

# Becoming Dad

A guide for new fathers



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[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/becoming-dad](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/becoming-dad)

# Introduction – Welcome to Becoming Dad



**“Having children is the biggest life-changing moment, it really is.”**

Prince William – 2020 BBC *'Football, Prince William and our Mental Health'*

So, congratulations! You're on your way to becoming a father!

How do you feel? Happy? Excited? Stressed? Nervous? Frightened? Angry? Mixed? Maybe it's also a bit daunting? Or maybe you don't really feel much – or anything – yet.

That's fine. Many men experience a variety of emotions before and when they first become fathers. It's natural. What matters most at this point is that you're here and open to thinking about what this all means to you.

In this guide we're going to focus on helping you make sense of what it can be like to be a Dad, to look after yourself and the others around you, and to do the best possible job of becoming a confident father.

## Finding out

Some men become Dads in a really *intentional* way, having made an active decision to become a father and taken whatever steps are necessary to get there. For others it's more of a surprise, or even a shock.

You may find that once you discover it's going to happen, you really don't feel ready for fatherhood. The important thing is to try not to worry too much. A lot of men feel that way but end up surprising themselves as to how well they adjust. You will learn, mostly by finding your own way, and trusting your instincts – which are probably better than you realise. No parent is perfect. We all make mistakes. But one of the first lessons you'll learn as a Dad is that nature has built you for this. Men are designed for fatherhood, just like women are for motherhood.

We Dads can be as sensitive to a baby's cries as mothers are. Within hours of the birth, we can recognise our babies just by the touch of their hands, even when we're blindfolded.<sup>1</sup> Our bonds with our children can be as strong as iron if we put the time in – and that's true even if they don't share our genes or live with us full-time!

**You've got this.**



1. Marsha Kaitz, Shimon Shiri, Shai Danziger, Ziva Hershko, Arthur I. Eidelman Fathers can also recognize their newborns by touch, *Infant Behavior and Development* Volume 17, Issue 2, 1994. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0163-6383\(94\)90056-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0163-6383(94)90056-6).



## Sharing your news

Think about who you're going to tell that you're going to be a Dad, and when.

There's no doubt this is important news. But remember – if your baby has only just been conceived, the news is not just about you – there are other people involved, whose feelings and opinions need to be respected.

Sadly, some pregnancies end in miscarriage. This is most likely in the first three months, and so people share their news in different ways or after certain points within the pregnancy (for example, the first scan).

Some expectant parents choose to keep the news quiet (except with their closest friends and family, perhaps) until after the first scan, whilst others share their news before this. There is no right or wrong way to share your news, it just needs to feel comfortable for you and the mother of your baby.

If you choose to wait to share your news, this time can give you some really useful space to get yourself used to the idea of fatherhood and hopefully start to think about planning, before facing other people's questions, reactions and/or negativity.

Sometimes people around us are shocked or upset about our journeys into fatherhood – or we are worried about how they might react. This can be the case with our own parents, for example. So, it can be helpful to consider carefully how, when, and where to tell people your news.



This includes the people you work with: have you thought about what difference your role as a Dad might make to your working life? Remember, employers should not treat you differently, when you let them know of the pregnancy (see *Box 12: Your workplace rights as a father*, for more information about your rights as a Dad in the workplace).

And your friends? Maybe you're the first in your social group to have children. If so, you might be nervous about telling them – and their reactions might feel negative or upsetting. You might feel like you and your mates are suddenly heading off in different directions. Friendships are important and being a Dad doesn't change that – but friendships also change over time, so be prepared to reshape existing relationships and carve out new ones as your fatherhood journey unfolds.

You and your partner may find new friendships with other parents at a similar stage in their parenting journeys. Make time to talk about all this with your partner, to work out the best plan for managing the sharing of your news, together.



## Getting ready

However excited you are about becoming a father, there are probably lots of ways you feel unprepared. You might feel that you're not ready financially. Maybe you've been enjoying a carefree life, and this has come too soon. Perhaps you feel that taking responsibility for a tiny human being might restrict you or tie you down.

You may not feel ready emotionally. You may not be sure about your relationship with your child's mother, and/or have difficulties with other key people in your life. You may have difficulties with other people in your family.

As men, becoming a father often makes us think about our relationships with our own father, as we compare how we might want to parent (see *Box 2*).

All of these are natural fears, concerns and thoughts. Thousands of men have felt exactly the same when becoming fathers: you're not alone!



## Feeling different

Remember, no two Dads are the same. We come in all shapes and sizes. Some of us have a biological relationship with our child, some of us don't. Some of us have biological AND non-biological children. Some of us adopt children; some of us foster. Some of us become Dads within Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) families. Some of us are our children's only father, some of us aren't.

We are also diverse in other ways: culturally and ethnically; in terms of age; the jobs we do; our sexual and gender identities; and whether we are in romantic relationships with our children's mothers. We may live with our children full-time or part-time or see them only on visits and days out.

We may live miles away or face other challenges to our ability to spend time with them. How much we get to see our children may vary over time.

Since most men's journey into fatherhood coincides with a baby's birth and happens in the context of a romantic relationship with a woman, some of the information we provide in this guide may be more relevant if you are taking this 'typical' route to fatherhood. But we've tried to address the needs of other Dads too... because social and adoptive fathers, and biological fathers who aren't in a relationship with their child's mother, or are in a relationship with another man, are just as important.

All types of Dads can play a vital role in influencing their child's development and ensuring they have a great start in life.



## Staying focused

*"[Fatherhood is] the greatest thing. You can't explain it until it happens; it's like telling somebody what water feels like before they've ever swum in it."* Michael Bublé, singer

Whoever you are and whatever you do in life, the most important thing to remember is that you matter hugely to your children, and you can be immensely influential in their lives. What you do and don't do will have an enormous impact on how they learn and develop – how well they do at school, their behaviour, how they feel about themselves, their attitude to risk, the relationships they form with other people.

You name it, you're a big part of who they're going to become. Don't forget that this is a great opportunity for you to leave a positive mark in the world.

We've created this guide to try and answer the questions and concerns you're most likely to have as you set off on your fatherhood journey. We've also included information to signpost you towards whatever help and advice you might need along the way, and to hopefully help you do one of the most important and best jobs in the world – becoming a Dad!

## Working through this guide

This guide is based on the best, most up-to-date research, and draws on the experiences of thousands of Dads who've travelled this road before you. You don't need to read it like a novel, starting at the beginning and reading through to the end (although of course, you can).

You can just dip in and out of different chapters, as and when you feel it's most relevant. We hope you find it useful.





## Here's an outline of what we cover in each chapter:

1

### **The science of 'becoming Dad'**

Many centuries of evolution lie behind what you're experiencing as a soon-to-be-father or a new father. What can science tell us about what children need from fathers, and how fatherhood changes us as men?

2

### **Looking after yourself**

It's a cliché, but true: how can you look after somebody else if you don't know how to look after yourself? This chapter is all about opening up to yourself, being honest about your feelings around fatherhood, and finding ways to stay calm and focused on the things that matter during what can be an exciting, but stressful time.

3

### **Supporting your baby's biological mother**

Whatever the nature of your relationship with this person – romantic or otherwise – they will be hugely important to your baby, and will go through some serious stuff. Here we focus on biological mothers' physical journey, and what you can do to help.

4

### **Looking after your relationship with your partner**

The perinatal period can be a minefield for couples' relationship – it can make or break them, or it can make little difference. In this chapter

we focus on key challenges and offer practical tips on how to maintain or even improve your relationship. We also look at what you can do if it's all going wrong.

5

### **Getting to know your baby**

Men can find it hard to 'engage' with the baby in the womb, and even once they are born. Here we look at simple ways to connect with your child, to build a strong bond and start to work out how everyone fits together in your new family.

6

### **Juggling work and home**

Family, friends, wider society – and we ourselves – can put a lot of pressure on Dads to be 'the provider'. Here we look at how to navigate this aspect of your paternal identity and offer practical tips for making the most of the time you have with your baby, and for creating a work/life balance that allows you to be an involved father.

7

### **What to do if you are struggling and where to find help**

Early fatherhood can be tiring and stressful. Most Dads muddle through, but some find it extremely difficult to cope. This chapter is all about how to spot problems before they get too serious, and where to go for help if you need it.



# Chapter 1. The science of 'becoming Dad'



**“Any fool can have a child. That doesn’t make you a father. It’s the courage to raise a child that makes you a father.”**

Barack Obama’s Father’s Day message 2008

When you become a father, you set off on one of life’s great journeys. And like all the best voyages, sometimes you’ll feel like you’re travelling with no map. Fatherhood changes who we are, what we feel, and our position in the world. It also brings with it what, for many of us, becomes the core of our very existence: our bonds with our children.

Doubts about whether you’re ‘up to the job’ of being a good father, or about what your role might be, are perfectly normal. This is all part of how nature prepares us for the changes to come. We ‘become Dad’ over months and years, not just in the moment when we hold our child in our arms for the first time. So remember, fatherhood is an evolving process. And while ‘becoming a Dad’ may be different and unique for all of us, its emotional power is universal.

## Dads during pregnancy

Men’s and women’s routes to parenthood are very different; but just because we men don’t grow babies inside us, doesn’t mean the nine-month period of pregnancy passes us by untouched and without feeling.

Oxytocin, also known as the ‘love’ hormone, used to be thought of as important only for women, because for them it is so closely involved in bringing on birth and breastfeeding.

However, more recently scientists have explored oxytocin’s role in men and have found that it matters to us too: in fact, it is central to the formation of our relationships. Working alongside other hormones, including dopamine (the ‘reward’ hormone) – it oils the wheels of our relationships, helping us form bonds with partners, children and even with our friends.

These hormones, along with another one you might be more familiar with – testosterone – all have a part to play in what you do and how you feel as a father. Even before you meet your child!







During pregnancy, the oxytocin levels of expectant Mums and Dads who live together, are amazingly similar. Why does this happen?

When we're in a close and supportive relationship with someone, our speech and movement often mirror theirs. There can also be other types of 'synchronies', for example, our heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure adjust to similar levels. The oxytocin 'sync' is a bit like that.

This matters because oxytocin helps parents to be more empathetic and co-operative, and more open to the experience of the baby's arrival. For Dads in particular, it may make us less orientated to external reward, and to 'lean in' more towards the family. So, we're being primed to work together as a parenting team – even before the baby arrives.

This may help explain why many fathers, as well as mothers, 'nest' before their children arrive. We tend to create physical space for the baby – turning a spare room into a nursery, for example, or finding an alternative space if we don't have a spare room, buying baby-grows, car seats, pushchairs and buggies.

We also build a mental space. Many Dads talk and sing to the bump. Evidence suggests that this helps the unborn child begin to recognise our voices. We also imagine what the baby might look like, and experience great pleasure when he or she kicks or moves around in Mum's tummy.

Ultrasound scans allow us to 'meet' our babies in the womb, and many of us find these encounters emotionally powerful. At this stage we're beginning to bond with our baby – before he or she is born.

This pre-birth bonding doesn't happen for all Dads, though, and you really shouldn't worry if it doesn't happen for you. But, for what it's worth, scientists believe there are three factors that make it more likely:

**1. How often you daydream about your baby, and how this makes you feel**

The more you imagine your life as a Dad, and feel good about it, the more likely it is that you'll develop a strong, early bond

**2. Your relationship with your partner**

The closer you are, the more likely you are to 'attach' strongly and identify early with your baby

**3. How comfortable you are with the idea of being an 'involved Dad'**

The more you aspire to being an involved, rather than the more traditional, slightly distant 'breadwinner Dad', the more likely you are to experience a close attachment when your baby arrives.

So, without stressing about the quality of your bond with your soon-to-be-baby (after all, the 'meat' of father-child relationship-building happens once the baby has arrived), why not open yourself up to the idea of becoming a brilliant involved Dad, and spend some time thinking about how you might achieve that?



## What kind of Dad do you want to be?

***“In my career there’s many things I’ve won, and many things I’ve achieved, but for me my greatest achievement is my children and my family.”*** David Beckham, ex-footballer

In her book, *The Life of Dad*, evolutionary anthropologist Dr Anna Machin describes the enormous diversity in fathering around the world, from the involved fathers of the Aka tribe in the Congo, to the long-hours-culture working Dads of corporate America.

What drives differences in how men ‘do’ fatherhood, she argues, is an innate flexibility that all fathers share, that is crucial for human survival.

Women’s early motherhood roles are tightly fixed, by the energetic and physical demands of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. By contrast, our roles as fathers can respond quickly to even tiny shifts in the social, economic, or physical environment that might threaten our family’s survival. Whatever our children most need, we are well placed to ‘step up’ and provide it.

In high-risk environments, fathers’ roles focus on ensuring the baby’s physical survival and health. Outside war zones or areas where food is scarce, fathering tends to focus on making sure the child develops the skills needed for economic survival. Once we’ve done that, we can turn our attention to supporting his or her social, cultural and intellectual development.

In developed Western economies like ours in the UK, much of what we do as Dads is about helping our children ‘thrive’ in an economic and social sense: putting food on the table, teaching them basic skills, guiding them, and supporting their education.

In the ‘old days’, we were left to focus on the ‘big picture stuff’ and would be considered a ‘good father’ if we just did that. But now mothers want to pursue careers, and we Dads want to get stuck in with the parenting too.

For many of us, it’s only by both of us sharing ALL elements of the caregiving and earning, that we can keep our heads above water.

So, the expectations we put on ourselves (and others put on us) as fathers are more wide-ranging than ever. Earning money isn’t enough anymore. This can feel tough if you have no choice but to do all or most of the breadwinning, and have very restricted ‘family time’ – as is the case for many Dads.

Most working fathers, like most working mothers, try to ‘have it all’, juggling busy careers and playing an active role in bringing up our children. We try to do the best we can, but sometimes we end up feeling guilty, as if we’re under-performing both in the workplace and at home.

If, as sometimes happens in this hectic world, we feel like the ‘big picture stuff’ is being undervalued in the overall ‘reckoning sheet’ of who does what in the relationship, that can lead to resentment... and potentially arguments.



