

# New-born fathers: blinded by the night?

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## **Abstract**

Fatherhood is a rite of passage that is a silent transition for many men. The birth of a child also creates the birth of a father and a lifetime commitment. Expectant and new fathers' needs are often not recognised or understood. These "blind spots" can potentially place numerous relationships at risk. This paper will look at the common issues that expectant and new fathers identify as concerns. Research will be presented that highlights the supports needed to enhance fathering awareness and confidence.

Parenthood is a lifetime commitment for both parents. But how well prepared are new parents for the huge transition, a significant developmental crisis that ignites many unconscious dynamics? No longer are the adults only a couple; they are about to become parents and a family. The adult relationship will inevitably change and it is this relationship that will set the foundation for infant attachment.

The voluntary training expectant parents do receive, particularly during the ante-natal and post-natal periods, are focused on the medical and practical and generally blind to the significant psychological dynamics. There is little focus on the internal shifts occurring for both adults and what it all means.

This is particularly true from the expectant father's perspective. Expectant fathers from the outset often have little voice and are seen more to provide a supportive role. They often have little real understanding of the process or of the need for support for themselves, as the focus is on the mother and baby unit. Frequently, they identify their needs through the perspective of their partner and not themselves. A lot is often expected from new fathers but with little support actually provided. As one expectant father described, "How can we know the answers when we don't even know the questions!" I think his statement really sums up the blindness of many expectant and new fathers.

I wonder if this is one aspect of the "Underbelly of Psychotherapy." It takes two parents to conceive a child yet from the outset the male perspective is placed on the periphery, looking toward the maternal, the mother and her belly, and less inward towards the pregnant self. The father's pregnancy process is invisible and

there is a general blindness towards his experience of pregnancy. Psychotherapy is a process of making visible the invisible, bringing insight to the darkness, and nurturing life in relationship. Under the mother's blossoming belly there is darkness and silence; within there is life. The father's pregnancy experience is like the belly's shadow. His voice needs to be heard through the darkness, to make conscious and put into words the male experience, to stand next to the pregnant belly in partnership and life, the visible with the invisible, the mother and the father.

## **Fatherhood**

The birth of a child brings the birth of a father. Becoming a father is a process of maturation and grief. It is a rite of passage that is sadly not recognised or celebrated. If it was, I believe men would be better prepared to make time and create space in the present as they integrate becoming a father as an important part of their identity. New fathers need to be supported in becoming more conscious of the unconscious dynamics being played out in their new family theatre. By becoming more aware, they gain more understanding, control, and choice over their experience of fatherhood.

It is essential for the father to be intimately involved in the attachment process with his child and partner. This will enhance his confidence, involvement, and joy as a father; the child will benefit by developing a secure attachment with his nurturing father; and the couple will benefit through the deepening of their commitment and understanding of each other's experiences as parents.

Over time I have come to develop a metaphor of Fatherhood as a team sport similar to rugby, rather than an individual sport like golf. Which position will the father play, and what are his responsibilities to the team, and how can the team support him? It's essential for him to be on the pitch and not on the sidelines. And it's important to highlight that this rugby team is not just a Tight 3 (three member team). How can he develop a team with more members?

Mothers are generally excellent team players and enlist the support of others. They have coffee groups and many other opportunities to be with other mothers. There is a powerful community that celebrates Motherhood. Unfortunately, most men do not have such a community. They are often at work and miss out on such structured supports that build community. They risk becoming isolated and consequently need to try harder to build a team around them.

So what is the role of the father, how is his identity shaped, and how can he be supported in the process of attachment? I think an important step is through education, particularly during the ante-natal period. Twenty years ago men generally did not attend ante-natal classes. The modern father generally does attend these classes with his partner, often encouraged by the partner, yet there is usually very little focus on the father's needs or experience of impending fatherhood. Men often describe their ante-natal experience of being an "add on" which only perpetuates their lack of importance.

I think that generally the ante-natal experience is really the father's introduction to exclusion and blindness. Yet in terms of the philosophy of early intervention/prevention, it is essential to provide some light and to recognise that it is also a period of great potential for men. If men are well supported during the ante-natal and post-natal periods it is likely that they will continue to be highly involved with their children and families in the later years as they feel valued, important, and are confident in their skills and abilities.

