



# Better conversations about Becoming a dad



In a new series, **Jane Moffett** calls for better conversations at work to support staff with life-changing situations. This issue, she writes about fatherhood



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Our understanding of the role of fathers in society is shifting – what's expected of them, both practically and emotionally, and how they view their role – with research now showing their importance to the development of their baby.<sup>1</sup> This has been recognised in public policy with the establishment of a minimum of two weeks paternity leave and, since April 2015, the legal right for couples to decide whether or not to take shared parental leave. However, the stir caused when Daniel Craig was seen carrying his new baby daughter in a sling,<sup>2</sup> suggests that there is still more to do. Arguably, the workplace is one place where new fathers could benefit from having better, more honest and informed conversations about the realities of parenting.

The expectation of many new fathers is that they will become involved in looking after their new

babies and support their partners in the often tiring and chaotic period after the birth. The importance of the baby bonding with both parents is now being recognised, with known behavioural, psychological and cognitive benefits in relation to the father-infant bond.<sup>1</sup> There are also key moments when the father's sensitivity to the baby (the way the baby's signals are perceived and understood) may have more effect than the mother's: this is the case at 18 months with regard to cognitive development, and at 36 months with regard to language development.<sup>3</sup>

While all of these changes can be positive, empowering and exciting, it's important to recognise that there might also be challenges for new dads and to consider the potential reality for them when they return from paternity leave. I'd like to highlight the following key areas for discussion:

### Lack of preparation

Many men (and women) feel woefully unprepared for the realities of life with a new baby and the changes that they might encounter as a new parent, despite attending antenatal classes. The fact that this new, incredibly responsible job of looking after a baby is 24 hours a day and is set in the context of very little sleep, can lead men to feel unsure as to just what has hit them. One dad explains: 'The first two weeks are relentless – only way to get through it is to go on auto pilot and deal with whatever happens, as it happens.'<sup>4</sup> Despite what prospective parents hear from friends and relations, the reality of life with a newborn can only be truly comprehended when it is actually experienced. Providing a forum at work, such as a family network, where these realities can be discussed, could help men to feel better supported.

### The effect of the birth

While the birth of a baby is a joyful event, the actual birth of your own baby can be difficult to witness. There can be all the worry and stress surrounding the birth itself – with the underlying fear of wondering whether both mother and baby will be well. There can also be the challenge of watching the person you love being in pain and feeling that the only thing you can do is to be there and offer support. While this support can be invaluable, sometimes new dads talk about feeling helpless and of wanting to be able to do more.

When births have been traumatic, the mother and/or the father might suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>5</sup> There are maternity units that offer a Birth Reflections service, where women can book an appointment with a midwife to look at the notes of the birth and talk through what happened. While fathers are often welcome, there is no service specifically aimed at men, and I have heard many women talk about how their partner is struggling to recover from what they observed during the birth. Some new dads could benefit from the opportunity to talk about how they felt about the birth, without their partner being present. It's important to remind new parents of the support that could exist at work, including access to confidential counselling.

### Tiredness

The tiredness that new parents feel can't be overestimated. Having gone through a life-changing event (birth) – which might have taken anything from a few hours to a few days – it would be great to be able to recover with a holiday! However, the reverse happens when you have a baby, as you are plunged into what is often described as 'chaos', where you

suddenly feel completely responsible for the livelihood of your baby and have to learn what to do and how to do it 'on the job'. Some nights, you might get a few hours' sleep, broken just a few times – other nights, you might be pacing the floor with a screaming baby for hours on end. After two weeks of this, paternity leave ends and new fathers return to work.

There is now the added challenge of trying to do a day's work while still having broken nights, and there could be anxiety about leaving the new mum to cope with the baby on her own. She now has to deal with the relentlessness of exhaustion, full-time baby care and overwhelming feelings of responsibility. New dads often need to travel with work and stay away from home, and this can fuel anxiety, tension and even feelings of abandonment in the relationship. Meeting new dads in the period just before they return from paternity leave, I have witnessed their anxiety and concern and have seen how important it can be to find out what support is available, such as drop-ins, classes or informal meetings with other new mums.

### New identity

With new fatherhood can come an alteration in identity and self-concept. There can be a change in confidence levels as men learn what their baby needs and how to be actively involved with their baby's development. Until

the end of paternity leave, new dads might have spent as long with their new baby as new mums; once they are back at work, that changes. It's at this point that a dad's confidence can often dip, as they are with their baby so much less than the mum, with the resulting feeling that they know less about their developing baby. A lot of women who I meet in the courses I run for new mums, talk about their partner's lack of confidence, but also admit to how

difficult it can be to stand by and let their partner do things with the baby that they would be able to do so much faster. They recognise that they need to let the dads find their own way of looking after their child, but it can be challenging to be an onlooker.