There's no simple answer to all this, but it's important to talk about how we are feeling, work out who's going to do what in terms of earning and caregiving, and keep checking in with each other about how it's going. For more ideas on how to have productive conversations with your partner see *Chapter 4. Looking after your relationship with your partner.*

### What about 'social' fathers?

We sometimes think of biological fatherhood as superior to other types of fatherhood, like step-fathering, or adopting a child. In fact, 'social fathers' as they are sometimes known, have always existed. In some cultures, they have a really high status.

Sometimes social fathers 'step in' to fill a gap where a biological father once was or might have been. Sometimes they co-exist in a child's life alongside the biological father. Either way, the roles they fulfil matter enormously to their children.

It's also worth remembering that children can survive, and even thrive, without a father – and without a mother, for that matter. And fathers, like mothers, can have negative as well as positive impacts on their children.

Most of us can probably think of someone whose parents damaged them in some way. Evidence suggests<sup>2</sup> that it's what we do as fathers, rather than who we are, that really counts (see *Box 1 and 2*).



2. Machin, A. (2018). *The Life of Dad: The Making of A Modern Father*. London: Simon & Schuster.



## Box 1: What do we mean by an 'involved father'?

Most of us would recognise the idea of the 'new Dad': a man who is relaxed, confident and skilled at looking after his children. Maybe David Beckham? He's perceived by the media as being a good Dad. How did he get so good at being a Dad? He and Victoria certainly don't seem to be struggling for money, and maybe they have a team of nannies and other staff to make their lives easier. But maybe the media image is real, and he's discovered the secret of involved fatherhood – which is, in a nutshell, time, plus paying attention to some basics of good parenting.

What matters in parenting is *significant and sensitive involvement* – research shows Dads who achieve this during the month following birth go on to help their babies achieve a range of good outcomes, including better language development and higher IQs. It's not essential to establish this so early in your baby's life, but the longer you leave it, the harder it gets – and the less impact you'll have.

Central to your success is the 'attachment' you form with your baby. A baby or child who feels confident that his/her needs will be understood and met by a caregiver (who could be a mother, father, nanny/childminder, sibling, or other person) develops what is called a 'secure' attachment to that person.

When a baby doesn't have that sense of confidence in the caregiver's support, the attachment is insecure, and this causes distress to the child. In response, the child may reject the caregiver or detach from them, becoming 'clingy' and anxious.



For a long time, people believed that only one attachment really mattered – that with the primary caregiver (usually the mother). But now scientists and researchers know that babies and young children develop a spread of attachment relationships simultaneously with the adults (and children) with whom they interact regularly – including their fathers. They've found that the amount of time you spend with your baby, and the quality of your parenting behaviour, are both significant in the development of secure or insecure attachments.

If your interactions with your baby are disengaged and remote this can predict behaviour problems in children when they are older – whereas if you play supportively with them, are sensitive to their 'cues', read with them, use a large vocabulary, listen to and expand on what they say, they will benefit.

For more on all this – see *Chapter 5. Getting to know your baby*, and *Chapter 6. Juggling work and home*





## Box 2: Your own Dad

**Your own father is likely to be an important figure for you as you work out how to 'do' fatherhood. If you're lucky, he will have been a great Dad – and you'll have fond memories of how loving and supportive he was during your childhood.**

But lots of us have had less positive relationships with our fathers, and you may feel like the last thing you want is to be like him!

Perhaps he was distant or emotionally unavailable. Maybe he was hyper-critical and overpowering. He may have been violent, abusive and controlling, or simply not a good or engaging Dad.

You may not even know who your father is, of course – he might be unknown, have lost contact, or died. So, you may feel like there's a blank space there, where your 'model father' might be.

Whatever your relationship with your father (or fathers, if you have had more than one), it's important to remember that he is not the only person you can model your fatherhood on. Think about the best parents you know – they could be mothers, grandparents, other family members, friends or fathers of friends – and focus on what makes them so admirable.

The qualities and skills they possess – such as warmth, patience, listening skills, the ability to devote time, express love and control anger – are within most of us to a greater or lesser extent.

Many men, including those who lack obvious paternal role models in their own family, find that the experience of being involved in fatherhood brings out aspects of their character they never knew they had.

Some of us may need to work a bit harder to bring out the good traits (and lose the bad ones) but we all have within us the capacity to love our children and be the best father possible.



## Chapter 2. Looking after yourself



**When we become parents, one of the things we get good at is putting others' needs before our own. That's a great lesson to learn, but it's vital that we look after ourselves too. Fatherhood can be lots of fun, but it's hard work. It's important to take time out to reflect, relax and stay healthy.**

### Self-care

These days, conversations about mental health are everywhere. Our Instagram and Facebook feeds are full of all sorts of advice about how to stay in a good place mentally. What does all this have to do with becoming a father? Well, you're going through one of life's big changes. There's a lot going on that can increase stress, cause rows and throw you off balance (as well as all the good stuff that fatherhood brings!)

To help yourself cope, a great starting point is to stay physically active and eat healthily. Getting plenty of sleep helps too – but that might be in short supply in your early days as a father!

If you're used to doing a lot of sport, you may want to reduce this a bit – or rethink your regime so you and Mum can do more gentle exercise together.

Sometimes you'll feel worn out, and maybe isolated. Keep in touch with the outside world, by going for short walks or runs, getting out into the garden or park, talking to friends, and keeping up with your interests.

Do a daily check-in with yourself. Think about how you are feeling and use the notes app on your phone or other apps to keep a record of what's going on: the good things and the problems. You could score your mood from one to five.

Over time, you'll spot what drags you down. Do you feel worse when you are tired, short of money, too busy, have been drinking, or have not seen your friends much? This type of self-reflection can help you to work out ways to keep yourself feeling good.





## Your inner critic

What we say to ourselves in our heads plays a big part in how we feel about our lives. Sometimes we compare ourselves unfavourably to other people – like we have a critic inside us, finding negatives in everything we do. It's easy to slip into this when we're learning new things or feeling unsure.

We're surrounded by a lot of cultural 'noise' about Mums being better and more 'natural' as parents. In fact, Mums just tend to do a whole lot more parenting – so they learn all the tricks, and attract more support (from midwives, other Mums, grandmothers and so on).

That's how they become experts at caring – usually quicker than we do.

All this can leave us Dads feeling like we're less important, a 'spare part' or even a bit useless. If you start thinking black and white negative thoughts – 'I'm not a good Dad', 'I never do anything right', for example – that's not a good sign. Notice what you're saying to yourself and thinking each day. Is it helpful?

If not, try to create more positive self-talk (see *Box 3. Dealing with your inner critic*).

### Box 3. Dealing with your inner critic

#### WHAT YOUR INNER CRITIC SAYS

##### **"I'm not mature enough for these new responsibilities".**

Becoming a father may trigger a 'provider' mindset, where you feel like it's all on you to give your child (and their mother) the best of everything in life.

Perhaps you also feel like you need to be 'the rock' for your family – as if they are relying on you, and you can't show how scared you are, or talk about the pressure you're feeling.

#### HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

It's completely normal to feel like this. But remember – your main job as a father is to keep your baby physically safe and feeling loved.

Your child doesn't need designer prams and millions of toys. Your child needs your time much more than your money. If you're struggling financially, that's a discussion for you and your child's Mum. But remember, couples who share the earning and caregiving tend to be happier.

Don't bottle things up. There's an old proverb that says 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. Talk to the people who know and love you. And if you need outside help, reach out.







### WHAT YOUR INNER CRITIC SAYS

**“I don’t know anything about how to look after babies or children”.**

Especially in the early days of fatherhood, it’s easy to think there’s lots of specialist parenting knowledge, that you just don’t have.

### HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

Most Dads initially feel this. Truth is, lots of Mums do too. All adults are built to look after children, but children don’t come with an instruction manual.

Try to take comfort from the fact that we humans have survived on this planet for as long as we have. Like with any other job or task, we learn to parent as we go along – by making our own mistakes and doing things lots of times.

The 100th nappy you change will be a lot better than the first!

If you want advice, ‘how to’ videos and guides, check out the NHS website and those run by relevant organisations (see *Chapter 7. What to do if you are struggling and where to find help* for a list). And don’t be afraid to ask for help.

Other parents will understand how you feel and share their top tips. Or call on the professionals: that’s what they’re there for.

### WHAT YOUR INNER CRITIC SAYS

**“Our relationship isn’t going to last, and that’s going to mess things up with my child”.**

Sometimes we become fathers by mistake. Sometimes we’re unsure of our relationship with our partner, or the stresses of new parenthood make things worse.

### HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

New parenthood can be tough, and especially if you don’t feel like you’re ‘on the same page’ with your partner.

The first year after a baby is born is a risky period for parents’ relationships. Parents in couple families are eight times more likely to argue! So, accept that things might be tough for a while.

There are lots of resources out there to help you work on your couple relationship. Be open to trying them, and put the work in. Often, things get better if we get our priorities clear, and improve our communication skills.

At the same time, it’s true that romantic relationships don’t always work out. If that’s so for you, the important thing is to make sure both of you can keep a good relationship with your child.

So, stay calm, don’t rush things, and be kind to each other, as you work out together how you feel, and what happens next.



## WHAT YOUR INNER CRITIC SAYS

### **“I don’t love my child”.**

Some fathers, and some mothers, feel this: check out parenting forums online and you’ll find threads devoted to this theme.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

Ask a group of Dads if they love their children, and most will say yes. But some will say it confidently and others less so.

Among the less sure Dads will be men who are physically quite ‘distant’ from their child. Some of us work very long hours, and even when we’re at home, we defer to Mum as the ‘chief parent’. So, we probably don’t hold our child very often, or for very long – and we don’t know their likes and dislikes, so if they start whining, we quickly hand them back to Mum.

Some of us also hold quite traditional views, about men needing not to be too ‘touchy feely’, for example. We might feel like an outsider in the family. If this sounds like you, and you want to change things, the good news is that you can.

Step by step, increase the amount of time you spend with your child. Even ten minutes a day can make a big difference. Relax, watch their face and listen to the noises they make; pull faces and see how they respond. If they like it, do it more. Try to find how they like to be held and touched. Show and describe things to them, like flowers, colours and pictures in books.

If they’re a bit older, see what words they know. Ask them about their day and listen to their answer. Share a story. Tell them about your day, and how you feel. It doesn’t matter if they won’t understand: they’ll just enjoy your voice.

The more time and commitment you give to a child, the more they’ll open up and respond to you. That’s where you’ll find the love. Attachments don’t happen straight away: like any relationship, they build over time.



## Learning to relax

You may know that breathing exercises are taught in childbirth classes. What you might not have realised is that these can be just as important for us Dads, as they are for Mums.

If, like most biological Dads, you decide to be present at the birth, you'll find that calm, deep breathing can help you manage your anxiety, keep the atmosphere calm and help labour progress.

Breathing exercises can be useful for all kinds of fathers, and not just when your children are small. As a Dad, learning how to relax in a short amount of time will help you stay calm. Tuning into yourself in this way can help you to manage your frustrations with Mum, your partner, your child, and sometimes, yourself.

So, take a long, deep breath and then slowly exhale to let go of stress and tension. A great technique is to make sure your stomach expands when you breathe in, and contracts when you exhale. This is the opposite of what we normally do and breathing this way can really help to calm your brain, body, and mind.

You could even go one step further, and try meditation, mindfulness, or yoga exercises. Lots of Dads swear by them.

## You're not alone

Men have been becoming fathers – biological fathers, stepfathers, adoptive fathers – since human life began.

So, while each of us travels our own, individual fatherhood journey, we do so in a world full of men on similar paths. Hopefully, it's reassuring to know that what's happening to you now is such a universal experience: there are millions of other Dads out there to learn from and connect with!

As a father you will need to connect, and stay connected, with lots of people. Your child's mother will be one of them and keeping a strong, positive co-parenting relationship with her – whether or not you're a couple – should be one of your priorities.

But it's not just about you two (and of course there may be more than two parents in your child's life anyway!).





Staying connected with other people, even if it feels like just another thing to add to your already huge 'to do' list, is an important aspect of being a good Dad. Babies take around 20 years of growing up before they fly the nest. When they do, you'll feel a whole lot better about it if you've built a network of loving friends, family and professionals who've been with you on your fatherhood journey and can help you navigate the next stage of your life.

#### **For example:**

- You'll need to connect with doctors, teachers, nursery workers or childminders, as well as with the other children around your child (and their parents).
- You may want to ask for advice from, and share ideas with, other Dads and Mums (including your own, and/or others from previous generations).
- You'll want to go out with your mates (whether they're Dads or not) and just let off steam.
- You may want to share your deepest feelings with the people who know you best.

## **Cleaning up your act**

Many men find that fatherhood is a great opportunity to give up smoking and rethink their relationship with drugs and alcohol. This is partly about protecting our children from direct harm. We know secondhand smoke is bad news for babies, and if we're drunk or out of it

on drugs we're less likely to keep them safe. But it's also about living by example: getting to a place where we'd be happy for our child to copy our behaviours. Of course, as fathers, we probably want to stay alive for as long as possible, to see our children fully grown and happy!

## **Stopping smoking**

If you're a smoker, the single best thing you can do to help your child is to quit. Smokers' children are more likely to become smokers themselves, and that's not a legacy you want to pass on.

Every cigarette smoked contains over 4,000 chemicals. If your partner smokes while pregnant, encourage her to give up by giving up yourself. If you don't smoke, get her some support to help her stop. If she quits, she is likely to have less morning sickness, fewer pregnancy problems and an easier, quicker labour. And your baby is less likely to be born early or sick, have trouble breathing, cry a lot, or die before birth.

Most women manage to give up smoking when they're pregnant. They're more likely to do this if YOU are a non-smoker and supportive. Both of you can find help from the NHS Pregnancy Smoking Helpline (0800 169 9 169) or visit [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) and type in the search engine 'smoking during pregnancy'.

