

## **Fathers at Birth.** How Mothers Say They Helped

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“I can’t imagine asking anyone else to get into the shower with me,” laughs Kathy Sweeting as she recalls her husband’s part in the birth of their first child. When Kathy was in active labour, the nurses encouraged her to take a shower. “They practically had to drag me in there,” she remembers, “but once I got in, it provided a lot of relief. The contractions were coming right on top of one another and somehow the warm water helped my body to not be so tense. But I didn’t want to be alone in there, so Fred got right in with me.”

So there was Fred Sweeting on, as it happens, the night of his fifth wedding anniversary, dripping wet, in hospital greens, standing in the shower while his labouring wife clung to him as if her life depended on it. Quite an image, isn’t it? On one level it’s the stuff of sitcoms; on another it’s so touching it could make you weep.

That, right there, is the crux of a man’s situation when he becomes part of the birth of his child – caught between the ridiculous and the supremely intimate. He may be the butt of bad jokes about fainting and vomiting, but to his wife, he might be a hero. He enters the situation with trepidation and, in the thick of things, often feels useless. After all, who’s going to tell him that he’s doing a good job? Not his wife – she’s got other things to think about! And the doctors, nurses and midwives are directing their efforts towards the mother and baby who are, after all, what this event is all about. As a result some men emerge from the birthing room glad to have been there, but wondering if they ‘did OK’ or even made any difference at all. If they don’t talk to their partners about it afterwards, they may never know.

So does it make a difference? Are fathers, inexperienced, unobjective and relatively (at best) untrained as they are, any use at birth? Science hasn’t answered, or even asked, this question yet. Researchers have looked at men’s response to the labour and birth experience, but not at the effect of the father’s presence on the mother. What *has* been established is that labour support, of all kinds, is consistently associated with what’s called ‘better birthing outcomes’ (e.g. shorter labours, fewer medical interventions such as Caesareans and epidurals) for mothers and, interestingly, for babies as well. In one study an anonymous person who sat behind a curtain was found to be better than no one at all! So we can make a fairly educated assumption that a father’s presence at birth is good for the mother. But why not ask the mothers for their thoughts?

“The worst time for me was when the induction took hold. I’d been having these mild contractions; they were pretty far apart before I got the drip [intravenous pitocin to stimulate labour] and I guess it gave me a false impression of what labour was like. Then suddenly it was fast and furious. If Jeff hadn’t been there at that point I’d have panicked. I just didn’t think I’d be able to do it.” So begins Rebecca Doreen as she recalls what it meant to have her husband, Jeff, with her as she laboured and bore their first child.

One specific and, to Rebecca, very important thing that Jeff did was to help her with her focal point. Concentrating on a particular object, such as a picture, is commonly taught to expectant couples as a pain management technique for labour. In their case, it was a little stuffed toy. “For me, it wasn’t natural to look at a focal object,” she remembers. “All I could do was think about the pain, you know, just trying to get through it. But he’d hold it up and remind me every time a contraction started and it really did help. It didn’t take the pain away, but I was able to be a little more relaxed. It gave me something else to think about.”

For Kirsten Patriquin’s husband, Alan, it was literally a case of “lean on me.” Like many women, Kirsten found that she could deal with the contractions best when she was in a standing position. “When I was lying down, it felt like someone was taking a hacksaw to my back,” she remembers. “I had to stand, but near the very end I couldn’t. My legs were like rubber. I started having to lean on him with all my weight. Otherwise I’d have collapsed.”

There are many specific supports that a man can provide for his labouring partner, they will vary from couple to couple, even from birth to birth. Women have cited everything from feeding ice chips, giving back rubs, and helping with breathing techniques to simple hand holding (more like hand squishing actually). But you know what? When you ask them what was really important, they stop talking about techniques and start talking about ‘being there.’

Kirsten Patriquin: “As the labour progresses you feel more and more out of control. Your body just takes over. With Alan there, I felt like I could concentrate on the labour rather than how I was acting. I felt that I could scream or express myself in any way I needed to without feeling embarrassed. I felt emotionally safe.”

Rebecca Doreen: “When the going got tough, he would just reassure me that he would be there, no matter what. It was really important to know that, if something went wrong, I wouldn’t be alone.”

Of course, Rebecca wouldn’t literally have been alone. She was in a hospital, with trained staff right at hand. But psychologically and emotionally, she would have felt alone without her husband. That is perhaps the most important message we men can take from all of this.

For Cathy Gillis, something did go wrong: an unexpected complication involving the delivery of the placenta, following the birth of her baby daughter. As a result, Cathy was denied that wonderful, euphoric period that often follows a birth – the new family commuting together amid feelings of relief, wonder and happiness. But at least she wasn’t ‘alone.’

“It was so disappointing. I wasn’t even able to hold her at first because of the problems with the placenta. She was born at midnight, and they took her to the nursery almost right away so they could work on me. I didn’t see her again for five hours,” she recalls.

For Cathy, her husband's presence was important in two ways. "For one thing," she begins, "I was glad that, if I couldn't hold her right away, at least her father was able to do it. Then, when I was going through my thing with the placenta, he was there for me. And, I tell you, I really needed him then. Maybe even more than when I was in labour."

As it happens, one of our mother-experts, Kirsten Patriquin, has also had the chance to view the father-at-birth dynamic from a different perspective – that of a labour and delivery nurse. In her six-year career she's observed all kinds of birthing couples, including men at their worst: "...yelling at their wives to 'cut it out' or sitting in the corner talking on their cellular phones." She's also seen the good. "The majority of them [first-time fathers] have no idea what's going to happen, and it seems that most of them are not well prepared, but still they usually come through," she observes. "It's hard to put into words, but when a man is really there for his wife, there's this feeling in the air. It's like they're into their own space. I think there's a special kind of bonding that occurs and, as a nurse, there's no doubt in my mind that it's an important part of the woman's well-being at that point."

Let's play devil's advocate here for a minute. Couldn't someone else fill this role? Wouldn't a woman, who'd given birth herself, be more able in some ways to empathize and provide appropriate comfort measures? Well, maybe. Kathy Sweeting, looking for the best of both worlds perhaps, had experienced women at both of her births. The first time it was her sister, who'd given birth to three children of her own, and the second time it was a midwife. In her mind that didn't diminish Fred's role and neither one of them could have replaced him.

"As far as I'm concerned he had to be there," she declares, "because of the bond that I felt with him as the father of my baby. It would be hard to imagine going through the pain of labour and birthing my son, with Fred not being there. And the celebration after...It wouldn't have been complete without him."

Rebecca Doreen expresses something similar. "Jeff had the same vested interest in the baby, and for that reason he's better [as a birth companion] than my best female friend, for example. I feel like I couldn't have done it without him." Couldn't have done it? As silly as that might sound, it's a common sentiment among women. Obviously, birth is a natural process that takes place with or without a father's presence. These women (and others who have expressed similar feelings) know that. So what do they really mean?

Maybe they're talking about courage – courage to help her go beyond the point where she's feeling, "OK. I've had enough. Can we stop now, please?" Courage that will enable her to feel that she can 'give' birth, rather than helplessly endure something that's happening to her. A number of things can help – the right words of encouragement from a doctor or a nurse, the reassuring presence of a skilled and experienced midwife. But along with that she needs the presence and love of her life partner. He's the one who has the least experience and training, but he is also the one who was there in the beginning, and who will still be there when the others have all gone home.