women that something is happening within them.

Expectant fathers cannot be differentiated from other men. Though they may gain weight, there is no characteristic contour that indicates a growing fetus. Men stated

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they should be "marked" in some way to indicate they were expectant fathers. Sharing the news that they were expecting a baby usually prompted queries about their partner. Even their own parents asked about the mother. Several men talked about "training" key friends to talk to them about the pregnancy instead of instantly asking how their pregnant partner was doing. Validation was so minimal that over time these men wondered whether this monumental experience was even supposed to be important to them.

Fathers may not be bearing the child, but they are becoming parents. Every expectant father interviewed stated that this investigator was the first person to ask about their experience and stay around to listen to their response. Each man openly and capably discussed his experience and his feelings, clearly communicating that this was a very important event in his life. Regardless of whether or not they felt they had been an informed partner in the conception, these men settled into the idea of and anticipated parenthood.

The expectant fathers marveled at their mates' changing bodies. It seemed otherworldly that a person was growing inside her belly. They found her rounded and growing contours beautiful and sexually exciting. They became even more fascinated when they could feel the baby moving and began to play games by pushing on bumps that pushed back. The fathers couldn't really participate in the pregnancy, but eagerly awaited meeting their baby at birth.

LABOR AND BIRTH

Fathers may have their own opinions and expectations of labor and birth. More than one father stated that he believed labor and birth were special female events that should not be invaded by men. They believed that to be present would be an invasion of sanctity and privacy. These weren't expressions of avoidant behavior, but of respect. These men were eager to meet the baby once born, but intended to place his partner in the supportive company of women until that point.

Another father resented that his wife had planned how she wanted her labor and birth to be without consulting him. *"You're not the only one becoming a parent here! I have my own thoughts about how I want our child to come into the world."* His wife was shocked to learn her husband had been looking forward to becoming a father his entire life and had his own expectations of the environment, atmosphere, and processes of labor and birth. He wanted his baby to be born naturally, without pharmacologic or medical intervention. He wanted labor and birth to be an intimate process for them as a couple.

Other fathers declared that it was absurd to experience the pain of labor and birth when drugs were readily available. They could not comprehend why a woman would want to give birth "naturally" or the sense of accomplishment or meaning this might have for her. Often such beliefs were not expressed until their partner



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was in active labor, resulting in conflict at a most inopportune time.

Many fathers expressed performance anxiety, believing that their responsibility was to help their mates "get through" labor and birth by ensuring they applied all they had learned in childbirth preparation classes. Some had diligently transferred class notes to their PDAs to guarantee they had key information at their fingertips.

One father shared how embarrassed he was when his wife merely wanted him to sit beside her and hold her hand while she labored. He remained anxious until the nurse had heard his wife give her directive enough times that he felt the nurse would not think he was shirking his duties. When the shift changed, he again tried to use all the techniques he had learned to his wife's renewed frustration and restated directives. Once he was convinced the new nurse understood what his wife wanted from him, he was able to relax and return to holding her hand.

A number of fathers recommended that a man have his own support person during labor and birth. This person didn't need to be in the room with the couple, but should check in on the father every 30 minutes or so to ask if he needed food, drink, a bathroom break, encouragement, support, to vent, a hug, or merely a pat on the back. After the birth, this person would serve as an interested listener so the father could recount and make meaning of the labor and birth experience.

Labor and birth are challenging for fathers in that they cannot relieve their partners' burden. Many stated they felt frustrated and helpless. In 1988 May recommended that it was time to fire the coach — time to stop training men to be labor coaches and start helping them prepare to be fathers. Though almost 20 years have

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passed, the labor coach has yet to be retired as the primary role for men during pregnancy and birth. As one father emphatically stated, "I am not a coach. I am not the guy on the sidelines with a clipboard telling the players what to do. I am a player on the field with my wife. This is our baby." Chapman (1991) described a variety of roles a father might assume during labor and birth. Both fathers and mothers are likely to have expectations of themselves and each other during labor and birth, expectations that they would benefit from sharing before and during their baby's entry into the world.

Fathers across the board were deeply moved by watching their baby emerge from their partner's body and meeting the miraculous little person for the first time. They were caught off guard by their emotional responses and the immediate and overwhelming love they felt. Though their prior attention had been solely focused on their mate, not really being able to comprehend the reality of the baby, after birth their attention was totally diverted to the baby. They sought to "claim" their baby by identifying personal or familial features (Jordan 1990). They also marveled that this was a product of the joining of themselves and their mates, some-one of them and yet unique and separate.

EARLY PARENTING

Many of the fathers believed that women are innately knowledgeable and skilled parents. One father stated, "Women have a monthly reminder of their parenting potential." They defer to the mother and expect her to be their mentor.

Mothers tend to have the opportunity to learn basic baby care in private: how to diaper the baby and get their jello arms through the sleeves. When given an opportunity fathers tend to fumble their way through the same tasks under the watchful eyes of women — typically mom and grandma. A running critique didn't do much to build confidence or competence. If grandma had come to "help out" after the baby was born, which was often the case, she and the mother usually kept the baby to themselves, giving the father few opportunities for caregiving. Fathers stated they really appreciated time alone with the baby to figure out what worked for them. Although initially frightened by the responsibility, especially having had their skills questioned, they proved to themselves that they were capable caregivers. They enjoyed time to marvel at the miracle that was their baby.

Each man reflected on his own father. They wondered whether their own father had been as emotionally moved by their birth. They wondered whether their own father had felt such overwhelming love. They gained a better understanding of why their fathers were absent

due to work and the responsibility for supporting the family financially. The new generation of fathers wondered how they might be more actively involved and present in the lives of their children. They wanted to father differently, but without clear ideas on how to do so.

The Bigger Picture

The transition to parenthood is often a major life event nested among other life challenges and transitions. As they became fathers many men reassessed what they were doing in their lives: "Is this the right job for me? Am I making enough money? Is it appropriate to continue my education now that we have a baby?" Some lost their jobs at this inopportune time, upending planned division of work and family responsibilities. Others purposefully cut back their work hours or resigned so they could have time to really get to know their new family member. Still others were dealing with functional or health problems in their parents. Some became caregivers to a dependent child and increasingly dependent parents at the same time. Others were dealing with the death of a parent.

CONCLUSION

Both men and women have their own unique experiences of becoming parents. Women have the advantage of becoming pregnant, growing the child within them, and giving birth, while their mates observe and experience vicariously. The journey into fatherhood is important to men and has a profound effect. Understanding their experiences is essential for anyone who works with childbearing families to be more sensitive and respectful caregivers.

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