Your doctor, midwife or health visitor can put you in touch with whatever smoking cessation services are available locally and talk to you about using nicotine replacement therapy to help to deal with withdrawal symptoms. Don't worry about telling them you smoke – they are there to help, not to judge you.



## The drugs don't work

Drugs and alcohol change how your brain and body function. They change the balance of chemicals that help your brain to think, feel, make decisions – and look after other people. If you're going through a tough time, it can be tempting to use drugs and alcohol as a coping strategy. But they don't solve anything, and these are addictive substances that can cause all sorts of damage to your physical and mental health, and to your relationships.

Changing drug and alcohol habits can be tough, but you'll be a better Dad for it – and if you make the change, your partner will be more likely to do so to. You can also inspire her to make the difficult change. If you normally drink a lot and find it hard to cut down or give up, talk to the doctor or midwife, find Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or you can call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282. For help with giving up drugs, try Narcotics Anonymous at [www.ukna.org](http://www.ukna.org).

## Getting fit for fatherhood

Being a Dad brings new pressures and demands and may limit the amount of time you have for keeping fit. Try to get into the habit of taking regular exercise if you're not already doing so. It will help you cope better with the tiredness and stress new babies can bring.

Fit Dads have long term influence on children's exercise levels from babyhood to adolescence. In fact, regular physical exercise by fathers is the strongest predictor of teenagers' physical activity – girls' as well as boys'!

There are lots of ways to build exercise into your daily life. Even when you are busy and may not have the time or money to go to gyms or leisure centres, you can do low cost, easy exercises from stair climbing to walking and skipping.

Find out more here: [ww.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/free-fitness-ideas](http://ww.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/free-fitness-ideas).

## Chapter 3. Supporting your baby's biological mother



**Whatever you are going through on the road to fatherhood, spare a thought for the person carrying, giving birth to, and feeding your baby.**

Making the transition to motherhood can be a challenge. Pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding for example, are such everyday facts of life that it's easy to forget that human reproduction is a miracle!

But it's important to remember that accompanying you on your journey to fatherhood is someone going through an almost incredible physical and emotional transformation.

**Please note:** This chapter focuses on how we as fathers can support our babies' biological mothers on their journeys to motherhood. Most fathers observe this voyage as part of a couple.

If that's not the case for you, you may still find the information/advice here useful. *Box 4. Physical changes women go through during pregnancy*, lists some of the physical changes women experience during a healthy pregnancy.

These are the standard effects of hormonal changes, their bodies adapting to the sheer size of the baby growing inside them – and the additional demands placed on them to feed and keep the baby healthy. As you can see, they add up to quite a big deal!

Many women seem to sail through all this with ease; others find it more difficult, and for some it can be a real struggle. Most, if not all, cope better if the people closest to them – including us Dads – give them physical comfort and emotional support.

See *Box 4. Physical changes women go through during pregnancy* on the physical changes women can go through.







## Box 4. Physical changes women go through during pregnancy

MONTH	HOW MUM MIGHT BE FEELING
 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• She might suffer from morning sickness – feeling sick and vomiting.</li><li>• Her breasts might feel swollen and sore.</li><li>• She might feel tired.</li><li>• She might need to pee more often.</li><li>• She might 'go off' some foods.</li></ul>
 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All the symptoms above could carry on or disappear.</li><li>• She might be moody.</li><li>• She might 'go off' sex.</li></ul>
 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Her morning sickness and other symptoms may start to lighten or disappear.</li><li>• She might start to feel her abdomen beginning to widen.</li><li>• She might start to experience food cravings.</li></ul>
 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By the end of this month, she might feel 'quickenings' – the baby moving around. Some women describe this as feeling a bit like 'butterflies' or 'bubbles'.</li><li>• If it hasn't already, her morning sickness might subside.</li><li>• She might feel less tired and moody.</li><li>• Her sex drive might start to return.</li><li>• She might start to look pregnant and will need some new clothes to fit over the bump.</li></ul>
 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By this time, she might have gained up to one stone in weight.</li><li>• Her appetite might have increased.</li><li>• She might be feeling more tired.</li><li>• She might get bloated, constipated or have heartburn.</li><li>• Her belly button might pop out.</li></ul>





MONTH	HOW MUM MIGHT BE FEELING
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The baby might be moving a lot.</li><li>• Her joints may start to feel looser, because her body is starting to get ready for childbirth.</li><li>• She might start to experience 'Braxton Hicks' contractions – which are totally natural but also uncomfortable (and can be quite scary at first!).</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By this point her uterus (womb) might be as big as a basketball, which can make her feel huge and uncomfortable.</li><li>• The skin on her belly is stretching and may become itchy.</li><li>• As well as constipation and heartburn, she might get leg cramps and her gums might bleed.</li><li>• She might be gaining about 1 pound a week in weight.</li><li>• She might get varicose veins or piles (haemorrhoids).</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• She might feel discomfort as the baby pushes on the rib cage and internal organs – and pressure in the pelvic area.</li><li>• Stretch marks may appear on the skin of her abdomen.</li><li>• Braxton Hicks contractions may become more regular.</li><li>• Indigestion and heartburn may increase or become more intense.</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• She might have problems sleeping, because of her increased size, and anxiety about the baby and the birth.</li><li>• She might be 'nesting' and become overly attentive with making your home ready for the baby's arrival.</li><li>• By this stage she might have gained a lot of weight – 35 pounds is about average.</li></ul>





## Looking after her physical health

Dads whose partners are becoming mothers, can do a lot to support their physical health during pregnancy and after the baby has arrived. Here are five key ones:



**Encourage her to rest,** especially in the tiring first 12 weeks of pregnancy – which is also the time when she’s most at risk of miscarriage.



**Stop smoking.** It’s not just the problem of her breathing in your damaging second-hand smoke, if you smoke around her it’s the risk of harming your baby (smoke outside if you have to). If she’s a smoker herself, she is much more likely to cut back or quit if you try to do the same.



**Take exercise together.** Overweight fathers are more likely to raise overweight children – but children are more likely to take exercise if Dad does. So, by working on yourself now, you can get into good habits, which can help your children – and your partner too. See *Box 5*, for more ideas on how to exercise together.



**Cut down on your intake of alcohol and caffeine** (which stops the body absorbing iron, and so makes anaemia more likely). This will encourage her to do the same.



**Help her eat well,** by choosing healthier foods for both of you. If she’s suffering from morning sickness, she may feel sick all or most of the time, especially around food in the kitchen. This can be a great time for us Dads to take the lead on preparing healthy meals. Some women become anaemic when they’re pregnant, which means their body isn’t making enough iron: the best foods for iron include red meat, wholemeal bread, lentils and beans, broccoli and cabbage, dried apricots and figs, and breakfast cereals with added iron.

Calcium is important too: this can be found in milk, yogurt, cheese, and non-dairy foods like tofu, broccoli and dried fruit. Fibre-rich foods like wholemeal bran can help prevent constipation and piles. If she gets indigestion or heartburn, offer small meals (little and often), encourage her to sit up straight when she eats, and not to eat or drink for a few hours before going to bed.

**Note:** Even if you’re not in a relationship with your baby’s mother, it’s good to take this opportunity to think about how you could improve your own diet and exercise, to get ready for fatherhood.



### **Box 5. What exercises should she be doing – and how can I help?**

Getting into an exercise routine can be really good for both of you individually, and together if you are a couple. Mum needs to be as fit as possible to cope with labour, and to help her get in shape after the baby has arrived. The birth could be tiring for you too – sometimes Mum feels most comfortable if you support her weight, for example – so see this as a joint challenge.

A first step might be to go out for regular walks – even half an hour a day is great exercise, gives you time to relax, and can be an excellent boost for your mental health too.

Spending time in nature, perhaps in your local park, can be especially beneficial.

This isn't a time for her to take up a serious exercise programme, but if she already works out or plays sports it's fine to continue – so long as she doesn't overdo it and drinks lots of water.

Swimming for example can be great for pregnant women because the water will support her body as she swims, and it is also considered to be good for the unborn child too.





## Pregnancy: Top 10 questions and answers

### 1 What's morning sickness – and how can I help my partner?

Most expectant mothers get some morning sickness in the first three months – either feeling sick or being sick. It may be set off by particular smells or foods – sometimes just thinking about them. Or even just waking up in the morning! Despite the name, it can happen any time of day.

Morning sickness usually goes away by 12-14 weeks, although for some Mums it lasts all the way through pregnancy or comes and goes. It's not a bad sign – morning sickness shows that her hormones are busy, and your baby is growing.

#### Ways you can help (if you're a couple or in close contact):

- Encourage her to get up slowly and eat a plain biscuit before she gets up
- Prepare little snacks for her so she can eat a little and often rather than main meals. Same goes for drinking water – little but often.
- Plain, bland foods (like toast, crackers, rice) will probably suit her better than fatty, sugary or spicy food.
- Extra rest will help.
- If you are in favour of alternative remedies, some people swear by ginger extract and acupressure bands.

### 2 What are all the tests they keep doing on her?

Your baby's mother will have lots of tests as she goes through her pregnancy. They are usually routine and nothing to worry about.

#### Regular urine samples test for:

- bacteria (germs), which may be a sign of an infection
- protein, which may be a sign of pre-eclampsia, a condition that can be serious for her and the baby
- sugar, which may be a sign of diabetes.

Blood pressure tests check how strongly the blood presses against the walls of blood vessels as it goes around the body. A rise in blood pressure can be an early warning sign of pre-eclampsia. It's normal for women to have lower blood pressure in mid-pregnancy, which might make her feel a bit faint and dizzy when she stands up quickly.

Blood tests are also offered to make pregnancy safer. They normally check:

- her blood group
- whether her blood is rhesus positive or negative (this can affect second and later babies)
- for infectious diseases that could harm her or the baby (HIV, hepatitis B, or syphilis)



- iron levels in her blood
- whether she has or carries an inherited disease such as thalassaemia or (for some people) sickle cell. If she's a carrier, you will also be invited for this test.

### 3 What's a miscarriage and how will we know if it's happening?

Sadly, some pregnancies end in a miscarriage. Most miscarriages happen in the first 12 weeks. They are usually caused because there was something wrong with the development of the baby.

There is nothing anyone can do to stop a miscarriage once it has started. Some Mums sadly feel guilt at the time, that it's their fault – but rest assured, there is nothing that she could have done to stop it, so reassure her of that.

A miscarriage usually begins like a period, by spotting blood from the vagina and mild cramps or backache. If she has these symptoms, it's called a 'threatened miscarriage' because it's not definite that she will lose the baby – sometimes the bleeding stops by itself, and there's no miscarriage. In fact, it's surprisingly common to have light spotting of blood around the time that a period would have been due.

If she does have any bleeding at any time, she should contact the GP or midwife right away. If she is more than six weeks pregnant, she can have an ultrasound scan to check whether the baby has a heartbeat. Some miscarriages happen without any outward signs: a scan reveals that the baby has died. These miscarriages can be especially devastating at the time, for both of you.

If she has a miscarriage, she is likely to feel shocked and very upset – as you will too. Under these circumstances it is important for both of you to take time to recover and to support each other.

### 4 What's pre-eclampsia?

Pre-eclampsia is a common pregnancy condition that can lead to serious problems for Mum, and your baby. Most women who get it only have a mild form, but it can be dangerous. That's one reason why it's so important for Mum to go to antenatal appointments and get her urine tested and her blood pressure checked.

Midwives can spot pre-eclampsia by doing these tests. They're looking out for protein in her wee and high blood pressure, which are signs of pre-eclampsia.

#### **Some women with pre-eclampsia feel completely normal, but others will get the following symptoms:**

- Bad headaches
- Problems seeing, like blurred vision or flashing lights in front of their eyes
- Sudden swelling of their face, hands or feet
- Pain just below the ribs
- Vomiting.

If Mum gets any of these symptoms, one of you should contact your midwife right away. Pre-eclampsia can appear any time after 20 weeks of pregnancy (and very rarely before 20 weeks). The only cure is for your baby to be born.



## 5 How will I know if she needs to see a doctor?

Most women have a straightforward pregnancy with no medical problems, but it's important to know when she needs immediate medical help or advice rather than waiting for her next routine appointment.

### **Make sure that one of you contacts her doctor or midwife right away if any of these things happen:**

- Bleeding from her vagina, especially if she has tummy cramps as well.
- Morning sickness so bad that she is throwing up everything she eats or drinks.
- Unbearable itchiness on her skin – this could be a sign of intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy (ICP), a serious liver disorder that needs to be treated.
- A severe headache that doesn't go away – this could be a sign of pre-eclampsia, as could the next two in the list.
- Problems with seeing (like blurred vision or flashing lights in front of your eyes).
- Sudden swelling up of her face, hands or feet (gradual swelling is normal).
- The baby isn't moving as much as normal.

If your baby's mother gets one or more of these symptoms, it doesn't necessarily mean that there is a problem, but the doctor or midwife will want to check it

out to be on the safe side. If she can't speak to her midwife or doctor, she should phone the hospital for advice. The phone numbers will be on the front of her maternity notes. If she can't get hold of a health professional, take her to A&E.

It is more serious if she gets sudden heavy bleeding or blood clots from her vagina, and/or severe tummy pains that don't go away. Call 999 and ask for an ambulance.

## 6 What if she faints?

When Mum gets up from a chair quickly, she may feel dizzy for a moment. That type of faint feeling is caused by not enough oxygen getting to her brain. If there is too little oxygen in her brain, she may fall over. Feeling faint is particularly common among expectant mothers. It can also happen if she stands still for a long time.

### **How can you help?**

- Encourage her to stand up slowly from seated or lying positions, and to change positions often and avoid standing or sitting in one place for too long.
- She should avoid overheating. That means no hot showers or baths. It's too hot if she has to put her foot in slowly to get used to it.
- Make sure she eats regular meals and drinks plenty of fluids.
- Encourage her to take gentle exercise. Walking is a good but, if she feels faint or dizzy during exercise, check with a doctor.
- Tell a doctor or midwife about her symptoms. They may want to check if she has anaemia.





