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He's Having a Baby

THE PATERNAL
CHILDBIRTH
EXPERIENCE

By Lynn Clark Callister, RN, PhD, Geraldine Matsumura, RN, PhD,
and Katri Vehviläinen-Julkunen, CNM, PhD

A 32-year-old attorney who was an only child himself spoke of the profoundness of watching his wife give birth to their third child and third son: "I marvel at how she can endure that pain and not even complain. I can't believe she would be willing to go through so much to have my sons. I have cut all three of my son's [umbilical] cords. It helps me to feel involved, to have a symbolic role in the birth." Becoming a father can be one of the most significant events in a life of a man. For many fathers, the birth of a child can be a significant emotional experience filled with mixed feelings such as excitement, fear, and gratification. This event represents the accomplishment of a significant life task as a man assumes a new role, with new behaviors, and the development of a repertoire of new skills as a father.

In recent years the paternal role during pregnancy and childbirth has been receiving increasing attention by researchers. Despite a growing body of literature on the topic, the role of the father in childbirth, the quality of the paternal childbirth experience, and the benefits of a shared birth experience are only now recognized as valid and still need further definition.



Paternal developmental processes occurring during pregnancy are as complex as maternal developmental processes. The father may experience mixed feelings, ranging from ambivalence and anxiety to excitement and anticipation. Emotional responses depend on such factors as whether the pregnancy is planned or unplanned, the quality of the partner relationship, previous experiences with childbearing and childrearing, paternal and maternal age, educational level, socioeconomic status, and cultural and ethnic variables. Upon learning his wife was pregnant, one expectant father said, "I experienced all kinds of feeling through sheer joy and excitement to terror." A first-time mother explained, "the ultrasound made it very real for my husband. He hadn't felt the baby kick, so at 22 weeks when I had the ultrasound he said, 'All right! We're going to have a baby!'" Another expectant father said, "The pregnancy became real when the belly got big."

Some of the identified fears of expectant fathers include performance, security, relationship, and existential fears. A father of twins expressed his uncertainty, "It's a lot like walking into a pitch black room and suddenly thinking that there may not be a floor"¹

In studies of family dynamics during pregnancy, expectant mothers and fathers viewed each other as an important source of support in making the pivotal life transition to parenthood.² Recent work documents the profound grief reported by expectant fathers who experience the loss of an expected child.³ A father whose pre-term twin daughters lived a few short hours said, "I never could have imagined the grief and pain I felt as I held those precious little ones who were here in mortality such a brief time. Becoming a father and losing my daughters all at once was an

overwhelming and bittersweet experience.”

Phases of paternal involvement during pregnancy include the announcement or confirming phase in the first trimester (producing joy or conflict); the moratorium phase in the second trimester, which involves adjustment to the reality of the pregnancy; and the focusing phase in the third trimester, as a man redefines himself in terms of becoming a father.⁴ One husband suggested that he felt more involved and excited when the couple was enrolled in childbirth education classes. His wife reported, “He’s really into it!” Another expectant mother said that her husband called their unborn child, “The angel baby.”

The expectant father may experience a variety of stressors, including fears about his role during childbirth and his relationship with the newborn. Barriers to the assumption of the paternal role in 84 first-time fathers included a troubled relationship with his father, a dysfunctional couple relationship, and other socio-cultural barriers.⁵ Styles of paternal involvement during pregnancy include observer, in which the father is passive and detached; expressive, in which the expectant father attempts to experience the pregnancy as much as possible; and instrumental, in which the father is the caretaker. One father’s expressive style is suggested in these words,

My earliest memories with Trina started the day she was born. No, they started before that. They started in the womb. I would come home and I would say, ‘Hello,’ and she would flick and flutter in the womb. She’d start kicking. If I put my hand on my wife’s tummy when she was carrying Trina, she’d move over to where my hand was. If I put it on the other side, she’d move to that side. I used to sing to her. It’s always been that way and has just continued pretty much that way. I remember one night laying with my head on my wife’s stomach and singing a lullaby or something, I can’t remember exactly which song. She was very active but she settled down, and then I put my hand on her stomach and she moved my hand.⁶



The father may have multiple motives for being present at the birth of his child. Pressure from extended family, peers, the expectant mother, and health care providers can all influence the decision to be present during the birth of a child. He may also be motivated by a sense of responsibility to his unborn child and the child’s mother. He may also have a desire for self-fulfillment through active participation in the birth.⁷ Regardless of his motivation, the father may assume a variety of roles during labor and birth, depending on such factors as his personal characteristics, coping strategies, the perceived expectations of others, professional support, the use of medical technology, and whether or not the laboring mother has epidural analgesia/anesthesia.⁸

Paternal roles during labor and birth may include (1) coaching, leading, or directing their partners through the childbirth experience; (2) acting as a teammate, assisting their partners by following the directions of others; (3) choosing to be a witness, observing the labor process and the birth of their child. Coaches seem to have a need for controlling themselves and the birth experience.

