

Inviting Fathers *In*

The Tender Beginnings of Attachment in Men

by Marcy Axness, Ph.D., with Trina Strauss

A mother's attachment to her baby often begins long before birth. By the last trimester many mothers feel like they know their babies, having been enjoying for months their familiar, reassuring movements in the womb.

But what about fathers? What are their experiences during those wondrous nine months? How does the attachment process begin for them? Is a father's only option to look on with wonder (and sometimes envy) at the beautiful relationship forming between his once-doting partner and this tiny interloper? Is it the extent of his calling to act as back-rubber, chauffeur and coach? Do these "staff support" roles reflect the monumental potential influence fathers have in their family's life?

Fathers actually have a natural, even biological, inclination to begin attaching to their babies during pregnancy, but this is largely ignored by the scientific community and by our collective culture. We bemoan absent fathers, but do we really nurture the seeds of their involvement from the very beginning, when it may lay a critical foundation for later attachment?

When a couple announces that they are having a baby, the role of the mother is tightly defined. Her family, friends, co-workers and even strangers treat her in an unambiguous fashion: she is doted on, showered with attention (sometimes to their dismay), and regarded in a way that emphasizes her mother-to-be status. Her partner, on the other hand, has no designated, well-choreographed role to play. He is usually left to stumble along his path to fatherhood with little direction, or acknowledgment of his own internal processes.

Michael Trout, director of the Infant-Parent Institute in Champaign, Illinois, writes,

Our language and our culture clearly support the notion that it is never he, only his mate, who is expecting a baby. He is often treated as a donor, a bystander and—if he is any good at his multiple but vaguely-defined jobs—it is understood that he will be supportive of the one who is truly important, the only one who is doing any work, the truly pregnant one.

Yes, pregnancy is a lot of work for a woman's body—rearranging ligaments, building blood volume and cranking out hormones. Oxytocin, the closest thing in Mother Nature's pharmacy to an "elixir of love," spikes at birth and is responsible for "biologically inspiring" many maternal behaviors: close contact with her newborn continually stimulates oxytocin release in the mother, causing her to experience intense feelings of caring and increased sensitivity to her baby's cues.

But guess what? Fathers, too, experience a cascade of hormonal changes during pregnancy that quietly echoes that of their partner. During his mate's pregnancy, a man's oxytocin level begins to rise, encouraging him to desire closeness with his mate and child. Together with vasopressin, it makes a male more protective of his family and committed to their care. (Vasopressin has been called "the monogamy hormone" because it causes males to desire the comforts of home as opposed to the thrill of the chase!)

While prolactin is mainly recognized for its role in milk production in females, it belongs to the hormone group that promotes caring, bonding and attachment—in both mothers and fathers! Prolactin levels in the male also begin to rise during pregnancy and then, after a few days of close contact with the newborn, surge even higher, increasing his desire to care for and be close to his baby.

Pregnancy, birth and parenting awakens for all of us, mothers and fathers alike, old feelings and sense-memories of our own womb and babyhood experiences, which further makes parenthood a journey of unprecedented proportions. Though it is rare for a father to be considered "pregnant" along with his wife, why should he not be given this consideration and status? He, too, is on a profound, life-altering roller coaster!

When Trina was pregnant, her husband Doug often spoke in terms of "us" and "we" with regard to the pregnancy, his language clearly reflecting his emotional and psychological participation in that monumental life event. One of his female colleagues was annoyed by this and would indignantly declare, "You, Doug, are not pregnant! When you get fat and have stretch marks and an aching back every night, come and talk to me!" This response is archetypal in our culture, a staple sitcom punchline that unfortunately reflects the prevailing attitude.

Devon, a 29-year old computer technician, said that during his wife's pregnancy he felt as if he had become invisible to everyone, including her (from whom he is now separated.)

I wanted a baby so bad! But after the initial excitement wore off, it was like, what do I do now? Michelle was totally into the baby and how her body was changing and how I didn't get it. Everyone else acted like that too, like I could never understand since I wasn't the one who was pregnant. But I felt like I was. I know it sounds really corny but I really did. It made me feel crappy that no one cared how I felt.

This is a common, if unspoken, experience. Perhaps as a result of this early exclu-



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sion, and feeling insufficient support and opportunity for forming a prenatal attachment, fathers often feel uninitiated and awkward with their newborns. Infants are exquisitely sensitive to emotional cues, and may react with discontent to a father's insecurity. This can set off a cycle of uncomfortable and not-quite-right feelings between dad and baby. Defeated, the father may interpret this as confirmation that he is simply "not good with babies" and decide his efforts will be better received (and rewarded) "when the kid's older."

So how can dads jump-start their fathering during pregnancy? Several dads we spoke with indicated that laying their hands on the mother's abdomen and making "contact" was a powerful experience. Kevin recalled lying with his wife in the early evenings and placing his hands on her still-flat belly. He whispered to the baby quietly, so his wife couldn't make out what he was saying, and when she inquired, he'd grin and say, "This is a private conversation between me and my little girl."

Mothers-to-be can be encouraging and sensitive to these delicate first steps, putting forth every effort to making their baby "accessible."

Blake, father of eight-month-old Erica, described the weeks when Erica's movements were first noticeable under his touch, and the emotional tidal wave that washed through him, carrying with it the reality of his unborn child. He reminisced of times when he could scarcely attend to his work during the day because he was so anxious to get home and feel his baby moving beneath his fingertips.

I liked to just lay with my head resting on Jess's belly so I could breathe on her skin. I thought that maybe somehow, Erica could become accustomed to the feel of my breath surrounding her and she'd know how much I couldn't wait to see her, and maybe she'd know me when she was finally born.

Fathers can be full participants during pregnancy, parents who are deeply affected by the experience of conceiving and loving a child and who process the experience in their own profoundly personal ways. We don't need to designate a new "role" for fathers regarding this process; a role already exists, naturally—not as replicas of women or as assistants to carry the suitcase, but as the biologically inspired caregiving partners they are designed by nature to be, and as men who long to be enthralled with the very presence of their unborn babies.

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This column is an adaptation of a research paper she wrote for a course with Dr. Axness, who, along with her own extraordinary husband John (who sang to their babies in the womb) this summer marks her 20th anniversary of parenthood. She can be reached at 818-366-7310, or via her website at www.QuantumParenting.com.

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