

A Girl's Guide to Rookie Dads. Ten things every new mom should know

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When you become a mother, you will want to learn all you can about the new little stranger you've got in your arms. That's as it should be. But don't forget about your partner. He's not new, but he's a new dad and you might be surprised at how much there is to learn about that unique phase of the human condition. Here are 10 thoughts to help you along:

1. Fathering is not as automatic as mothering.

"Girls and young women are prepared for parenthood over a long time by the way they are socialized. Men develop the consciousness of fatherhood over a much shorter period," says Neil Campbell, a psychotherapist and author who has been running prenatal dad classes, in London, Ont., since 1989. Even if you somehow missed the doll play and babysitting that are part of many girls' upbringing, the nine-month biological boot camp known as pregnancy ensures you are primed for action.

That means your partner's process is less complete when the baby arrives. He knows he's a parent, but it may take him longer to figure out how to act like one. For one thing, at first he will need to make more of a conscious decision to act in situations where you would jump in with scarcely a thought. When a new father sees that the baby's diaper needs changing, he thinks, "The baby's diaper needs changing." In the same situation you would probably think, "I need to change the baby's diaper." Fathers can develop a similar mentality, but it usually takes longer and, to begin with, requires more intentional effort.

2. Fathers usually take longer to develop a close relationship with the baby.

"I think dads bond differently with babies and it often takes them longer," says Ray deVries, a father of two from Vancouver. "But just because a dad doesn't glom onto the baby and become as instantly enraptured as a mother, that doesn't mean he doesn't love the baby."

Here's what's up. The parent-infant connection is built primarily through physical contact, something fathers generally get less of in the early days of parenthood. Amy Spurway, a Toronto mother of twins, says, "I wish I'd realized that bonding with the girls would take more time for Matthew than it did with me. I was sometimes frustrated that he did not seem to relate to and interpret them as well as I did. But I had to learn that he needed to get to know them, and he found it more challenging because he spent less time with them than I did."

The more your partner does what you do — holds the baby, changes diapers and gives baths — the more he will understand and feel connected to her. (I also strongly recommend the use of baby carriers for fathers.)

3. He thinks you know everything.

Mothers are seldom as infallible as fathers suppose (except for you, of course); however, most acquire baby-care skills quickly and fathers are often awed by their partner's apparent consummate skill.

This can be a good thing if your partner responds by treating you with respect, working to support your efforts and looking to you as an example. However, his perception of your omnipotence could also cause him to underestimate your need for help or make it hard for him to see how to help without messing things up.

Spurway says she'd heard about this from some friends who'd had babies before she did. "They said their husbands felt left out and it caused them to withdraw," she says. "One of my friends asked her husband why he wasn't helping out with the baby. She told me his response was, 'I'd help if I knew what to do, and you seem to be doing pretty well on your own.'"

After his first child was born, Joel Brody wanted to get involved, but he had trouble finding his entry point. "My wife quickly became the expert and so she did almost everything," says the father of two from Toronto. "That was good in a way because at that point you're just trying to survive. But soon I found myself thinking, How can I ever be as good as she is?"

Figuring out how and when to get in there was a bit like trying to jump on and off a moving train, Brody says. "There's a train going along that the mom is driving. The father sees the boxcars going by and he has to figure out how to jump into one of the open doors without bouncing off the side of the train."

The solution? The more time your partner spends with the baby, the more skilled and confident he will become. He'll have a much better idea of not only how to get on and off the train but, eventually, how to take a shift as the engineer.

Your support and encouragement will help him get this experience more quickly. Here's the catch...

4. He's not going to do things exactly the way you would do them (which is OK), and it's probably going to bug you sometimes (and that's OK too).

"I wanted Andy's help, but I wanted him to do everything exactly the way I would have done it." That wonderfully honest statement, made by a good friend when her first baby was about six months old, encapsulates a prime challenge in early parenthood. Mothers want and need all kinds of support and assistance, and a partner who can see what needs to be done and knows how to do it is definitely a new mom's best friend but, initially anyway, new mothers are not always comfortable with the way their partner does things. As a result, new fathers who try to help often find themselves being inspected, directed and corrected, and they don't really like that.

Brody recalls the discouraging feeling of being criticized. "I know she had to take the lead because she did know more than I did; inevitably that meant she would correct me

sometimes. And if I was doing something dangerous, sure, tell me. But I don't think I really needed those five- or 10-degree corrections."

Campbell is very familiar with this dynamic. "My observation is that mothers often look at a man's way of parenting in terms of a mother's way," he says. "But men do it differently. In particular they handle babies differently than mothers. It's really important for fathers to have the time and space to develop their own style." A father has the best chance of doing this when the mother is able to back off at times and let him learn by doing, even if his way of doing is imperfect.

It ain't easy. New mothers are not designed to back off. Your very intense connection with your baby and your heightened sense of her needs make it very hard for you to step back and let your husband do things in a way that seems wrong to you. That's OK. That intensity is part of what helps you become a good mom. But it's more encouraging for your partner if you can fight the urge to correct and rescue at least some of the time.

Spurway says, "Eventually I realized that it was more important for my husband to do things in his own way, rather than doing it the fastest, neatest way. To avoid discouraging him from handling the babies, I had to drop the mother superior attitude, and let him learn to be a dad, rather than trying to teach him to be a mom."