For many fathers, the birth of a child can be a significant emotional experience filled with mixed feelings such as excitement, fear, and gratification. This event represents the accomplishment of a significant life task as a man assumes a new role, with new behaviors, and the development of a repertoire of new skills as a father.



Some wives suggest that the assumption of the coaching role by the father was essential to their own

sense of control in a time of potential vulnerability. Teammates were there for their presence, providing physical and emotional support as part of a team with the health care providers being in control. Witnesses viewed themselves as observers of the birth, offering presence but not advocacy as a comfort to the laboring woman. Some seemed detached, but perhaps they were coping by appearing to focus on reading or watching television.

Interactive styles between laboring couples include:

1. The touch or physical interactive style, which includes conversation, touching, offering comfort, and modeling breathing and relaxation techniques.
2. The equipment or interaction through instrumentation style, which includes attention to electronic fetal monitoring and other medical technology.

3. The non-interactive presence, in which the father is present but does not evidence interaction with the laboring woman.⁹

Suggestions are provided by the National Center for Fathering for the expectant father who elects to serve as labor coach.¹⁰ Such suggestions include committing to regular practice; offering ice chips, backrubs, and encouragement; acting as her advocate; complying with her requests; hugging her a lot and holding her hand. Much of the research focuses on the father's role as a labor coach, rather than exploring the personal needs of fathers whose wives are giving birth.

Whatever paternal role is assumed is less important than agreement between partners on what role is most appropriate and helpful.¹¹ This includes following proscribed sociocultural roles, such as those appropriate for Orthodox Jewish couples. In such cases, fathers do not physically support their wives because of religious prohibitions regarding touching or observing the woman when there is vaginal bleeding or when she is immodestly exposed. In spite of not following what would be considered typical coaching roles, Orthodox Jewish women have expressed a strong sense of support as the expectant father prayed, read Psalms, and consulted the rabbi. One mother described it in this way, "I give birth and my husband helps me spiritually. He can pray for me; and that is my biggest support."¹²

Perceptions of new fathers about being present at the birth of their baby include feeling unprepared for an unpredictable process, for the intensity of the woman's pain experience and behavior, and for their own emotional responses.¹³ Emergent themes in first time fathers following the birth include:

1) it's happening; it's beginning (often expressed at the onset of labor); 2) more work than anticipated (often expressed during active labor as the intensity of the experience increases); 3) increased fear and hidden fears and emotions (often expressed during second stage labor); 4) lack of inclusion and increased excitement (often expressed as birth approaches); 5) relief and "we made it" (expressed at the time of birth); 6) time to get acquainted (expressed following birth).¹⁴

Some fathers are also unprepared for the initial sight of the newborn whose color may be purplish blue before the first breath is taken, with a misshapen head covered with vernix.

A 30-year-old, first-time father described his feelings when he first held his child, "It was hard to believe we had a son, that we were co-creators of this child with our Heavenly Father. I feel joy and

happiness that I had never felt before. It is awe-inspiring, and I feel a strong sense of responsibility, a lot less self-centered and selfish, and more centered around this little spirit."

Laboring for relevance was the overall theme identified in a yearlong study of new fathers.¹⁵ Processes identified included grappling with the reality of pregnancy and the child, struggling for recognition as a parent, and plugging away at the role-making of involved fatherhood. Reality boosters identified included active participation during pregnancy and birth, and infant care giving in the early days and weeks of their infant's life.

iii.c.



POTENTIAL BENEFITS
OF A SHARED
BIRTH EXPERIENCE

At least two decades of research document that paternal involvement during childbirth may serve to facilitate the childbirth process emotionally and physically, enhance both maternal and paternal feelings of self worth, strengthen the couple relationship, and facilitate paternal-infant attachment.¹⁶ As expressed by one first-time mother, "I felt a very strong closeness to my husband because I feel the baby is a part of him and a part of me. Especially that he looks so much like [his father]. I can't even explain it. It's like someone took a string and tied both of us together. I felt like a unita little family."¹⁷

The father who is present during labor and birth and is actively involved in physical and emotional care giving activities offers a quality of care that is different than that of professionals.¹⁸ The father brings to the childbirth experience his presence, knowledge, and understanding of the laboring woman; love for the mother and his child; and a sense of advocacy



