

## Fathers at Birth. Being there – for her and for you

By John Hoffman

Originally Published in Great Expectations, December 1994

*“You can’t speed it up. You can’t slow it down. You can’t save her from the pain. But she’ll appreciate what you did for the rest of your life.”*

“I must have been in the deepest sleep possible. I don’t know how she got me to actually wake up.” It was six a.m. and Tony Tarle’s wife, Rosa, was yelling from the bathroom. She was “stuck” on the toilet.

Their son, Cameron, would be born three short hours later. They had been at the hospital earlier that night, but were sent home because Rosa was judged to be in “false” labour. Tony went back to sleep, but Rosa was up and down to the bathroom all night. By dawn, the contractions were so fast and furious that she was unable to get up from the toilet with his help.

We knew that we had to get right to the hospital, but it took us two hours to get out the door,” he recalls. “We couldn’t get more than a few steps before a contraction would take over and she’d have to sit down or lean on me. Once we got to the hospital...”

Hold it right there. We take it for granted now that Tony’s part in this birth story is not yet over; that he will go with his wife into the delivery room or birthing suite and stay for the birth. In fact, that’s exactly what happened. But 22 years ago, when Tarle himself was born, his own father was not allowed to be present. As childbirth practices have evolved in North America, so has the role of the father.

“Until the 1960’s and, really, the ‘70s, fathers had no place at birth,” says Penny Simkin, author of *The Birth Partner*, and one of North America’s leading childbirth educators. “Then they were brought in as a sort of desperation move by the natural childbirth movement.” One of the goals of natural childbirth proponents was to avoid (or minimize) the use of medication during childbirth. If that goal were to be achieved, the labouring woman would need constant one-on-one care and “coaching” in pain management techniques. “There was really no one else available to do that but the father.” Simkin explains.

In the last ten years or so, the appropriateness of the role of “coach” has been questioned, and with good reason. A coach is usually an experienced expert in his field. It’s safe to say that your average first-time (or second-time or third-time...) father is far from being an expert in the field of childbirth.

Moreover, the very idea that women need to be “coached” through labour and delivery has been challenged. Some childbirth educators argue that, rather than direct or coach a woman in labour, caregivers should strive to create a supportive environment that enables the labouring woman to respond to the natural forces within her body and allow them to work.

So where does that leave you, Dad? In a much better place, actually.

Letting go of the role of coach or quasi-caregiver gives you the opportunity to participate in birth in a much more realistic role: that of teammate, a partner in the experience. This does not by any means diminish your importance. The other people involved in the birth – nurses, midwives, doctors – are all important. Your partner needs them. These professionals have much more experience and knowledge than you – but you have something they don't have. Penny Simkin, when describing her vision of the father's role, emphasizes that "the father brings qualities to this experience that nobody else can possibly bring: he loves her more he knows her better than anyone else there." You came to this point in life with her. And you're the one who'll be there afterwards. She'll feel safer emotionally if you go through this with her.

The importance of that emotional safety net should not be underestimated. A man may find himself doing any number of specific things when his wife is in labour – rubbing her back, fetching ice chips, acting as a leaning post during contractions, even holding a bowl while she throws up. Chances are, though, that what she'll remember is the fact that the person she loves, trusts and knows best was there for her. He stuck with her. And it didn't matter to him what she did, how she looked or what she blurted out.

Third-time father Jody Ellis knows this. "I could tell Cathy was happy I was there," says Ellis. "You can't speed it up. You can't slow it down. You can't save her from the pain. But she'll appreciate what you did for the rest of your life."

**Constant Care**  
*good for fathers, too*

Some fathers worry about being the "last line of defence," finding themselves in a situation where they feel over their heads. Doctors and nurses will do their best to support labouring couples, but at most times, in most hospitals, they have numerous responsibilities and cannot be with one family all the time. The best antidote for this is to arrange for the services of a midwife or an experienced labour support person (doula) who can provide constant care. Of course there are many good reasons to consider midwifery care, but the advantages to the father are not often discussed.

Jody Ellis and his wife, Cathy, had midwives in attendance for the birth of their third baby, Michael. "It made a big difference to me," says Jody. "They [the midwives] spent a lot of time with us, and everything they did, they did in a warm and caring way. The atmosphere was much less clinical; it allowed me to get into the experience with Cathy." Ellis would recommend it to anyone. "If you want to make sure you have support the whole time, go the midwife route," he says.

Being there is the bottom line, but a man can do more. He can help the birth to be a better experience for his partner physically as well as emotionally. You can learn many comfort measures from books and childbirth education classes: the problem is that there is no simple how-to do-it formula. It would be wonderful if we could say, "Just rub her back like this and everything will be OK. Just have her breathe like this..." But we can't. We have to accept that we're working along with the forces of nature, and nature is not so predictable.

So, rather than prescribe techniques, it might be more helpful to offer a few ideas that you can file in the back of your mind to pull out when you need them.

**Expect nothing. Expect anything.**

A birth plan is a great way to think about what you want to be able to do during labour and to help your caregiver learn how you wish to be cared for, but once your wife is in labour it might go out the window and you may have to improvise.

**You're not as useless as you think.**

At some point you may feel completely useless, but it's safe to assume that you're doing more good than you realize. You may have learned techniques to help your wife deal with the contractions. That's good. But they might not seem as effective as you'd like. Remember, though, that in this situation being even a *little* more comfortable can make all the difference.

**Support without interfering.**

Her body knows how to give birth. Your goal, and the goal of everybody else who's involved, should be to help her feel comfortable and confident enough to let those processes work within her body the way nature intended to.

**Lead by following.**

As you go through this experience with her, you may observe that certain things seem to help her cope with intense contractions. Then you can quietly help her to do those things, and perhaps remind her if she seems to have forgotten.

When my wife was in labour with our second child, she wanted to be sitting up during contractions with her head down on her arms. Our doctor picked up on this and moved one of those hospital bedside tables over so Holly could lean on that. After the next contraction, she slipped a pillow under Holly's head. Eventually, I moved in and Holly would bury her head in my shoulder. All of this was done with scarcely a word said. We were listening to what she was "telling" us, and helping her figure out what she wanted to do.

**Help her to remember that she's going to have a baby.**

At times she (and you) may feel that she's always been in labour and always will be, but that's not true. The baby will be born. It may be easier for you to remember that than her!

I remember how, after some contractions that seemed particularly intense, our family doctor would quietly say something positive like, "That's good, that's progress." It helped Holly to be reminded that this was all going somewhere, that it had a purpose and that things were moving along.

**Your feelings will be intense.**

It's not easy to watch someone endure pain, especially the woman you love. You may need some support of your own. Don't be afraid to ask the nurse for help.

There will be good feelings too. For most fathers (and mothers), witnessing the birth of a child is one of life's greatest highlights. Andy Bell, father of two, recalls his second daughter's birth: "When Jamie came out and everything was fine it was like a heavy weight being lifted off my shoulders. You know, you get these butterflies in your stomach but you're just overjoyed. I went along with the nurse to get her weighted. On the way back I carried her. I was in a bit of a daze but I must have had some kind of big grin on my face. There were some people standing at the nurses' station and they just burst out laughing when they saw me."

**Hold that thought.**

Preparing yourself to be a birth partner, you have lots to think about – what you'll do, what might happen, how you might react. But bear in mind two things. You're getting ready to be part of one of the most amazing and joyous moments of your life. And your support will be a great act of love. As Jody Ellis puts it, "It was one of the best things I'll ever do for her."