- If she looks like she might faint, help her to sit down, bend over and ask her to breathe deeply to increase the flow of blood to her brain. If she feels faint when lying on her back, she will feel better if she turns onto her right side, so she is not adding pressure on her heart.

7

### What if she gets food cravings?

Lots of expectant mothers get sudden cravings for particular foods, and no one is sure why. It's possible that it's a woman's body trying to tell her that she lacks some important vitamins or minerals (although that's a bit unlikely if she is craving doughnuts!) It's also possible that it's just her hormones messing around.

The most common cravings are for sweet, salty, spicy or sour foods. There's no harm in her following her cravings once a day, so long as she is craving a real food and isn't binge eating. If she finds herself longing to eat something odd like chalk, earth or coal, it's definitely not a good idea to listen to her body on that one.

What can you do? Be understanding – be careful not to make her feel awkward about something that is perfectly normal. And make sure the fridge is stocked with what she craves at night, so she doesn't have to suffer until the morning.

8

### Can we stop using contraception?

This is a question many expectant couples ask themselves, and the safest answer is no: you should not throw away the condoms! It's actually a good idea

to wear one, because it will protect your baby from infection.

Remember, it's completely safe for a pregnant woman to have sex – although she may want to try out different positions to get comfortable as her shape changes. The only exception is if she has any heavy bleeding in pregnancy, in which case the midwife or doctor may advise her to avoid sex. Sex can sometimes cause some very light bleeding, which is nothing to worry about.

9

### Why is she so tired?

Expectant Mums can get very tired during the day. The simple reason is the enormous amount of energy that goes into nurturing a growing baby. It is amazing that women manage to do so much else while they are pregnant.

Encourage her to take breaks. Some women swear by a power-nap – a short sleep of just 10 or 15 minutes, with an alarm set to wake up afterwards. But if they are not at work, college or school and have the time, then it's good if they just listen to their bodies and doze for as long as they need. Sleep is going to be in short supply once the baby arrives, so it's great if she can pack in as much as she can now.

10

### Should she be eating for two?

They say that pregnant women are eating for two. It's true, but she should be careful about what she eats. She only needs to eat an extra 200 calories a day. Ideally she should make sensible choices about where those extra calories come from (clue: not just chocolate!)





Healthy 200 calorie choices might be things like a handful of grapes in low fat yoghurt; a couple of crackers with cream cheese; two slices of wholegrain toast with low fat spread; or a banana smoothie.

**Remember** – it's good to encourage your baby's Mum to have a healthy diet, but don't be too negative and critical about her eating, try to be loving and diplomatic; these can be sensitive times. Also, don't treat this like it's just her problem: she'll find it much easier not to snack if you set a good example.

## Women's emotional journey

Studies suggest that as many as one in five women experience depression or anxiety when they are pregnant or in the first year after the baby's birth. Many feel stressed, lose confidence, and suffer lower self-esteem. Before the baby arrives, they may feel upset about their body changes and possibly fearful about the birth and the baby's health. After the exhaustion of labour and the birth, they need time to recover – and if they are breastfeeding, building and maintaining a close bond around feeding can be physically and emotionally draining.

Just like we men do when we become fathers, women have a lot to get their heads around when they become mothers. The idea that women are 'natural' parents is so strong in our culture that many Mums also feel like they don't match up to the 'ideal' vision of motherhood that surrounds them.

'Peer support' from other Mums, along with help from professionals such as midwives and health visitors (many of

whom will also themselves be mothers), can help women make sense of the changes they are going through, and how they feel.

But we can play a vital role too, creating space for Mums to share their thoughts and fears, providing 'tea and sympathy', reassuring them about how fantastic and loved they are, and helping them feel good about the way they look.

## Coping with mood swings

Some men find that expectant mothers' emotions are a bit unpredictable. She might be happy, shocked, excited and worried all at the same time. She may be hypersensitive and get upset or angry about little things, or what you or others might perceive as being little things; or about what you or other people do or say. She might also become forgetful and find it hard to concentrate. Be reassured that her hormones will calm down after the first few months. Don't feel like you have to solve how she feels: your job is to listen, empathise and show her love.

Breathing can help. Find time to be calm, particularly when you are both stressed. It is important to avoid arguing at these times. Talking helps, too.

Since both of you are going through big changes, sometimes you'll need some outside help. Either or both of you may feel angry, sad, lonely, or fearful. Sometimes chatting with other people can help you put a name to your feelings, and work through them. Could you ask your Dad how he felt? Or a friend who is already a Dad? Maybe there are Dads you



could talk to in your antenatal group. Your Mum, sister or a female friend might help you understand what things are like for your partner. People love to share their wisdom: all you have to do is ask.

### **Keeping things simple**

Be careful about taking on big, new projects at work, because you already have one at home: becoming a Dad! On which note, try not to become too ambitious at home either. Many of us decide we need more space when we know there's a baby arriving. Our nesting instincts can kick in and lead us to take on big DIY projects, like reorganising and redecorating rooms – or even moving to a new home.

Babies take up very little space until they're walking, and they certainly don't care what colour the walls are! The most

important things to work on at this stage, are your relationships with each other and with the baby. Maybe the house stuff can wait until they're a bit older?

### **Coping with sleep problems**

Expectant Mums may find it difficult to get enough sleep – long before the birth. If you live together, that sleeplessness might also stop you from getting a full night of rest. Maybe she has to get up and go to the loo several times. Perhaps, it is hard for her to find a comfortable position to sleep in. This might lead one or both of you to feel tired and grumpy through the day.

People around you will respond by telling you to get used to it, because there will be plenty of broken sleep when the baby arrives. Sadly, they are right! Some women find they sleep best with a pillow



between their knees and a pillow behind their back. Or try raising her on a pile of pillows so she is half-sitting, half-lying. Try not to get angry if she's disturbing your sleep routine – even if you know you're going to feel tired at work the next day. Remember, this is your baby she's carrying, and she has no choice but to be the one to carry it! So support her.

## Getting ready for the birth

On the journey from conception to birth, Mum (and you) may attend a number of midwife appointments, scans and tests all building up to the birth of the baby. Along the way decisions need to be made: where to have the baby, what kind of pain relief Mum would rather have, whether to go for a water birth and so on. These choices are primarily hers, but will also depend on what's available in your local area.

She's the one giving birth to the baby, so your job at this point is to help her get the information she needs to make informed decisions, and support her in whatever those decisions are. Attending antenatal classes, asking questions of midwives, and looking at some trusted websites, should help both of you get a sense of what feels right.

Sometimes, even the best plans experience setbacks along the way and you may both need to change your ideas about how pregnancy and birth are going to be. If things perhaps don't go how you had thought, remember to keep conversations with Mum going, support her to adapt to these changes and discuss any concerns that you both may have. You could support her to

get the information that she needs and perhaps seek support from your trusted support networks or websites. If you feel like you need more information than you're being given, don't be afraid to ask – and keep asking.

On rare occasions, healthcare staff might give you and/or Mum bad news about your baby. This may leave you both facing the decision of whether or not to terminate the pregnancy. If this happens you will both need space to digest and discuss what's happening. Whatever your eventual decision, try to focus on supporting each other, and be prepared to share your feelings with trusted family and friends, as well as asking whatever questions you have of the medical professionals. You may also find specialist organisations and bereavement counselling useful. At the end of this chapter there are some links to more information about screening and scans, and interviews with parents who've received bad news and made tough decisions.

## Your guide to contractions

At some point Mum may experience contractions. These are usually a practice-run known as Braxton Hicks contractions (named after the 19th century doctor who discovered them). They happen as her body tries out what labour feels like. These contractions last for a few seconds – with a strong tightening across the belly and sometimes in the back and legs – and then stop. They may feel uncomfortable, even scary at first, and they are different in that they don't settle into a regular rhythm like 'real' labour contractions.



In contrast, real labour involves slow, regular contractions that get steadily stronger, often with pain in the lower legs, the back and the abdomen. If her waters have not broken, there is no need to contact the midwife until contractions are ten minutes apart.

If she has Braxton Hicks contractions, it helps if she moves around while she has them. You could do some deep breathing with her while they are happening. Sometimes, having sex can set off Braxton Hicks contractions, but sex does not lead to premature birth, so don't worry – it does not endanger the baby.

## Being a birth partner

Lots of men enter the labour ward feeling like a spare part – and all too often, nobody helps get rid of that feeling by explaining what you're really there for. So, here's our recommendation.

### You are basically there to do four things:

- 1. Act as a partner and witness to this miracle.**
- 2. Help keep the atmosphere calm** by attending to her needs and managing your own anxiety.
- 3. Support her as she wants to be supported**, including helping her to breathe and move around in the way that works best for her.
- 4. Make sure that her wishes and needs – including around pain relief – are understood** by the clinicians.

If you've ever seen someone having a baby on TV, chances are she was lying on a hospital bed with her knees up and legs open. Fair enough, it's possible to do it that way but generally, keeping upright and keeping moving will make it less painful for her and help her labour go faster.

During the first stage (opening) contractions, she has many options. She could lean on the wall, on a chair or with her arms around you, and rock her pelvis. She might want to kneel up, holding onto you. She could kneel down on all fours and rock. She could sit upright on a large ball. She could get into a warm bath or birth pool. Or whatever feels right!

When it's time for the second (pushing) stage of labour, staying upright will help her to give birth quicker. Your baby has to twist down through your partner's bony pelvis, and her pelvis is open wider if she is upright. For example, she could kneel on the floor and hold onto the bed, or she could kneel on the bed and hold onto you.

As you can see, in all of this, you can be the mother's rock during labour. It might feel like fun, or it might even feel a bit scary or daunting. Consider talking to the midwife about it in advance, so you feel confident about what to do.

## Dilation: what is it and why does it matter?

During labour, you will hear professionals talking about dilation. When they do, they are referring to the mother's cervix, which is the neck of her womb. The cervix is closed during pregnancy and



needs to open for your baby to be born. Contractions open her cervix little by little. The midwife will check how open it is when she is in labour. Once the cervix reaches 10cm, it is fully open ('dilated') and it's time for her to push the baby out.

Dilation of the cervix is seen as a marker for how the labour is progressing, so midwives pay a lot of attention to it. (By the way, birth can be an invasive experience for women. It is good to remind Mum that she does not have to have a vaginal examination if she prefers not to. Clinicians do their best to listen to expectant mothers, but you can be on her side to show her that you care and speak up if she feels that her wishes have not been heard.)

## The power of breathing

Good breathing is vital for mother and baby and can be key to having a birth that feels like it's under control, rather than led by panic. It helps to reduce pain during labour and to ensure that both get sufficient oxygen. Practising breathing in advance will help her, and will get you ready to support her during labour.

When a woman is in labour, the muscles of her womb contract (tighten) harder and harder. If she is feeling tense or scared, her other muscles tighten up too and this can make her labour more painful. At the same time, if she is feeling panicky, her breathing may become shallower and faster, and this means mother and baby may not get enough oxygen.

To stop these things from happening, lots of women practise relaxation and deep breathing with their partners beforehand, to foster calmness during labour.

You can practise breathing together in the weeks before the labour, so that it becomes more like second nature in the birthing room – see *Box 6. How to do breathing practice.*

## How long will it take for her to recover from the birth?

Birth can be painful and messy. New mothers can emerge quite bruised and swollen. If she has had a vaginal birth, she might have had an episiotomy (a surgical cut) or experienced a tear to make it easier for the baby's head to emerge. As a result, she may have had stitches.

### Here are a few things that might make her feel more comfortable. She could:

- take paracetamol.
- sit on a cold pack (like a bag of frozen peas) wrapped in a cloth for up to half an hour at a time.
- have a warm bath.
- wash herself carefully where the stitches and bruising are (without soap) and dry herself carefully.
- wear big, loose, comfort clothing.

If the pain and discomfort isn't getting better after a few weeks, encourage her to talk to her midwife.





### **Box 6. How to do breathing practice**

Sit quietly together. Perhaps, Mum will put her hands on her bump. Notice how there is a rhythm about breathing – a few seconds in, a little pause, and a few seconds out. Together, you may start to mirror the timing of Mum's breathing. Now, try quietly saying the word 'baby' in time to the breathing. Say 'ba-' as you breathe in slowly and say '-by' as you breathe out slowly.

Do this a few times, keeping the rhythm going. If you can support Mum's breathing like this when she is having a contraction, it will help her body to stay relaxed and she will get plenty of oxygen.

Even if she doesn't use this when she is in labour, it's a nice way to relax together and focus your minds while she is pregnant.

## **Getting ready for breastfeeding**

When your baby is born, even if you can't provide them with milk from your body, you can still play an important role in supporting their feeding. You can help to create a calm environment for Mum and the baby, while she is trying to breastfeed. It can be difficult, but your encouragement can make all the difference.

Whether or not she plans to breastfeed for a long time, it's worth her having a go for the first few days because the first milk her body makes is really special.

It's called 'colostrum' and it's a perfect first food for your baby, packed with exactly what they need. It protects them from germs, is easily digested by their tiny tummy, helps prevent jaundice (when a baby's skin goes yellow), and even helps them do their first poo!

An important principle is 'responsive feeding'. This is where Mum establishes eye-to-eye contact with the baby and delivers food slowly. Feeding is like a conversation, a back-and-forth interaction, with moments for pausing, before carrying on. It will be important to be calm and peaceful when feeding, in a quiet place where those involved can relax together for this very important time.

When your baby moves on to other forms of feeding, the responsibility can be shared. For now, your role is to help make feeding a pleasure for everyone.

Mum might hand the baby over to you once feeding is finished, for example so the baby is away from the breast and knows that feeding is over for now. Perhaps you will become a 'burping' expert, gently rubbing your baby's back after feeding and settling them to sleep.