THE FATHER MAY HAVE MULTIPLE MOTIVES FOR BEING PRESENT AT THE BIRTH OF HIS CHILD. PRESSURE FROM EXTENDED FAMILY, PEERS, THE EXPECTANT MOTHER, AND HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS CAN ALL INFLUENCE THE DECISION TO BE PRESENT. HE MAY ALSO BE MOTIVATED BY A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO HIS UNBORN CHILD AND THE CHILD'S MOTHER. HE MAY ALSO HAVE A DESIRE FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT THROUGH ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE BIRTH.

coupled with a desire for the woman to have a positive birth experience. One woman spoke of the importance of her husband's presence: "My husband was a real support from the start till the end. Just being supportive and being a comfort, that's the best I could have asked for. You see another part of your husband that you didn't know existed before, a caring part."¹⁹

When women were asked about who was most helpful to them while giving birth, the majority indicated that it was their partner, coupled with professional support.²⁰ Mothers described the birth experience as enjoyable when the father actively participated with them in an intimate and pivotal family experience.

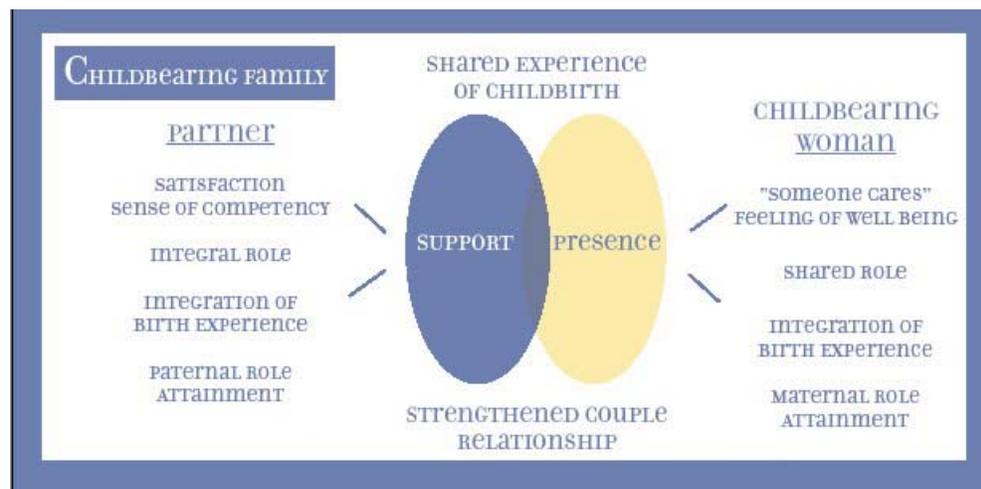
The mutual benefits for both the childbearing woman and the father of her baby are illustrated in Figure 1. As the couple shares the experience of childbirth, the woman has the sense of that "someone cares," which contributes to a feeling of well-being. The father has a sense of competency and contributing to the experience as he offers support and presence. The maternal and paternal roles are shared and attained, the birth experience is integrated into the framework of the marriage. All of these circumstances contribute to a strengthened and enhanced couple relationship.

One father spoke about the enhancement of his love for his wife as they became parents for the first time, "I couldn't believe Jeni's strength in giving birth. I was so proud of her. She was beautiful when I first met her.... She was beautiful the day we were married. But she was the most beautiful when she was breastfeeding my son wearing a gray flannel shirt and no makeup." As the father progresses with the childbearing woman through pregnancy and birth, he begins to take on the paternal role. One father described his this way:

The moment that I really knew that I was a dad was the day after he was born. In the morning, Jeni went to take a shower and Joshua started getting a little fussy. So the nurse showed me how I could use my pinky finger as pacifier. So I cleaned my hands, and I sat down. And I put my little pinky in his mouth, and he started sucking on it, and then he looked right into my eyes. And so, I guess this was my moment of fatherhood. And I knew that Josh was truly my son and I was his dad.

Fathers may also have a profound emotional and spiritual experience at birth. One father expressed with tears in his eyes what becoming a father meant: "It was as though a door opened to a room in my mind, in my heart, that I never knew existed, and I felt emotions of such sweetness and strength that I was overwhelmed. I have been ecstatic, absolutely joy-filled, since the moment I laid my eyes on that little baby."²¹ Another father spoke of his feelings of pride and the desire to be the protector:

It's hard to believe that you can have so much love for this itty-bitty thing. But I really love this little baby. The sense of responsibility is overwhelming. Now what I do affects this little guy. I want to be the best father I can be.