**'It's important to remind new parents of the support that could exist at work, including access to confidential counselling'**

Conversely, so many women look forward to the moment that their partner walks through the door, not only as this gives them the opportunity of having someone else to help, but also because babies are responsive to their fathers and often settle well in their arms. Helping dads to realise that they still have an important role to play, and that they need to continue to learn about their growing baby, is key, both for developing their confidence and for the benefit of the relationship with their partner.

### Changes in relationships

Having a baby is one of the key times for relationship stress.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly,

there are three people in the relationship, and it is common in those early months for either parent to feel that they are less important to their partner than the baby is – or to feel that their partner is of less importance to them. Keeping the lines of communication open, being encouraged to think about the needs of the other adult, and finding a way of conveying your own needs, are all factors that can help the relationship at this time. Having an understanding that this can be a crunch time for relationships and that other couples can experience similar stresses, can help normalise the situation. It can also be useful to recognise when it would be beneficial to access further help from organisations that can help couples with their journey to parenthood.

### Postnatal depression

Major life transitions, lack of sleep and changes in lifestyle are all risk factors for depression, so it is hardly surprising that postnatal depression (PND) in men is now recognised. PND is defined as depression that occurs within the first year after the birth of a baby, and, for men, the risk of developing depression in this period doubles.<sup>7</sup> As having a partner with PND has been shown to further increase the risk, the NHS has just announced that it will be screening all new dads for anxiety and depression if their partner is suffering from mental ill health.<sup>8</sup> For many years,

**‘New dads often need to travel with work and stay away from home, and this can fuel anxiety, tension and even feelings of abandonment in the relationship’**

PND in women has been a recognised phenomenon, but many sufferers of it still feel that there is a stigma attached to this label.

Because PND in men has only relatively recently been acknowledged, and is not widely known about, it can be hard to recognise that you might have it or to talk about it among friends and colleagues. Having the possibility of PND raised by a counsellor or therapist might be the first time that new fathers hear about its existence. At a national level, campaigner Mark Williams<sup>9</sup> writes and speaks regularly on the topic, with the aim of raising awareness, providing support and enabling more men to get the help that could be so beneficial.

### Closing thoughts

Having a baby is a life-changing experience, filled with joy, excitement and meaning, and it is also common for there to be some negative impacts on life and work. Having the opportunity to talk about the mixture of emotions and realising that many of these feelings and experiences are normal, can be hugely beneficial. A supportive employer can make all the difference to male employees as they face one of life's biggest transitions. ●

### REFERENCES

- 1 Hawthorne J, Savage-McGlynn E. Newborn behavioural observation: helping new fathers and their babies. *Perspective* 2013; (1): 7–8.
- 2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45873664> (accessed 26 November 2018).
- 3 Morgan K, Naylor S. The influence of fathers on children's mental health. *Perspective* 2018; (1): 27–32.
- 4 Barrett J. Meeting men's needs in antenatal courses. *Perspective* 2013; (1): 3–5.
- 5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5341171/> (accessed 13 November 2018).
- 6 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/relationships-after-a-baby/> (accessed 13 November 2018).
- 7 <https://www.nct.org.uk/life-parent/dads-and-partners/postnatal-depression-dads-10-things-you-should-know> (accessed 13 November 2018).
- 8 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-46424419> (accessed 18 December 2018).
- 9 <http://www.reachingoutpmh.co.uk/> (accessed 18 December 2018).

### RESOURCES

VIG (video interaction guidance) is a tool that has been developed to help parent-infant interaction by promoting positive parenting and building family relationships. Recent research has also shown that it can help with bonding after a traumatic birth and help with depression in fathers who have a baby in neonatal intensive care units.

For example, DadPad (<https://thedadpad.co.uk>) is a tool developed with the NHS to give new dads knowledge and practical skills.

For information and support regarding relationships:

<https://www.oneplusone.space/couple-connection/>

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-family-life-and-parenting/new-parents>

For information and support for fathers:

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk/about-the-fatherhood-institute/>

For support for single dads:

<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/>

For information about PND and fathers:

<https://www.nct.org.uk/life-parent/dads-and-partners/postnatal-depression-dads-10-things-you-should-know>

For information about shared parental leave:

<https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay-employer-guide>