### **The research**

My understanding of new fatherhood has been extended by forty-nine expectant fathers who have been through a men's only evening called "Welcome to Fatherhood." It is a semi-structured group process during which the men can share their concerns and receive some information and support. For many men it is the first time they have considered fatherhood from their own male perspective and have had an opportunity to explore their issues with other men. Common themes have been around the roles and expectations of fathers, being a good enough father, and how to juggle it all. Group size has ranged from 7-13 men. Ages of the expectant fathers have ranged from 24-44 years. The men are generally a middle class pakeha cohort.

During my involvement with these men only evenings, I have been impressed with the men's willingness to engage in the process. Create a safe respectful space and the men will use it. All of the men express the desire to be a good father. Once comfortable, they are serious, open, and direct. There are many laughs and some sadness. They are excited about the journey ahead. It is essential to emphasise that these men shatter the myth of men being distant, uncommunicative, and cut off from their experience. The modern father is different from the mythical fathers of the past.

## **The issues**

### **a) Provision**

Men frequently identify provision as a main concern: how are they going to provide financially for the baby/family, on a reduced income for a period of time. They feel the pressure to work longer yet often recognise that this affects their availability to their child and partner. They worry about how will they ever juggle it all, achieving a livable balance between work, home, and their own personal needs.

The risk is that they will value themselves as a father primarily in dollars and cents, especially in those early first weeks and months and even years. They may experience a sense of mastery, control, and confidence at work, while these attributes can be much more challenging to acquire amid the chaos of fatherhood.

Yet we know those early weeks and months of the infant's life are the most important in terms of developing attachments. Fathers need to be supported in being available and involved. Some men think they do not need to be around much until the child is two to three years of age and can kick a ball around and carry a decent conversation. Sadly, by this time the child and father have missed out on so much.

Ultimately, I think provision is directly related to the fear of impoverishment and not feeling valued. New fathers in particular need to feel valued and important in their role, not only as providers, but as fathers in relationship with their child and partner. This needs to be reinforced by health professionals, government policies, and work environments. A significant time to demonstrate the father's importance and to offer a more balanced perspective of parenthood is during the ante-natal period.

### **b) Expectations**

Expectations are often based on the father's relationship with his own parents, what was provided and what was missed out on. Fathers have voiced the pressures that they feel to be everything: provider, excellent parent and partner, and maintain the house and property. Almost all of the fathers grew up in families where there was a traditional separation of responsibilities. The fathers' and mothers' roles were clearly defined. No longer is this the case: the roles are blurring into each other. Fatherhood and motherhood are dramatically changing and parenthood is a common term that attempts to cover both domains. Unfortunately, parenthood often really translates only as motherhood, and the unique and important role that the father plays and his fathering presence is lost.

New parents expect more of each other in many ways yet with often less being provided in terms of emotional support and understanding. These expectations can ignite the anger and resentment from both sides, especially when combined with sleep deprivation, a change in intimacy, financial and other pressures. These parents are pioneers as they forge ahead to define new roles and identities yet it can often feel as though they are driving blindly through the night.

### **c) Exclusion**

The men in my groups frequently identify as a significant concern feeling left out by the mother and baby. From the outset the new father is seen as the supporter focusing on the external. However, as his responsibilities increase there may be little reflection on his internal experience, or what is needed in return, or how he can be supported to tolerate the increased pressures, chaos, and uncertainty. How can the new father be supported to remain connected and not disconnect and act out his impulses? How can he stay attached to his partner and child? How can the gap between the father and the mother be negotiated and brought to light?

While women are pregnant and in the first two years following the birth of a child, the risk of an affair is high as fathers may attempt to get their sexual/emotional needs met elsewhere if the space can't be understood or expressed. New fathers may feel left out so therefore act out with dramatic effects for the family.

How will the fathers cope with the change in intimacy as the couple moves from a two-person relationship to a three-person family, triggering the classical oedipal dynamics? The mother's attention needs to be focused on the child so how does the father support this process as well as being supported himself? And how can the mother create space for the father to interact, learn, and gain confidence as a father? How can a balance be created so that everyone is kept in mind- baby, mother, and father? This would allow all family members to feel more secure and thereby facilitate a healthy attachment process.