In the work of the authors, when new mothers were

interviewed about the meaning of their birth experience, fathers who were present were also eager to talk about birth from their perspective. Fathers do appreciate being asked about their birth experience.²² Another father said:

Man, she was brave! I never knew how strong my wife is, you know? I just always thought of her as being delicate and beautiful, and man, she was so strong, and so beautiful, it made me dizzy to watch her. I loved being a part of it! What a high!.²³

Both professional and lay literature demonstrates an increasing focus on perceptions of the paternal birth experience²⁴ and ways to enhance the quality of paternal birth experiences.²⁵ Childbirth education classes should foster dialogue between partners about what childbirth and parenting roles they are mutually comfortable with. The expectant couple can explore how to make the childbirth experience and parenting the child theirs instead of hers alone. It has been suggested that expectant parents should actively negotiate sharing childcare and household labor responsibilities prior to the birth of their child.

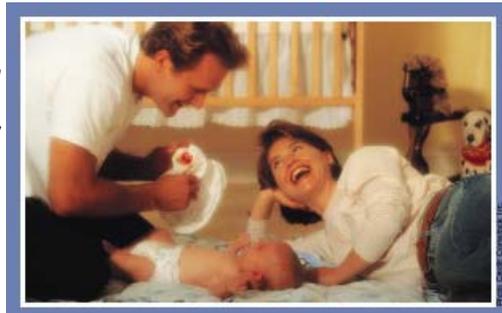
Incorporation of family life education into current childbirth education courses may be an effective intervention to enrich the family perspective. Such work is currently in process through the implementation of "Marriage Moments" as part of childbirth education classes in Utah Valley.²⁶

Facilitating assumption of the paternal role is helpful. One father wrote of his initial experiences with his child:

Seeing him [my son Scott], I took his hand in mine and was able to accompany him into the nursery. Later, I awoke to a nurse smiling as she stood above my chair. It had been six hours since I had taken him into the nursery, and I was still holding his hand.

While each father's experience will vary somewhat, the opportunity to participate in the birth of his child and to then share his perspectives of his experiences during pregnancy, childbirth, and the transition to fatherhood will help a man integrate these experiences into the framework of his life. In addition, efforts to understand the father's role in childbirth, those factors that affect the quality of the father's experience, and the benefits of a shared birth experience will undoubtedly foster positive outcomes for the childbearing family.

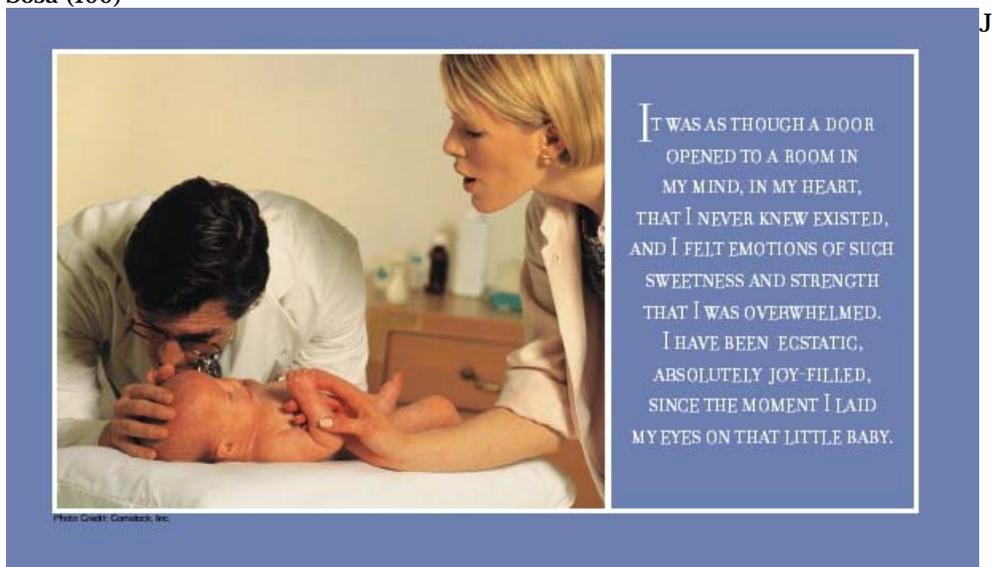
Lynn Clark Callister, RN, PhD, is a professor in the College of Nursing at Brigham Young University; **Geraldine Matsumura, RN, PhD**, is an associate professor in the College of Nursing at BYU; **Katri Vehvilainen-Julkunen, CNM, PhD**, is chair of the Department of Nursing Science at the University of Kuopio, Kuopio, Finland.



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