## Useful links for both parents

### Information about giving up smoking

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/nhs-stop-smoking-services-help-you-quit](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/nhs-stop-smoking-services-help-you-quit)

### Information about healthy living

[www.nhs.uk/live-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well) including sections on eating, sleep, alcohol, exercise and mental health

### Information about looking after your mental health:

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/looking-after-your-mental-health](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/looking-after-your-mental-health)

### Information about sickle cell and thalassemia

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/screening-sickle-cell-thalassaemia-pregnant](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/screening-sickle-cell-thalassaemia-pregnant)

### Information about scans and screening

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/screening-tests](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/screening-tests)

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/20-week-scan](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/20-week-scan)

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/screening-for-downs-edwards-pataus-syndrome](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/screening-for-downs-edwards-pataus-syndrome)

[Interviews with parents about their experiences of antenatal screening](#)

[Interviews with parents about when something is wrong with the baby](#)

### Information about miscarriage

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/miscarriage](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/miscarriage)

[www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk](http://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk)

### Information about pre-eclampsia

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/pre-eclampsia](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pre-eclampsia)

[www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/patients/patient-information-leaflets/pregnancy/pi-pre-eclampsia.pdf](http://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/patients/patient-information-leaflets/pregnancy/pi-pre-eclampsia.pdf)

[www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/pregnancy-complications/pre-eclampsia-information-and-support](http://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/pregnancy-complications/pre-eclampsia-information-and-support)

[www.action-on-pre-eclampsia.org.uk](http://www.action-on-pre-eclampsia.org.uk)

### Information about labour and birth

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth)

### Information about baby feeding

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding)

[www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/breastfeeding](http://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/breastfeeding)





[Engaging fathers in the perinatal period to support breastfeeding](#) is a guide for midwives and other healthcare professionals, but includes lots of information that you and your baby's mother might find useful and interesting.

St John Ambulance basic first aid courses online: [www.sja.org.uk](http://www.sja.org.uk)

Resources to help you support Mum's mental health, collated by the Maternal Mental Health Alliance: [www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/resources/mums-and-families](http://www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/resources/mums-and-families)

### Premature birth and surgery

About one in 13 babies in the UK are estimated<sup>3</sup> to be born prematurely (that is, before the 37th week of pregnancy), and need to be looked after in a neonatal care unit. Sometimes premature babies need surgery to help them survive. These are worrying times for you and Mum, and can make your baby's early weeks really difficult. You'll need lots of emotional and practical support, so try to work out how best to handle this situation together. Remember, thousands of Dads have been here before you, and there's help out there – even if sometimes it might feel like everyone's talking to Mum.

#### Here are some links to information and support:

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth/signs-of-labour/premature-labour-and-birth](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth/signs-of-labour/premature-labour-and-birth)

[www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth/after-the-birth/special-care-ill-or-premature-babies](http://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/labour-and-birth/after-the-birth/special-care-ill-or-premature-babies)

[www.bliss.org.uk/dont-forget-dads](http://www.bliss.org.uk/dont-forget-dads)

[www.healthtalk.org/parents-experiences-neonatal-surgery/overview](http://www.healthtalk.org/parents-experiences-neonatal-surgery/overview)

### Stillbirth

A stillbirth is when a baby is born dead after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy. It happens in around one in every 250 births in England and Wales. Every baby death is traumatic for parents – including us Dads, even if all too often we get forgotten. If your baby dies before, during or after the birth, you – like Mum – will need time and space to deal with your loss, both together and as individuals. If possible, make use of whatever bereavement support is on offer in your area.

#### Here are some links to information and support:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/stillbirth/what-happens](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stillbirth/what-happens)

[www.sands.org.uk](http://www.sands.org.uk)

3. [Bliss estimate Prematurity statistics](#) in the UK: We estimate that around 60,000 babies are born prematurely in the UK every year. This means that 1 in every 13 babies born in the UK will be born premature (before 37 weeks of pregnancy).
  - ISD, (2016). Births in Scottish Hospitals: Year ending March 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Maternity-and-Births/Publications/data-tables.asp>
  - Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland Child Health System, Children's Health in Northern Ireland, December 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/RUAG%20Childrens%20Health%20in%20NI%20-%202016-17%20-%20FINAL%20-%20Dec%202017.pdf>
  - ONS. (2017). Births in England and Wales by Characteristics of Birth, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales>

## Chapter 4. Looking after your relationship with your partner



### Time to talk

Becoming parents can quickly stir up lots of thoughts and emotions, ranging from excitement to worry, in both you and your partner. That's normal. Set aside a regular time to talk and listen to each other – that will help you to stay close.

This is a time in your life when communication may be different and more difficult than previously with all the additional things going on. So, try the 'Speaker/Listener' technique. Take turns for one minute at a time, to be, first, the 'Speaker', and then swap to become the 'Listener'. Listen actively without interrupting, disagreeing, or offering solutions. You may even find passing a 'speaking baton' between you helps this process and makes it a bit more light-hearted. Ideally, you could do this every day, but you'll probably find putting at least a session aside once a week to adopt this new process works well. You may find that, gradually, it just becomes a normal part of how you communicate. Practise regularly so that, once your baby arrives, you can use this technique to keep checking in with each other.

### Deciding who does what

Some people think fathers should be the breadwinners and mothers should be 'stay at home Mums' doing the primary caring. This is sometimes because of tradition or simply because that's what their parents brought them up to believe. For many people, these gendered ideas hold

true even in 'non-traditional' families (for example if you're a gay Dad you might find people assuming you do the earning even if you're a stay-home father).

If Mum spends years out of the workplace, or ends up doing all the school runs, doctors' appointments and so on, her career may not take off until the children are older. This may leave you working longer hours or going for better paid, more demanding jobs, which could mean you end up seeing less of your family. But if the worst happens, and you end up out of a job... does that mean that you'll be no good as a Dad? Absolutely not! Mums often make great 'providers', and Dads can be great 'stay-home' parents too.

Questions about 'who does what' are really important in couple relationships, particularly where children are involved. Research suggests that parent-couples tend to be happier and closer when they share the earning, caring and domestic/household tasks. Which means making sure tasks are divided up in ways that are clear and agreed by both of you, rather than by making assumptions like 'she's at home with the baby so of course she'll do most of the housework', or 'he'll do all the DIY because he's a man, and men like that kind of thing'!

Don't wait till your baby arrives to start thinking about all this – do it as early as possible so you're in the right frame of mind beforehand. This is an opportunity to break out of the limitations of 'typical' male or female roles, and if that's what you want to do, you may need to get



creative. Maybe you have a friend or relative with a baby? If so, and you feel like you need some practice, ask if they'd let you hold their baby, let you watch them change a nappy and tell you about what the baby does at different ages.

In the boxes on page 39-40, we've listed some key tasks that – as a 'parenting team' – you will need to get done. Maybe you can think of others to add.

Organise a quiet time to sit down with your partner (and anyone else on the 'parenting team') and talk through who should be doing which tasks and when.

Once you've agreed your list, revisit it every two to three months, to make sure the balance of roles and responsibilities is working for both of you, and neither of you are slipping into patterns of behaviour that cause resentment.

### Box 7: Who does what?

CHILDCARE-RELATED TASKS	WHO WILL DO IT? If sharing, decide a rough percentage for each
Shopping for food	
Planning and preparing meals	
Cleaning up after meals	
Cleaning the house	
Taking out the rubbish/recycling	
Laundry: washing, folding, ironing	
Providing income	
Paying bills	
DIY/repairs	
Other (e.g. car maintenance, garden)	

*continued overleaf...*



<b>CHILDCARE-RELATED TASKS</b>	<b>WHO WILL DO IT?</b> If sharing, decide a rough percentage for each
Feeding our child	
Cleaning or bathing our child	
Changing our baby's nappies	
Dressing our child	
Putting our child to bed/getting them to sleep	
Getting up at night if our child wakes up	
Playing with our child	
Deciding whether or how to respond to our child's crying – and responding	
Arranging for babysitters or childcare	
Organising and attending doctors' appointments	
Disciplining our child	
Taking our child to/from nursery or other childcare	
Buying clothes and toys for our child	



## What will you give up?

Having a new baby may mean that for a while at least, you won't have the time, energy, or money to do all the things you used to do.

Be mentally prepared to work out what things you really couldn't do without, and what you are each willing to give up – both in terms of shared and 'solo' interests. Becoming a parent is often about making compromises.

Once you've each worked out your lists, use the 'Speaker/Listener' technique to discuss them. What could each of you do to make sure the other can carry on doing one (or more) thing on their priority list? Is one of you prepared to give up more than the other? Once the plan is drawn up, take a few minutes to look at it and ask yourselves 'does this feel fair'? And plan to revisit the agreement at regular intervals.

### Box 8: Things I can't do without/Things I could give up

Things I can't do without (examples)	Things I could give up (examples)
Going to the gym	Takeaway food
Seeing my mates for a pint once a week	Seeing mates more than once a week
Watching my football team on TV	Reducing the level of sport I watch

### Your list of activities might include things like:

- Good sleep
- Exercise and playing sport
- Eating out
- Movies, cinema
- Sports events
- Netflix/TV/Gaming
- Keeping the house clean
- Sex
- Shopping or going out with friends
- Visiting or hosting family.





## Handling disagreements

Parenting is full of challenges that can be tackled in different ways. How will you manage feeding, burping, settling? What's the best way to help your child sleep? How should you do bathing? What are the routines that really matter, and what can be left more to chance? Who will be in charge of your baby, and when?

Make sure you talk out these issues regularly, so disagreements can be settled easily. And if, as a Dad, you want a full and equal place in these conversations, be prepared to put the work in. You will need to earn your place at the table, by knowing from experience, rather than in theory, what works and what doesn't.

Do what mothers have been doing for a long time: ask questions, gather knowledge, read blogs about child-rearing. Step up. Do the work. This will give you confidence to encourage Mum to step back at times, to make space for you to be an active Dad. This can be especially important if you're surrounded by people who think Mum always knows best.

## Arguing better

Research shows that nine out of ten first-time parents argue more than before the child was born.<sup>4</sup> Arguments don't mean everything is going wrong: you are going through a big change and there is a lot to discuss. It's natural to disagree, and sometimes we get annoyed with each other when we discuss things we disagree on! The issue is how to argue in a way that keeps you both happy.

## Here are some top tips for how to do it:

- Don't start an argument with a harsh criticism. Your partner will be defensive, may not listen and little will be achieved. The secret to a sound relationship is where positive comments far outnumber the negatives.
- Avoid generalisations. Keep the small things small and stick to the facts.
- Expand your ways of speaking about emotions. Be more than just angry. You are more likely to be heard, if you can also express sadness, upset, fear, unhappiness, disappointment and need.
- Don't stonewall – maybe you need a 'time out' to calm down sometimes but if this is the case let her know you need a break and will return to the discussion, rather than storming out or shutting down discussion.
- Make up before bedtime – try to avoid sleeping on an argument, be the one to extend the olive branch.

## Helping each other cope with less sleep

Sleeplessness in babies can be one of the biggest problems of early parenthood. It leaves you tired and grumpy and can mess up your day. In the depth of the night, when your baby wakes and it's just the two of you, it may not always feel like a problem. Sometimes, it is a wonderful private time, when all the clutter of the day is set aside, and you can take care of them without anything interrupting the moment. Helping your little one find the peace they need to drift back into sleep

4. Medina J. (2014) *Brain rules for baby: How to raise a smart and happy child from zero to five*. London: Pear Press (book)





is such a privilege, and helps create a terrific connection that will still be there as they grow up. Some babies sleep better than others. If you're unlucky you might have a child that really struggles – and if that's the case, you'll need to share the burden.

### Here are some top tips from Dads:

- If you can, try to master the art of 'power napping', grabbing 10 – 30 minutes when you can.
- Prioritise sleep over housework. It's fine to let your domestic standards drop for a while in these early weeks!
- See if you can organise some flexibility in your work – even if it's just once a week, getting home an hour early or going in an hour late can make a big difference.
- Save time by 'batch cooking' and freezing meals – so helpful for days when you are both really tired.
- If you have family members keen to help out, ask them to do useful things like cleaning or the laundry, or bringing you a home-cooked meal. Sometimes people really want to help: they just need you to tell them what to do.

### Coping with parents

All grandparents will have their own ideas about your baby. They might want to be really involved. They might stand back. They might be pushy – with fixed ideas about what mothers and Dads should do. But it's for you and Mum to say what you need from them. Sometimes you might have to ask them to step back a little. It's also for you – not them – to decide what type of parents you want to be.

Fathers can be edged out of decision-making by over-enthusiastic extended families – and sometimes Mums unintentionally allow this to happen. If that's a danger, make sure you discuss the issue, so you're both alert to it and send out a consistent message.

It's good to show how involved you are, so no-one tries, however unconsciously, to take over your role. The more capable you are with baby care, cooking and housework, the more confidently you can say to others, 'I can do that' and the more they will respect your role.

### Sex

Our sex lives can take a battering when we become parents. But the good news is, whilst it might be a game changer, it needn't be 'game over'. The experience of pregnancy, birth, recovery and breastfeeding can bring all sorts of changes to a woman's sexual appetite. Some women and men find this a time of increased attraction and intimacy, whilst others feel the opposite. All these responses are natural and normal.

Sex is safe during pregnancy, although you may want to try out different positions to get comfortable as her shape changes. It won't cause a miscarriage. It's not strange. It's normal and natural. You might be anxious that you will hurt the baby. You won't, although it's probably best to use a condom to protect against infection. Late in pregnancy, having an orgasm can set off practice contractions (called Braxton Hicks contractions), but it won't make her labour start. The only exception to all this is if she has any heavy bleeding, in which case the midwife or doctor may advise against sex.



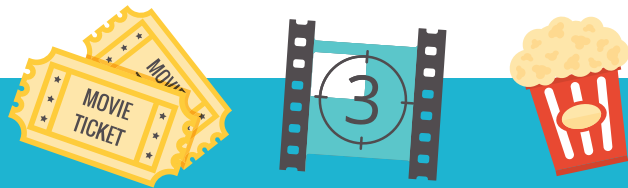
After the baby has arrived, there's no right or wrong time to start having sex again but most new mothers want to wait at least a month or two, because they're too sore or too exhausted.