### **d) Our fathers**

In our ante-natal groups, most of the men express a desire to father differently from the fathering they experienced. As we explore this issue further, it often becomes clear that they don't know how to do it differently, other than by spending more time with their child, but of course, how are they going to organise that and what will they actually do? How are they going to make time and create space and how will they play within it? The room often goes silent, in the face of these questions, and most men feel somewhat lost. Many men recognise that the attachment maps their fathers provided are outdated, that they are really entering an unknown territory.

Becoming a father provides an opportunity to reattach with our own fathers, grandfathers, and our own masculinity, to make solid what has been melting. Through this process of reattachment we can gain an understanding of our own and family narratives, prompt forgiveness, enhance acceptance, and celebrate our identity. We gain a more detailed map of our experience.

Many men recount that their relationships with their fathers have already changed since conceiving their child. There is another layer developing. The men are often interested in learning more about their fathers and about themselves as children. Some men are fortunate and share inspiring stories of support. Now their fathers are to become grandfathers and again have an opportunity to do it differently, to make amends. There is more in common as now both are fathers.

### **e) Post-natal depression**

The issue of Post-Natal Depression is significant for both women and men. Depression existing within the family system affects everyone and complicates the infant attachment process. The rates of PND for women are estimated to be between 11-20 percent. The incidence is similar for men but tends to be under-reported. Men often become depressed as their partner's condition improves. The men who are most at risk of becoming depressed are those fathers who are trying to do it all: be a great father, husband, and provider, and often very much on their own.

I run groups for men whose partners are involved with a Maternal Mental Health service. A frequent theme in these groups is concern over their partner's health and their desperation to "fix" her. Often I feel as though the father himself is lost in the process and has little ability to reflect upon his own needs, and that the father-child relationship is also not being thought about. We discuss how these dynamics can affect the mother's depression and how his being better supported by others rather than the mother, and developing a closer relationship with the baby, may be beneficial for everyone in the long-term.

### **The voices of expectant fathers**

At the end of each evening, the men completed an evaluation. All 49 men thought that a similar evening should be offered to other expectant fathers. There was an overall 86 percent satisfaction rating of the groups. What the men identified as the most and least beneficial elements have been collated.

**Issues regarding communication were highlighted 26 times as the most beneficial factor. The focus was on talking/sharing, listening to others, and understanding others' feelings and expectations:**

“Guys sharing their thoughts/fears/expectations rather than just the practicalities of giving birth.”

“Listening to what the other dads were worried about or thought about things that were happening to them.”

“Comments from the leader of what it was like during the initial phase of fatherhood.”

**Support from other men in the group was identified as the second most beneficial factor, with 12 comments:**

“Talking about support for men.”

“Forming a support group.”

**A male perspective in the ante-natal process was regarded as the third most beneficial factor, with 11 comments:**

“Offers a side not normally discussed.”

“Hearing other fathers' views and discussing the various subjects from a male perspective.”

**Increased awareness was the fourth most beneficial factor, with 10 comments:**

“Having it stressed how important communication was.”

“Illuminating the need to concentrate on my relationship with my wife.”

“Confirmation that things will constantly change and dealing with this will be difficult but manageable.”

**Normalising their experience was the fifth factor, with six comments:**

“Confirming that my fears or anxieties were not unusual and that other participants have similar concerns.”

“Finding out that I am not alone.”

**Inclusion was the final factor, with two comments:**

“Felt included and was an opportunity to do something not done/offered elsewhere.”

“Like the more participative approach where you’re involved and included.”

There were only five comments in total about the least beneficial factors. These focused on the need for more structure, for more time and for more sessions like this, and on the feeling that it “seemed a bit trivial”.

**Conclusion**

In summary, there are many concerns that expectant fathers share. They are often relieved to realise that they are not as alone as they feared. They value the opportunity to communicate and support each other. By having supportive relationships new fathers reduce the risks of exclusion, depression, and acting-out. Support can provide men with more awareness and confidence as fathers, enabling them to be more involved with their children and partners. This is beneficial for healthy children, men, families, and communities.