

Fathers getting involved and staying involved

Becoming a dad can feel like one of the best things to happen in your whole life. But it can also feel quite daunting and a big responsibility.

A father's role is a complicated one – your responsibilities increase, your relationship with your partner changes from being an exclusive couple to a new three-way relationship, in which you may feel temporarily excluded. As well as being a proud new father, feelings of resentment and jealousy can sometimes arise in the most unexpected ways. When you meet your new baby, you may also feel a bit vulnerable yourself and this can be difficult to understand and manage.

This leaflet will explain why you are such an important person in your child's life.

Remember your baby needs you!

During the pregnancy

During the pregnancy, your partner may be feeling tired and uncomfortable as well as excited and anxious about the forthcoming new arrival. You may feel a bit left out of all the attention at this time, but your role as a supportive partner is essential. If you can attend antenatal scans and classes you can plan and be as prepared as possible together.

Even though you might not be getting much attention, your feelings as a father-to-be are very important. Try to talk about how you feel about the pregnancy and becoming a parent if you can and with your partner, friends or family.

The birth

Not all births are straightforward and some women feel quite traumatised by their experience. So do some men. Seeing your partner give birth can be pretty scary in lots of ways, whether there is medical intervention or not. It is quite normal to find yourself reliving the experience afterwards. If this happens you might find it helpful to talk it over with someone, just tell them the story from start to finish, but make sure you let someone know that that's what you need to do – they are not likely to ask about the birth in detail unless you tell them.

The first few weeks

In the first few weeks, and even months, after your baby's birth, your partner's mind is likely to be especially preoccupied with the needs of your baby, sometimes to the exclusion of all other people, housework and even herself. The more involved you can be in even the most basic of ways will be greatly appreciated, for example, helping with the housework, shopping,

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changing nappies, feeding your baby, boosting your partner's self-esteem and ensuring that she has some time to herself now and again. The more involved you are the more benefit there will be not only to your relationship as a couple, but in helping you and your baby to build your own close and secure relationship.

Some women experience the 'baby blues' in the first week or so after the birth when they feel very tearful and anxious. It is important for fathers to be aware of this and to make sure they are especially supportive and positive towards their partner. The baby blues doesn't usually last more than a few days. If it goes on for longer, it is important for the mother's midwife or health visitor to know.

Introducing solid food to your baby

If your partner has been breastfeeding your baby, introducing solid food to the baby can sometimes be a time of mixed emotions. It may feel like a relief to her in that she has more time to herself, or a time of loss and grief for the special closeness that the two of them shared together in this way. Some mums feel guilty about the decision to introduce solids, especially if their baby is reluctant to do so. If your baby shows that he or she wants to begin the process of taking solid foods first, as some babies do, your partner may perceive this as a rejection, feeling that she is no longer as needed. As well as becoming more involved with feeding, you may need to help your partner and your baby to manage some of the more difficult feelings they might be experiencing about this change. The loss of this particular kind of closeness however, can then allow for you and other children if you have them to feel more involved in caring for the baby.

Building a relationship

Try to build a relationship from the start with your baby, don't isolate yourself even if you feel a bit left out at first. Being an equal partner in your child's upbringing will be rewarding and beneficial to you and your family as a whole.

Mums have a head start with getting to know the baby during pregnancy. It can sometimes take time for dads to catch up to feeling as close to their baby.

You and your partner

You can help your partner, and therefore your baby, by listening to her worries and feelings and helping her think them through. There is nothing like children (and lack of sleep!) to make everything feel overwhelming and when this happens you become your partner's most valuable resource – being a listening ear will be invaluable to her at these times.

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Having said that, having a baby is bound to change your relationship with your partner in some way, and it will probably take time to adjust to each other in your new roles as Mum and Dad. Communication is important.

Keep talking to each other!

Also give it time. There may be times when you can only think of each other as your child's other parent. But after a while it will become easier to see each other again as partners or husband and wife. It is important for your children that you look after your own relationship, so see if you can find ways to spend time together. Think about who you would trust to babysit or be creative about having a 'night out' at home!

Play – valuing the big kid in you!

Many dads are naturally good at playing with their children, so muck in and have fun. You will get to know your child and it will strengthen the bond between you. In fact research has shown that fathers who play with their children as often as they can help their children to learn e.g. turn-taking, problem-solving and building relationships. Playing with their fathers also helps children explore their own strengths and develop skills that will help them at school.

Being a role model

Children learn from their fathers about men in general. With your guidance, and without you necessarily realising it, your child will pick up ideas about what it means to be a man, such as how a man might handle emotions, deal with relationships, manage conflict etc. This may well be different from the way women, initially mums, tend to handle things. This is another reason why you are such an important person in your child's life. So think about setting a positive example. For example, if you don't want your child to swear, don't swear. If you don't want them to be aggressive, give them an alternative by modelling a non-aggressive behaviour yourself when you are frustrated.

Understanding and thinking about your own upbringing may help you to decide how you want to be as a parent yourself. You may want to consider how your past experience as a child affects the way you are as a parent. Think about what parts of your own experience you would like to pass on to your child? What parts would you prefer not to pass on?

Children need boundaries (or rules) in order to feel that someone is in control and the world is therefore safe. Sometimes fathers will take a more active role in providing the discipline. Remember discipline does not have to be harsh, in fact the calmer you are the more effective you will be. If you feel too sorry for your child you may be tempted to give in, and if this happens often things will

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be harder for you (and your child) later on. Reflecting on your own experiences as a child may help you to find a good balance between your 'head' and your 'heart' in matters of discipline.

You are likely to feel frustrated with your baby or young child from time to time. Children can sometimes push us to the end of our tether, particularly if we are feeling tired and overwhelmed. At these times avoid screaming at them, and never shake or hit them. It might be a good idea to think ahead of positive things you can do to when you feel this frustrated, such as doing some exercise, offering to go to the shops (gets you out of the house!), letting your partner know you need some time out, spending time doing 'normal' stuff with a mate, counting to ten even, or simply talking about how you feel.

For more information visit www.inourplace.co.uk

Partners getting involved and staying involved

Becoming a parent can feel like one of the best things to happen in your whole life. But it can also feel quite daunting and a big responsibility.

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Even though you might not be getting much attention, your feelings as a parent-to-be are very important. Try to talk about how you feel about the pregnancy and becoming a parent if you can and with your partner, friends or family.

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