Don't pressure her to start again sooner than she wishes. It's also a good idea to use condoms until six weeks after the birth, to prevent infections while your partner is healing. Oh, and it is important to remember – she could get pregnant again if you have unprotected sex just three weeks after giving birth, even if her periods haven't started. You might feel that you need to hold back from sex because you're worried about hurting

her. You might also feel a bit rejected at this time when you cannot be as intimate as you'd like to be. Try to accept that her reluctance is about her need to recover. Make her feel good about herself, show that you still fancy her and let her know that, while you're looking forward to sex again when she feels OK, there's no rush.

Whoever your partner is, male or female, be prepared for sex needing to be a bit less spontaneous than before if you're parenting together. You're both busy and tired, and there's another person to eat up time and distract you from each other. Why not try having regular date nights – see *Box 9: Date nights*.

### Box 9: Date nights



Planning regular nights together is a good way to take care of, and often rejuvenate, your relationship. Get into the habit before the baby is born so it's already a regular event when you are busy with the baby and might forget. Whether or not these special times lead to sex, the important thing is to keep talking and touching (think cuddles, hugs and massages!). That way you'll keep your physical bond strong.

Remember, also, that sex in the past might have seemed very spontaneous but, in reality – especially at the beginning – you probably both went to a lot of trouble. You planned what you wore, where you went, how you behaved, how you looked. Taking the same approach to post-baby sex can be helpful. Plus, remember that your partner may feel happier and more romantically inclined if you have done the cleaning, housework and brought flowers!

You will also need help with your child, so you have time together as a couple. Start to ask yourselves: who else would we trust with our baby? Talk to them about this role and begin training them up. It is especially important that you, as a Dad, can identify your support circle, people you know who can step in to help your new family and your relationship to work well.



## Your child in the future

When we become parents, we have hopes and dreams about our children, and sharing these with your partner is a big part of how your relationship will evolve and hopefully grow.

If you're a biological Dad, your child will have two copies of almost every gene: one from you and one from Mum. Lots of things are inherited through these genes – for example the colour of their hair, eyes and skin, how tall they are likely to be as an adult, and whether or not they have freckles.

Genes also affect whether they'll have some health conditions, like allergies and asthma.

But your child is not going to be a mini version of you – or their Mum – even if sometimes you and others may feel like there are strong similarities. Just know that this is your child, and encourage them to be whoever and whatever they want to be.

They will show you that they are unique – and if you have another child, then that baby will be different again. It is good, though, to tune into key characteristics. Some babies are active, others placid. Some are curious and confident, others more fearful. Some poo regularly. Some sleep fitfully. Be ready to look, learn and adapt.

Having said all that, there are some things that we as parents want to pass on to our children that go beyond genetics: values and personal qualities, that we'd like to instil in them.



It can be useful to think and talk about what these are, as part of building the 'parenting team' element of our romantic relationships.

So – what qualities really matter to you in your future-child? Kindness? Determination? Honesty? Humour? Politeness? Obedience? Spirituality? What matters most to Mum? Here's a good exercise. Take a few moments so each of you can separately write down the top ten values you hope to give your child. Then rank them in order of importance and compare your lists.

It's unlikely you'll have exactly the same priorities, even if some coincide. Now's the best time, in the early days, to share your ideas, negotiate and accept any differences. Good parenting relies on mutual understanding and compromise.



## What if our relationship's not working?

Perhaps you're arguing or disagreeing more. Maybe you are not having much sex. Maybe one of you – or both – feels unloved, not understood, unnoticed or invisible!

Here's a good step-by-step approach to addressing these feelings:

### First...

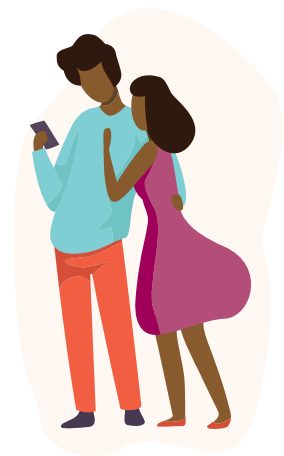
- **Identify a problem but narrow it down**, so it's small. So, don't start with 'she does not love me anymore'. Better to say, for example, 'I feel upset because you did not hug me today.'
- **Agree when and where to talk**, and time limit the conversation. Talk slowly and gently. Take turns by using the 'Speaker/Listener' technique.
- **Don't try to solve the problem.** Just listen to each other. Work out if your partner understands your position and whether you understand hers. Stop there. Sometimes these things just need to be said and heard and that is enough.

### Later...

- **Suggest as many ways as possible** to solve the problem you have understood.
- **Discuss the pros and cons** of each solution.
- **Agree a solution** that you will both try.

Don't expect that solution to work first time – it is a 'test and learn' project.

And don't be afraid to seek some external support if you both feel down, or stuck.



## Useful links for both parents

**Relate:** [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

**Family Lives:** [www.familylives.org.uk/advice/your-family/relationship-advice](http://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/your-family/relationship-advice)

**Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships:** [www.tavistockrelationships.org](http://www.tavistockrelationships.org)

## Chapter 5. Getting to know your baby



**Because our babies don't grow inside us, we fathers can find it harder to 'engage' with them before they're born. It's hard to even imagine what's going on in there!**

*Box 10: Your baby at different stages of pregnancy (page 49-50) gives you a rough idea of what size your baby is, and what they're capable of, at different points during the pregnancy.*

Research shows that babies start to hear sounds from about halfway through the pregnancy (about 18 weeks onwards), and by about 25 weeks they can hear and respond to our voices. Knowing this can be helpful, because it gives us a 'way in' to start building our relationship with them early on. So here are some ideas about how we can engage with our babies at such an early stage...

### Talk to the bump

Babies can learn and listen while they're in the womb. So even if it feels weird at first, talking to the bump can be a great habit to develop. It doesn't matter what you talk about – they won't understand the words. But they'll get used to the sound of your voice, and find its rhythms soothing.

Don't shout, but don't feel the need to whisper either: just talk at a normal level, like you're having a chat. You could even read to them. The idea is that you're getting them used to the sounds they'll

be encountering in their everyday lives once they're born – including them in your world and showing them that you, their Dad, are part of theirs.

### Sound effects

Why not play them some music? Listening to music during pregnancy is not only soothing and uplifting for the mother, but it also has a positive effect on the unborn child. As your baby's brain develops, they will begin to react to the sounds that they hear. It is proven that music can play a role in brain development both before and after birth.

A lullaby will make your baby calmer. They may become still, or reduce their movements, in response to the sound. Some studies even suggest that babies can recognise music that they heard in the womb once they are born.

It's best not to play anything too loud, so go for the more chilled and easy listening tunes in your collection (perhaps leave the heavy metal until they're a bit older). Generally, it's best to keep the environment around your baby calm, so if they start moving around a lot, they might be trying to tell you something – keep the noise down!



Many Dads, including some who are tone deaf, sing to their babies. Again, this can help with early bonding – and you may find it helps you later, because singing a song they’re familiar with can help you soothe them in the first few weeks after birth. There are also specific types of classical music you can buy that are specifically designed to support early child brain development. So, think about music too.

### **The kick inside**

Mum may begin to feel the tiny movements of your unborn baby from about 20 weeks into the pregnancy. By the time she is 30 weeks pregnant these movements will have grown bigger, and you should be able to see them kicking or poking with their feet or elbows. Don’t be concerned – this is perfectly normal.

If you and Mum provide some gentle resistance to these movements by simply putting your hand or Mum’s hand where the kick is experienced the baby may respond by becoming more still – and may even come to recognise your touch.

### **Use your imagination**

Studies suggest that if you spend time imagining your child before they arrive, this can help you form an early bond. Visualising how they might look, what characteristics they might have, and what your relationship might be like – even giving them a nickname, perhaps, and talking about possible future scenarios – can be part of creating a mental space for them, and of signalling clearly to your partner how important your new family is in your life.







## Box 10: Your baby at different stages of pregnancy

AGE	WHAT'S HAPPENING?
Conception	Conception happens when one of your sperm meets and penetrates the mother's egg. This is also known as fertilisation. At this moment, your baby's genetic make-up is already complete, including what sex it will be. Within about three days, the fertilized egg is dividing very fast into many cells. It passes into the womb (also known as the uterus) and attaches itself to the uterine wall. The placenta, which will nourish the baby, also starts to form.
4 weeks	At this point the baby is developing the structures that will eventually form their face and neck. The heart and blood vessels continue to develop. And the lungs, stomach, and liver start to develop. A home pregnancy test would show positive at this point.
8 weeks	The baby is about the size of a fingernail. Eyelids and ears are forming, and you can see the tip of the nose. The arms and legs are well formed. The fingers and toes grow longer and more distinct.
12 weeks	The baby measures about two inches and starts to make their own movements. A doctor may be able to hear the baby's heartbeat with special instruments. The sex organs of the baby should start to become clear. At this point your baby has survived the riskiest part of pregnancy – the first trimester (which means 'three months').
16 weeks	The baby now measures about the same length as a smartphone, and weighs about the same as an onion. The baby's eyes can blink, and the heart and blood vessels are fully formed. The baby's fingers and toes have fingerprints.
20 weeks	The baby weighs about 10 ounces and is a little more than six inches long. The baby can suck their thumb, yawn, stretch, make faces, and hear sounds. Soon, if she hasn't already, Mum will be able to feel the baby move. Around this time, you'll be offered an ultrasound scan, which is done to make sure the placenta is healthy and attached normally and that your baby is growing properly. At the scan you'll be able to see the baby's heartbeat and movement of its body, arms, and legs on the ultrasound. You may be able to find out whether it's a boy or a girl, if you want to.



<b>24 weeks</b>	<p>The baby weighs a bit more than a football and responds to sounds by moving or increasing their pulse. You may notice jerking motions if they hiccup.</p> <p>With the inner ear fully developed, the baby may be able to sense being upside down in the womb – and may start to respond to sounds, including your voices.</p>
<b>28 weeks</b>	<p>The baby weighs about the same as a small bag of potatoes, and changes position often at this point in pregnancy. Babies born prematurely at this stage have a good chance of survival.</p>
<b>32 weeks</b>	<p>The baby weighs almost four pounds (two bags of sugar) and is moving around often. The baby’s skin has fewer wrinkles as a layer of fat starts to form under the skin. Between now and delivery, your baby will gain up to half their birth weight.</p>
<b>36 weeks</b>	<p>Babies differ in size, depending on many factors, such as sex, the number of babies being carried, and size of the parents. So your baby’s overall rate of growth is as important as the actual size.</p> <p>On average, a baby at this stage is about 18.5 inches (half a metre) long and weighs close to six pounds –about the same as a house brick. The brain has been developing rapidly. Lungs are nearly fully developed. The head is usually positioned down into the pelvis by now.</p> <p>Your baby is considered at ‘term’ when they are 37 weeks. They are an ‘early term’ baby if born between 37-39 weeks, ‘at term’ if they’re 39-40 weeks, and ‘late term’ if they’re 41-42 weeks.</p>
<b>40 weeks</b>	<p>A mother’s due date marks the end of their 40th week. The delivery date is calculated using the first day of their last period. Based on this, pregnancy can last between 38 and 42 weeks, with a full-term delivery happening around 40 weeks.</p> <p>Some post-term pregnancies -- those lasting more than 42 weeks – are not really late: the due date may just not be accurate. For safety reasons, most babies are delivered before 42 weeks. Sometimes the doctor may need to induce labour.</p>

## From dream to reality

Once the baby arrives, the relationship you've been wondering about for so long, starts to become real.

Skin-to-skin contact with your baby is one very simple step that both you and Mum can take, to welcome them into the world – and it's a win-win for everyone:

- It's great for the baby, reducing their stress and helping them regulate their breathing and temperature.
- It's great for Mums, helping them build a close bond with the baby, and start to get 'in sync' with them for breastfeeding.
- It's also great for Dads, because it helps to activate hormones associated with love and happiness, including oxytocin and serotonin – and reduces your testosterone level. These changes will make you feel close to your baby, and help get you in the right mindset for looking after them.

The midwives will usually put the baby straight onto Mum's chest, if she's had a normal delivery. So as Dad you will probably have to wait your turn. You may feel very much like a 'secondary' parent at this point. But it's probably fair to say that Mum deserves 'top billing' right now, after what she's just been through. Plus, she has been designed through human evolution to make a start on breastfeeding almost straight away.

What's more, it's an amazing experience to watch her meet and get to know the tiny miracle she's delivered. So, sit back and revel in the beauty of it all...

Make sure you're ready for when it's your turn, though – and bear in mind that if Mum had a C-section, or needs stitches, you might even get to go first. Try to wear clothing that you can easily open – like a shirt with buttons down the front – you can undo some buttons and lay the baby on your chest, close to your heart and put a soft blanket over both of you.

Many Dads describe the moment we first held our baby like this as precious and life-changing, so try not to miss the opportunity, and make sure you're fully 'present'. Take it all in, rather than distracting yourself by 'taking the perfect picture'.

By the way, skin-to-skin isn't just for day one of your baby's life. You can keep doing it for months, and it's a brilliant way to connect deeply with your newborn and soothe them when they're tired and grumpy.





## The early days

Biological mothers have a head-start as caregivers over us Dads, thanks to their unique position as the ones who give birth to babies. The neurochemicals that start and control labour, help them cope with the pain of childbirth, and support breastfeeding – oxytocin and beta-endorphin – also help them bond with the baby (though for some Mums it can still take time to feel a connection). We Dads need to rely on our physical and verbal interactions with the baby, instead, to provide the neurochemical kickstart we need to bond with them.

Which can be especially tricky if the baby wants Mum most of the time, because she's breastfeeding and is the only one who can provide food. Also, new babies are not yet very 'interactive': they won't smile when you walk into the room or laugh at your jokes, for example! So, this can lead to us feeling a bit detached. The seemingly never-ending cycle of full nappies, hunger screams and disturbed sleep do little to help. And the more the baby wants and is soothed by Mum, the more down and 'left out' we can feel.