5. He may feel the change in your relationship more acutely than you do. People often say fathers are "jealous of the baby." That's simplistic, demeaning and generally untrue.

Here's a more helpful view. You have developed a very intense, all-consuming relationship with your little one. Your partner may love the baby, but she doesn't fill up his world the way she fills up yours. DeVries says, "When the baby is born, both parents lose something from the adult relationship, but I think that some of the mother's emotional and physical needs that would be met by her partner are now met by the baby. The father doesn't get his needs met from the baby in the same way, and so he notices the loss more than she does."

It's not simply a question of "why isn't she paying attention to me?" It's more a question of "where do I fit in?"

This is another argument for early father involvement with babies. Being involved helps him to understand your world a little bit and it also helps the two of you connect, because you're sharing the experience rather than having him sitting on the sidelines watching.

6. He may become preoccupied with finances and savings. "Before I had kids, I went to work to pay for my life. It was a fairly carefree attitude," says deVries. "Now I feel like I've got to work for 30 years and I've got to provide." These days, the role of provider is not as exclusively male as it once was, but after a baby is born many men feel a heightened sense of financial responsibility.

Cindy Harasen, mother of three from Thunder Bay, Ont., recalls that after each child's birth her husband became very focused on money and savings and how much they were spending. "I think that's because it was a role he felt used to and had some control over," she says. "He couldn't nurse the babies. He couldn't comfort them the way I could, and he just didn't feel like he could give them the same things as me at that early stage in their lives. So he concentrated on what he could do, which is to keep us safe and warm and fed."

7. Men like concrete things and new parenthood is not concrete.

Another reason that new fathers can take longer finding their feet is that they tend to be most comfortable with concrete tasks and situations where they can see clearly and quickly what needs to be done. Men tend to have more trouble with the grey areas and early parenthood has many shades of grey.

Campbell says some men deal with this by identifying an area to problem-solve. "Let's say the new parents have come in from shopping and the baby needs to nurse right away. The mother says, 'Oh, we forgot to buy Q-tips for the umbilical cord stump.' A father may want to go straight out that minute and hunt for those Q-tips." It's not that the lack of Q-tips is a crisis, but it gives him a problem to solve and a concrete contribution to make.

Some fathers find one job that can become their own. "I was the bath guy," says Brody. "I'd take Aisling right into the tub with me, and that became the one task I could prosper with."

8. He can't read your mind.

You knew this, surely. However, in new motherhood when your needs and wants are very, very clear and immediate to you, it's easy to forget that they aren't as obvious to your significant other.

Picture this. Mom has been home all day with the baby. She's exhausted. Her husband, sensing her need for a break, jumps up from the dinner table to do the dishes. Meanwhile what she'd really like is for him to take this baby who's been clinging to her all day. She sits there and seethes and he toils blissfully away in the kitchen, thinking he's being such a good guy.

The point is, even when he tries his hardest, your partner is not going to see your needs and priorities exactly the way you do. If you want something very specific at a certain time, tell him. But don't wait until you're so frustrated from waiting for him to figure it out that you snap at him.

9. You can't read his mind either, and there may be stuff going on in there that you don't realize. A constant challenge for a well-motivated father who wants to be involved is that he may not be sure what to do with his own negative feelings and insecurities. We could blame it all on male reluctance to express feelings, but I think there's often a deeper layer.

When so much focus is on supporting the mother, the father is cast in the role of helper and the helper often feels he shouldn't be laying his anxieties and hang-ups on the person he's supposed to be supporting.

DeVries went through a period of unemployment during his wife's second pregnancy. This, obviously, increased his anxiety about providing for his family, but, because she was expecting, DeVries thinks he talked about it less than he would have in other circumstances. "I knew she was worried about my work situation too, so I kept a lot of it to myself because I didn't want to upset her even more."

The point here is not who has the right to feel what. Feelings are what they are. The point is that during pregnancy or early parenthood, men may be even more reticent than usual to express negative feelings for fear of burdening their partners. It's just something to tuck away in the corner of your mind in case it ever seems like something is bothering your new-dad partner, but he's not saying anything about it.

10. He needs to be alone with the baby sometimes.

Not trying to push you away from your baby or anything, but it sometimes helps if new dads can get in a few licks with the baby when no one is looking over his shoulder (even admiringly). I don't mean when you are upstairs having a nap, I mean out of the house. It doesn't have to be a long time, in fact it shouldn't be at first. Short successful solo stints are preferable to long ones that end with a howling baby and a rattled dad. And there's no prescription for exactly when, how often and how long to do this. But give it a try sometimes, preferably when your baby has been well prepped (recently nursed). Fathers can learn a lot when left to their own devices.

Final word. We've spent a fair bit of time talking about how you can support your partner's involvement. I don't mean to put it all on your shoulders. Obviously your partner has a responsibility to get involved, to make a contribution and to do so in a way that honours and supports you. In fact, if you want the flip side of this story, read "A Guy's Guide to New Mothers". However, if you understand where the new dad in your life is coming from, you might have a better chance of supporting his development into the kind of parent and partner both you and he would like him to be.