### What's the best way of dealing with this? Here are some principles to follow:

- 1. Don't take it personally.** It's not that your baby doesn't love you – it's just that Mum is like a walking foodbank in your baby's eyes, and food's what your baby needs more than anything right now.
- 2. Take your chances when you can.** Keep making yourself available for holding, burping, nappy-changing and soothing duties. And stick with the skin-to-skin, whenever possible. It's all good stuff and is helping build a strong connection, even if sometimes the baby doesn't seem to give you an obvious reaction.
- 3. Keep chatting.** Sometimes we Dads feel like it's pointless talking to a baby who can't understand a word of what we're saying, let alone reply, but they soon will! So get into the habit of giving them a running commentary about what's going on all around them – it's part of how they learn new words and concepts.
- 4. Play the long game.** Remember, by the time your baby hits three months old, they will start to be able to play and interact more. Who knows, you might even raise a smile or two. And that's just the start (in the next section you'll find out why).
- 5. Carve out a role that's 'yours'.** Looking after the bath-time/bedtime routine or changing nappies can be great opportunities to bond with your child. If you can't manage that every day because of work commitments maybe you could fix some days when you take the lead? Remember both Mums and Dads learn the essential skills of baby care through plenty of solo practice.



## Time to play

It may seem a cliché that we fathers have a special role as ‘playmates’ for our babies, but research suggests there’s more than a grain of truth to that idea. Once our babies are a bit more interactive, a lot of us find that we relate more easily to them. They start to feel like more fun. When we pull silly faces at them, they smile. If we blow raspberries on their tummy, they laugh.

Play often feels quite instinctive and subconscious, and so long as you keep your baby’s safety (and enjoyment!) as your top priority, you’ll probably find yourself making up your own little activities. You don’t need lots of toys, although it can be helpful to have a few that they play with regularly, because familiar things can help soothe them sometimes. Babies love playing with water (always under supervision), and simple things like leaves, boxes, and cut up pieces of fabric can help keep them occupied. Once they’ve reached toddlerhood, we might get into real ‘rough and tumble’ play – noisy, physical play that leads them to giggle and belly laugh: throwing them up in the air, tickling them, having them run at us and roll around together.



But even babies of six to 12 months can enjoy ‘lighter’ versions of ‘rough and tumble’ involving moving them around in space: lifting them into the air or bouncing them on your knee; rolling, climbing, and tumbling over people. Making repetitive noises (like pretending they are a plane) can add to the fun. For more on ‘rough and tumble’, see *Box 11* (page 54).

**Remember:** it is not a question of ‘either/or’ – we need to do the caring work as well as the play. If all we do is the ‘fun stuff’, that relegates us to an assistant role, rather than equal parenting partners.

### Useful links

#### Information about baby milestones and how to support their learning:

[www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/baby-moves](http://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/baby-moves)

[www.hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk](http://www.hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk)

[www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/activities/zjh8hbk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/activities/zjh8hbk)

[www.readingrockets.org/article/reading-tips-parents-babies](http://www.readingrockets.org/article/reading-tips-parents-babies)

[www.wordsforlife.org.uk](http://www.wordsforlife.org.uk)



## Box 11: Playing safe

'Rough and tumble' play is traditionally associated with Dads, and you may find yourself doing this kind of activity with your child. Which is great – so long as you keep it safe.

'Rough and tumble' play is quite a complex and deep experience that involves careful judgements and communication. When you lift your child up in the air, you make very sure that you're not going to drop them, for example. You assess their reactions. Sometimes you might test their limits by setting them goals they can't quite achieve – which means knowing their capabilities inside out, and their ability to manage frustration.

For your child, there can be emotional learning: when they think you might let them fall, it's scary as well as fun; they're learning to trust that you'll catch them... and once they know they can trust you, they might ask you to do it more, or find ways to make you laugh too – because that feels good.



The key to making a success of 'rough and tumble' is taking your lead from your child, pausing and waiting for them to indicate they want more – they may do this through eye contact, body movement, making a noise, or a combination of these. If they do, say the word 'more' and repeat the activity. This helps them learn that they can communicate and get what they want or need: this is a key aspect of what the experts call 'secure attachment' – a close, loving relationship.

We enjoy this kind of 'give-and-take' play because it stimulates rewarding chemicals in our brains, most importantly beta-endorphin, which is addictive, and is often produced when we enjoy activities that, like 'rough and tumble', involve synchrony (like chanting at football matches, singing in choirs or laughing together at a stand-up comedy show).





## Chapter 6. Juggling work and home



**The early days of fatherhood can feel stressful if you're worrying about money or struggling to find the time you'd like to have at home. Many of us fathers feel like it's our responsibility to solve any financial concerns. Sometimes we make the mistake of not sharing our worries, and this can end up causing bigger problems.**

### Managing your money

Having a baby does not have to cost a fortune, but lots of parents get into arguments over money during their babies' first few years. So it's important to get on top of how much you need as a family and work out, together, where it's going to come from. If you haven't already, try to get into the habit of having regular, calm conversations about your family finances. Financial worries distract you from spending relaxed time with your baby, and as a family.

### Home economics

Despite decades of changes in the law and society, we are still a long way from equality between men and women, in terms of earning and caring. The time many of us work this out for ourselves is when we have children, because we suddenly face choices about who will look after the baby, and what that means for our careers and finances.

Often, these don't feel like choices. The imbalance between maternity and paternity leave is a big part of the problem – Mums can take up to 52 weeks off work (only six of these paid at something like

the usual amount she earns), and we get only two weeks (or zero, if we're self-employed!). And then there's the cost of paid childcare, which can be enough to wipe out most of a salary.

In many families, Mum ends up staying off for most of the first year. She might then return to only part-time work or find a job closer to home that's flexible enough to allow pick-ups from childminders and so on (and may be lower-paid as a result).

So, for many men, part of becoming a Dad is feeling the pressure of suddenly being the only or main earner in the household – whether we like it or not.

And if we don't have a job – or even if we actively choose to be the stay-at-home or part-time-working parent – we may feel a nagging sense of failure because we're not fulfilling the provider role expected of us.

### Making sense of our roles

Many of us are brought up believing that in families, men provide and women care. Sometimes our parents teach or show us this in the way they share (or don't) these



roles. We also absorb the idea of gendered family roles from what we see and hear around us.

Even if in our heads we are 100% supportive of gender equality, and we want women to be able to have successful careers, it can be hard to fully shake off these widely held beliefs.

Our gut feelings about this are important because they're part of how we position ourselves as parents, and in discussions about money. Some Dads are cool with the 'provider' tag, or positively embrace it, but others struggle, or actively fight the idea that men should 'own' such a position. Mums' responses to the (equally powerful) assumption that they should be 'lead caregiver' vary similarly.

Sometimes as Dads we can find ourselves struggling to match the reality of our lives to our aspirations – just like Mums do.

All this has the potential to cause stress and unhappiness, as well as problems in our relationships. Research shows that couples who talk about this stuff openly and often, are more likely to stay together (remember the Speaker/Listener section earlier).

## Sharing how we feel

As men we sometimes hide how we feel about our earning and caring roles, because it makes us feel weak, or we think the people around us might not like what we have to say. It's socially

acceptable for new Mums to talk about the challenges they face, but things are different for Dads, and many of us find it difficult to talk about how we feel.

This is partly because we are brought up to show how strong we are. It's also partly because we know that generally we have more power in society. So, if we feel powerless – as we might when we see no alternative but to stay in a job we don't like, for example, or if we can't find a job; or if we want to do more caring but can't seem to make that happen – it seems difficult to claim a space in the discussion. Often, we respond by just avoiding the conversation altogether, and keeping any stress we're experiencing to ourselves.

If any of this rings true for you, it could be helpful to sit down and have a 'heart to heart' with your child's Mum. In fact, even if you feel fine it might be useful to do this – because she may be struggling. Many women hit problems in their careers when they become mothers, and some struggle with the 'lead parent' role. So it's good for both of you to lay your cards on the table, and keep an open conversation going. The last thing you want is for either of you to become resentful.

Don't approach these discussions like there's a problem you need to fix straight away. See them more as an opportunity for you to express how you feel about being the 'man of the house', and any challenges that brings you – and for her to do the same about her roles as a woman and mother. The Speaker/Listener exercise can be great for this.

## Work life balance

For us Dads, the sense of needing to 'bottle things up' can be made worse if we have jobs where we feel like being a Dad gets in the way or needs to take a back seat.

There are some obvious, practical reasons why your employer needs to know that you're becoming a father (see *Box 12: Your workplace rights as a father*).

But taking two weeks' paternity leave may not, in itself, bring you much recognition for the scale of the change that's happening in your life.

Many employers take the attitude that their staff's roles as parents are none of their business – especially when it comes to male staff. Even those companies that provide generous maternity leave and pay packages to help retain their female staff, or offer 'family friendly' flexible working options, may look blankly at a Dad who dares to expect a similar deal.

So, trying to 'do things differently' as a father may take some courage, especially if you're the main or only earner. If you work in a place with a strongly macho culture – where openness about parenting roles simply doesn't exist, and commitment to your job is measured in hours spent in the office – you may judge it impossible to negotiate the work/life balance that suits you and your family. In which case, maybe it's time to look for a new job?

Sometimes things are less clear-cut, though, and there's a sense that the more people open up about their



domestic lives, the more accepting the organisation will become. Perhaps it feels like there's one rule for the Mums and another for the Dads. Could you be the first man to challenge this, arguing the case that in the 21st century, Dads making it home for bath-time is only radical for dinosaurs?

That's a decision only you can take, weighing up the possible risks (your employer viewing you as less committed) against the benefits (your employer seeing you as a caring family man whose life doesn't begin and end at work). If you want to avoid being apologetic about being there for key moments in your child's life, it's one you may need to consider.



## Box 12: Your workplace rights as a father

You have the legal right to time off to go to two **ante-natal appointments** with Mum. Your employer doesn't have to pay you for the time off, though. It's great to attend these appointments, to show her that you care, and to share the fears and joys they can contain. They also help you tune into your baby and feel more part of the process.

You also have the right to **paternity leave of up to two weeks**, which you must take straight after the birth or adoption of a child. By law you're entitled to a minimum amount of pay set by the government – or 90% of your average weekly earnings – whichever is less. The government reimburses this money to your employer. To be eligible, you don't have to be married to, or live with, the mother. You can take your leave in week-long chunks – not as individual days, unless your employer agrees. If you're lucky, your employer might pay more than the minimum – some even pay

paternity leave at full pay. Whatever the pay-rate, you need to tell your boss at least 15 weeks before your child is due, or you may run into problems.

If you're self-employed, you won't get any paid paternity leave. So if you want to take time off around the birth, you'll have to save and organise it yourself.

You could, for example, save 5% of your income each month through the pregnancy. That would give you enough to take some time off after the birth. (Remember to factor in that your partner may be on a reduced pay while on maternity leave.) Maybe you can't manage a solid two-week block of leave. Here's another option: carve out time during each working day and shift clients around to create time to be at home. This kind of flexibility can be a big benefit of being your own boss. Maybe you could keep that going throughout your baby's first year? For more details





about paternity leave and pay, and time off for antenatal appointments, visit: [www.gov.uk/paternity-pay-leave](http://www.gov.uk/paternity-pay-leave).

After the birth, you and Mum can also take **unpaid parental leave**. You can each individually take up to four weeks unpaid parental leave a year per child (or more, if your boss agrees). You must take it as a whole week at a time rather than as individual days, unless your child is disabled. But you don't have to take it all at once. For more information, visit [www.gov.uk/parental-leave](http://www.gov.uk/parental-leave).

**'Time off for dependents'** is another option if you're an employee and need time off in an emergency. A dependent could be a spouse, partner, child, grandchild, parent, or someone who depends on you for care. You're allowed a reasonable amount of time off to deal with the emergency, but there's no set amount of time. It depends on the situation so keep in regular contact with your employer. Find out more: [www.gov.uk/time-off-for-dependants](http://www.gov.uk/time-off-for-dependants).

You may also be eligible to **shared parental leave** – a scheme which allows mothers to transfer some of their maternity leave and pay to their partner. This can be great if you can make the finances work, but the level of pay is very low – unless the employer 'tops it up', which few do. However, it's still worth thinking about, especially if you've saved a bit before the birth to add to the Shared Parental Pay. To find out more about Shared Parental Leave (SPL), visit the government website: [www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay](http://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay). Some couples who have shared the mother's maternity leave by taking even a month or so of SPL, say it has transformed their experiences as parents.

Check out these video clips, compiled for the Manchester Business School Making Room for Dad study: [www.workingfamilies.org.uk/shared-parental-leave-videos/whats-in-it-for-parents](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/shared-parental-leave-videos/whats-in-it-for-parents).

If you've worked for the same employer for at least six months, you have the **right to request flexible working** – which can be a great way of making sure you stay involved as an involved Dad. There are lots of options such as: working from home for all or part of the time; going part-time; working compressed hours (squashing your work into fewer days); working flexi-time (varying the start and end of your work day, but retaining core hours).

Your boss can say 'no', but must explain the business reasons in writing, and you may be able to complain to an employment tribunal. As things stand, fewer Dads than Mums ask to work flexibly, and those who do, are more likely to be turned down. But don't let this put you off asking the question, the more Dads ask, the more employers recognise there is a need that they should be addressing.

#### Here are some links to help you think about flexible working:

[www.gov.uk/flexible-working](http://www.gov.uk/flexible-working)

[www.acas.org.uk/making-a-flexible-working-request](http://www.acas.org.uk/making-a-flexible-working-request)

[www.timewise.co.uk/article/what-is-flexible-working](http://www.timewise.co.uk/article/what-is-flexible-working)

**Time with Dad** is a project led by the Fatherhood Institute, finding ways to help fathers combine earning and caregiving. <https://mailchi.mp/fatherhoodinstitute.org/time-with-dad>



## Chapter 7. What to do if you are struggling and where to find help



**It's often said that having a new baby is one of the most exciting times in your life, but we know it doesn't feel exciting all the time. The transition to fatherhood can feel like a journey, with lots of uphill and downhill sections. The problem is that some Dads only talk about the highs, and joke about the lows.**

We also know that becoming a Dad can be tiring and stressful. Most Dads muddle through but some find it difficult to cope. Most people are aware of the physical and emotional changes for Mums in having a child. The truth is that Dads are impacted by these changes too.

A new baby can change everything for both Mum and Dad. Some of these changes are not easy or comfortable to adapt to. Perhaps you feel frustrated that you have less time and energy. You might feel low, flat or overwhelmed, with your thoughts continually racing.

### **Why do I feel different? Why does having a baby affect Dads' mental health?**

Having a baby is a major life change. Every Dad processes this change differently. We don't know exactly why having a baby affects some Dads more than others. It's likely to be a combination of factors such as hormonal changes, the stress of caring for a new baby, life-style changes, and your own upbringing and experiences.

Some Dads find that having a baby affects their mental health and some don't.

Mental health describes the health of your thoughts, feelings and reactions. The term 'mental health' is not just about poor mental health. It is important to remember we can also do things to maintain good mental health, which will help us cope better when life becomes difficult.

*"Good mental health is characterised by a person's ability to learn; to feel, express and manage a range of positive and negative emotions; to form and maintain good relationships with others; and to cope with and manage change and uncertainty."*







Everyone's mental health changes depending on what is going on in their life. This is normal. Often our mental health changes because of 'triggers', and scientists believe having a baby can be one of these triggers.

***"Mental health is about wellness rather than illness"*** Beyond Blue <sup>2</sup>

It can be helpful to understand some of the factors that can contribute towards our mental health as Dads. *Chapter 1. The science of 'becoming a Dad'*, discusses some of the hormonal changes that happen in men as they become Dads. These are important to help us adapt to being a better caregiver and enable us to bond with our baby. But this also means our body must get used to these differences. Hormones are known to affect mood and mental health in teenagers going through puberty and Mums going through pregnancy. Hormone changes affect Dads too.

Taking care of a new baby can feel like a huge responsibility, like walking in the dark as you learn to do something you've never done before. These new responsibilities can take time to process. This is especially challenging when you are sleep deprived and physically exhausted.

Risk factors are what give you an increased chance of developing poor mental health. Some of these factors are within our control, but many of them are beyond it. For example, becoming a new Dad is a risk factor for depression: as

new Dads we are twice as likely to suffer from depression compared to other men our age.

#### **Some of the factors scientists and research have identified are:**

- Your genetics
- Whether you've had a previous mental illness
- Your job
- Your finances
- Your housing situation
- Your age
- Your physical health and
- Whether the pregnancy was planned.

One of the strongest risk factors for Dads in couple families is **whether your partner has postnatal depression**. This is important to look out for in Mum. The more support she receives from services through her postnatal depression, the less of an impact it will have on you and your mental health (there is more on postnatal depression later in this section).

Dads who have several risk factors can still have great mental health but may just need some more support on their journey to becoming a Dad. Dads who don't have any risk factors can still struggle to cope. In short, anyone can have a challenging time with their mental health after a major life change – and becoming a father is definitely one of those!

1. [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/about-mental-health/what-good-mental-health](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/about-mental-health/what-good-mental-health)  
2. [www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/what-is-mental-health](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/what-is-mental-health)



## What to do if you're having a low day

It's important to remember that most Dads don't develop mental health problems. But this doesn't mean you are expected to feel great or even fine every day. It is completely normal to feel a bit low or flat sometimes after having a new baby.

A low mood will usually improve over a short time. This doesn't make you a bad Dad. It doesn't mean you don't love your baby. It just means that you are trying to process a huge life transition. Just like your physical health, your mental health can sometimes need extra input and attention. A healthier you will improve your quality of life and will benefit your family.

### Accept who you are

All Dads are different. Being a Dad can be challenging but should also be rewarding. You might be good at making your kids laugh or creating family adventures, you might also be good at cooking and teaching them new things. It's important to remember there are lots of things that can make you a great Dad.

All Dads are different but remember, you get to choose what kind of Dad you want to be. There are some helpful thoughts on this in Chapter 1.

***"Start thinking about what being a good Dad means to you. This will be different for everyone. Get in touch with what matters to you most, and what kind of upbringing you want to provide for your child."***

Dadvice, Beyond Blue

## Look after yourself

Taking care of yourself can help to improve your mood. Sometimes having a low mood can be a way that our body is warning us that we need to pay more attention to our wellbeing. (See the *Mental Health Foundation's top 10 tips*: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-mental-health](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-mental-health)).

## Tell someone how you feel

Let someone that you trust know that you are having a low day or bad day – your partner, family members or friends. We know that talking is good, and without understanding how you are feeling, your loved ones cannot support you.

Friends and family may be able to provide you with practical help to give you some space and take some of the pressure off you and your partner. However, we also know that not all of us have someone we feel like we can talk to. We might feel as if the people we want to talk to don't understand – maybe because they aren't Dads themselves.

Some Dads who have experienced this have set up peer support groups. These groups provide opportunities for Dads to share their experiences with other Dads in the same life-stage. Other Dads have created websites, blogs and social media forums for Dads to share their experiences of becoming a father.

No one knows better than Dads what it is like to try to figure out how to cope with fatherhood.



### Box 13: Some resources that may help

**Because Dads matter too** provides information about Dads' mental health.  
[www.andrewmayers.uk/fathers-mental-health](http://www.andrewmayers.uk/fathers-mental-health)

**Fathers Reaching Out – Why Dads Matter offers** evidence about fathers mental health and what's happening in the UK.

**Dads Matter UK** is a website that provides support for Dads worried about or suffering from depression, anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).  
[www.dadsmatteruk.org](http://www.dadsmatteruk.org)

**Dads Can Cymru** provides peer mentoring and Dad groups in Wales to support Dads with the challenge of being a parent.  
[www.dads-can.co.uk](http://www.dads-can.co.uk)

**Dadsnet** is an online and in person community of Dads, which describes itself like an 'online pub' where Dads can hang out and share parenting advice to equip and support each another.  
[www.thedadsnet.com](http://www.thedadsnet.com)

**Dope Black Dads** is an online space, podcast and blog supporting black Dads and their experience of fatherhood.  
[www.dopeblackdads.com](http://www.dopeblackdads.com)

**Dads Unlimited** is a service for separated Dads to support them through family breakdown and the cultural barriers facing Dads. It offers one-to-one mentoring, a helpline, co-parenting workshops, mental health support, court support, Dad groups and a Dad buddy scheme.  
[www.dadsunltd.org.uk](http://www.dadsunltd.org.uk)

The **Fatherhood Institute** is a charity that champions caring fatherhood. It works to make social, family and employment policy, services and research inclusive of fathers and other male caregivers - and offers training for professionals and parents.  
[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)

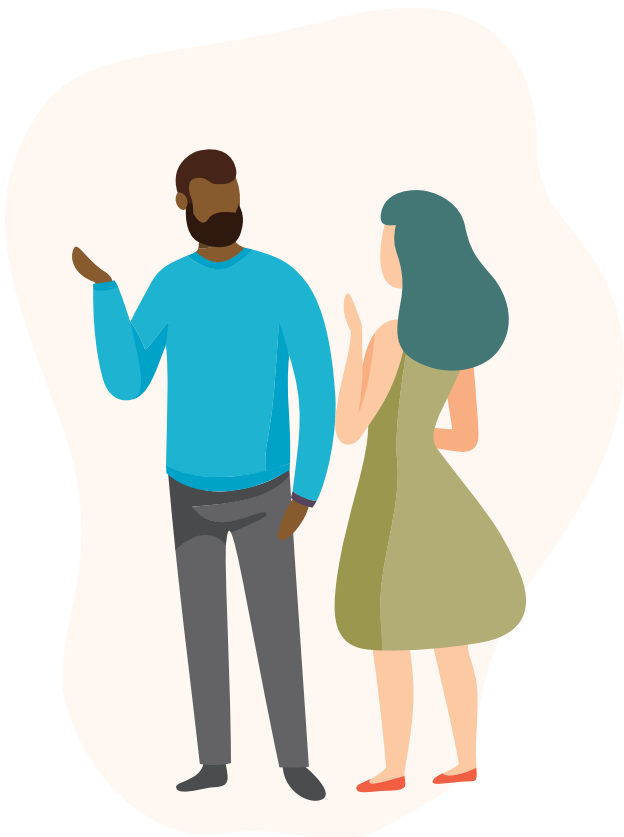
**Gingerbread** specifically provides advice and support for fathers and mothers who are parenting alone through their website, peer support groups, online forum and free single parent helpline.  
[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

**Dadvice** – an online resource from Beyond Blue (an Australian mental health organisation) designed for fathers. It includes videos made by Dads for Dads, an online Dad stress test, and parenting tips to help Dads support their families.  
[www.healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads](http://www.healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads)

## Signs of it becoming more serious

It is normal to sometimes have a low day or feel stressed as a new parent. But if these feelings become regular or continuous, then it might be a sign of something more serious, such as depression or anxiety. These are much stronger than a low mood because they stop you from being able to do normal activities.

They are also more common than people realise – one in ten Dads have postnatal depression and almost two in ten Dads experience postnatal anxiety. It also can affect anyone. Celebrities including Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson and Michael Phelps have talked about their experiences of mental health problems during early fatherhood.



**Postnatal depression** is a type of depression that Mums or Dads can have after childbirth. It isn't caused by the birth of your child, but by a mix of factors discussed earlier in this chapter. Depression can be described as a long-lasting low mood and loss of pleasure in things you normally enjoy. Dads are most likely to experience depressive symptoms three to six months after the birth, but they may last longer than they do for Mums.

### Symptoms include:

- Feeling irritable, frustrated or angry.
- Feeling flat and not wanting to socialise.
- Not enjoying spending time with baby.
- Feeling guilty or worthless (thinking Mum and baby don't need you).
- Difficulty sleeping even when your baby is asleep or being looked after.
- Working much longer hours or spending time on videogames/online to avoid the baby.
- Drinking more alcohol than before having a baby.
- Having scary thoughts about harming your baby.
- Physical symptoms: weight loss, weight gain, appetite changes, fatigue

**Anxiety** involves uncontrollable feelings of worry or fear that affect your ability to function. You may not feel worry or fear, but your body might – you can get physical symptoms even if you don't think you're worrying.



Or you may experience worrying thoughts and behaviours.

### **Symptoms include:**

- Not being able to stop worrying or feeling something bad is going to happen.
- Difficulty sleeping even when your baby is asleep or being looked after.
- Feeling irritable, restless, or sudden extreme fear.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Avoiding socialising or going out.
- Physical symptoms: feeling sick, stomach pain, heart palpitations, tense muscles, sweating, feeling short of breath.

If you are having these symptoms most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks OR if you think that you are struggling to cope and these symptoms are affecting your daily life, then it is important to seek some help. It does not mean that you have failed as a Dad. It is simply because mental illnesses can involve changes in chemicals in your brain. This makes it more complicated than just a low mood and often more professional input is needed.

### **Getting some extra support**

It's not always easy to ask for support as a Dad, especially if you feel like you are the source of support for your family. But just like with our physical health, there is only so much that we can do for our mental health alone. Also, like

physical health, it is better to get support sooner rather than later. It is important to talk to a healthcare professional. You might want to talk to them first, or you might feel more comfortable talking to your partner, family member or a trusted friend beforehand. Healthcare workers, such as your GP, are trained to identify mental illnesses and direct you to the most appropriate support.

They will keep everything you tell them confidential unless you share something which means you or someone might be at risk. If this is the case, they will tell you first who they plan to tell.

In a GP appointment, your doctor will ask you questions about your mood and general health – this is because they need to assess your mental and physical health to check for all possible causes of your symptoms. It might be helpful to write down your symptoms before your appointment, so you know what to tell them. Your GP will then make a plan with you about how best to support you moving forward. They might not be able to give you a diagnosis immediately, but it is important that you are assessed.

You can also find support from peer support groups and internet communities. It might be surprising to hear, but there are many Dads who are experiencing the same feelings and symptoms as you. Talking to other Dads who are struggling to cope will allow you to exchange useful ideas and resources. Some Dads have shared their personal stories of postnatal depression in blogs and on websites. If you feel stuck or trapped, hearing their journey through fatherhood may enable you find words for your journey or provide you with ideas of what might help.



It is also important to stay away from drugs and alcohol. Although they may make you feel better for a while, they can affect how you think and feel which can harm your ability to make decisions and often leave you feeling worse afterwards. Numbing your feelings cannot get rid of them. We know that it can be hard to face how you feel, but getting support is effective and will benefit you.

## **Suicide and crisis contacts**

Sometimes our feelings can become overwhelming and exhausting. At these times you may feel that your partner and your baby are better off without you. If you feel like you do not want to live anymore or are thinking about taking your own life, it is important to tell someone. You do not have to struggle alone.

There are many people available to listen to what is going on for you and help you stay safe. These feelings may come at any time and so helplines are often 24 hour (such as the Samaritans and Community Action Listening Line). It is good to make a note of them, just in case you need them.

**There are free helplines open 24hrs a day. If you do not want to talk, then you can message someone or use a webchat.**

### **Samaritans**

Call 08457 90 90 90,  
Email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### **Community Advice and Listening Line (C.A.L.L.)**

Call 0800 132 737, text 'help' followed by a question to 81066,  
[www.callhelpline.org.uk](http://www.callhelpline.org.uk)

### **Shout Crisis Text Line**

Text 'SHOUT' to 85258  
[www.giveusashout.org](http://www.giveusashout.org)

### **Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)** \*specific for men\*

Call 0800 58 58 58 (5pm–midnight every day)  
Webchat service [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)

**If you have seriously hurt yourself or you think you are about to hurt yourself, call 999, go to A&E, or ask someone to call 999 or take you to A&E.**



The Mental Health Foundation  
and The Fatherhood Institute  
hope this is a useful resource  
for you, as you become a Dad.

We wish you well on your new  
adventure into dadhood.



