

Ready or Not? The journey to fatherhood

by John Hoffman

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When do you become a father? At the moment of birth? At the moment of conception?

Perhaps the real question is, when do you feel like one? In truth, there is probably not one definitive moment. As the five fathers we'll meet here suggest, the journey to fatherhood is a gradual change in identity that is experienced a little differently by every man.

Rod Cohen already feels like a father. He *is* a father, a stepfather specifically. But the Toronto social worker has never been a dad-to-be — until now. He and his partner, Claire, are expecting in two months. "I've worked with kids, and I've lived with them as a step-parent so I'm really comfortable with children, but there's a definite first here." He's been anticipating the birth with mixed feelings. "There have been halting reflections and some exciting 'uh-ohs' — the total dependency of an infant is going to be a whole new ball game. But mostly I'm just excited."

John Kantelberg is excited too, and even though he and his wife, Max, have another month to wait, they feel sort of like parents already. They spent five anxious years trying to conceive before Max finally became pregnant. There were times when they thought it might never happen, John says. "We've had our hearts set on having a child for so long. Now that it's so close, we just can't wait to see the baby. It's like when you see all those Christmas presents under the tree and you're just dying to open them."

That's a fatherly feeling. But it's not as real — not yet — as it is right now for new dad Michael Johnson. Far from spending five years anticipating fatherhood, this 20-year-old college student was in a fairly new relationship with his partner, Kathryn, when they found out she was pregnant. Johnson wasn't settled in his career; he had no money, he wasn't even finished school. "It was scary. How would I handle it? How was I going to support this child? I was still a kid myself doing my own kid things and now I had to change things around and become a father."

It's not happening to me

We sometimes refer to "pregnant" fathers but everyone knows it's not men who grow babies inside their bodies. That makes a significant impact on how they get their heads around being a parent. The physical changes of pregnancy, and social reminders like, "Now you're eating for two," combine to literally propel a woman towards parenthood. Men get there under their own steam.

That may be the reason for the following observation from Toronto childbirth educator Jennifer Elliot. "I think that men recognize impending parenthood over a much shorter time period than women. It's all more remote for men. It's usually women who initiate the gathering of baby equipment and preparation of a space for the baby. And women

have usually done some reading. The whole thing doesn't seem to be as real to men earlier in pregnancy."

Steve Girardi, whose daughter, Lauren, is now three months old, says "It's not so much that it isn't real. You know it's going to happen, but, on the other hand, all the way along there are these little glimpses of unreality, because it's not really happening to you in the same way it's happening to your wife." True enough. Girardi didn't feel his breasts swell or his baby-to-be turn somersaults in his belly. He was not advised to abstain from alcohol or make sure he got enough folic acid. No one asked to pat his tummy.

This focus on the pregnant woman is understandable. As one father said, "It's her show. It's not your show." However, it sometimes leaves fathers feeling like they are on the outside looking in. "Kathryn had all these things to do, like go to the doctor, or to the midwife," recalls Johnson, "You're kind of out in the cold."

"Even if you go to doctor's appointments and they try to include you, once they get down to the examination, there's a level on which you're a third wheel," adds Rob Croft.

How am I supposed to feel?

Croft and his wife Barb married in their mid-thirties and waited another ten years before deciding to start a family. During Barb's pregnancy, much of Croft's time and emotional energy was taken up with a house-building project. "It was frustrating that we couldn't devote more time to what you normally do during pregnancy — buy equipment and think about the baby and things like that," he recalls. "I can remember wondering if there was a certain way you were supposed to feel."

Who knows? Pregnancy folklore tells us a lot about women, and little about men. For example, the emotional aspects of pregnancy for women are well known. As Croft points out, men and their partners are told to expect mood swings, emotional sensitivity and introspective feelings. But as for what they themselves can expect to feel, fathers are, like Croft, often left wondering. Our society provides much less of an emotional and psychological roadmap for expectant fathers.

However, childbirth educators and others who work with pregnant couples have observed some differences between the way expectant men and women think. The crux of it is that men's thinking is more "out there" while women's thinking is "in here."

Kathleen Outerbridge is a prenatal instructor at Children's and Women's Health Centre of British Columbia, in Vancouver. Once each session, she divides men and women in same-gender groups and asks them to discuss their concerns and anxieties. "Men tend to identify worries about finances, the health of the mother and the health of the baby," she says. "Women have concerns like, "How much will it hurt? Will I get to the hospital on time? Will I be able to breastfeed?"

Midwife Kay Hanson says, "Fathers will often ask a lot of questions about the biology of pregnancy. They will say things like, 'Wow! Why didn't we learn anything like this in

school?’ while women are more likely to see the pregnancy more as something their body is supposed to do.”

Public health nurse Helen Ames, who taught prenatal classes in Peterborough, Ontario, for many years, has noticed that if men feel anxious about the pregnancy, they may not have the outlets women have to deal with their feelings.

“If, for example, a woman is worried about her own health or the health of the baby, there are a lot of books and other materials which are focused on what she can do. She can eat well, she can go to the doctor and get proper care. And she can talk to her friends about how she’s feeling. The father is one step removed so he can’t affect the baby as directly.”

Zap! Now I’m a father

Croft remembers the sudden immediacy of fatherhood, which hit when he was handed his son, James. “When I was alone with him, carrying him down the hall to meet his grandparents, it definitely felt like he was mine. I felt like I was holding myself when I was a baby,” he recalls.

Croft’s initiation continued during his wife’s hospital stay, which was longer than average due to post-birth complications. He went home at 3 a.m. that first night to sleep, because he had been up for 36 hours and there was no private room for his wife. But he was up at 8 a.m. the next morning. “My lawyer called about the real estate deal,” he laughs. By 9:30 a.m. he was back at the hospital, where he would stay for three days. That experience was basically just survival, says Croft. “It was so overwhelming. James was with us all the time and Barb needed help with everything at first — even getting him in the right position for nursing. All we had time to think about was, ‘When are we going to sleep?’” It was a crash course in a way, and it left little time to reflect on paternal feelings.

Girardi thinks the transition into feeling comfortable with parenthood has been a little slower for him than for his wife. “Even when we came home, her primary focus was the baby. I was focused on the baby as well, but I was trying to look after my wife too, and cook,” he says. “At first I didn’t feel like I had the same impact on the baby. But I made a point of doing all the things I could do, like bathing Lauren, changing diapers and holding her. I think men have to make that conscious effort to get involved whereas a mother really has no choice, especially if she’s breastfeeding,” says Girardi. “If you do make an effort and get to know your child, it keeps you from feeling on the outside.”

Even though his child is not yet born, Rod Cohen has made the decision to be an involved father. “I don’t want to just watch Claire look after the baby,” he says. Since Cohen’s partner, Claire, has already raised two babies, there is an even greater experience gap between them than between most new mothers and their partners. She and Cohen have considered how this might be a factor in the new family dynamic. “I think Claire is all set to do things in the way she knows, but I remind her that, with me involved, it’s going to be a bit different,” he says. “I’ve said to her, ‘you’re going to have

to let me do things wrong and come up with my own ways of doing things with the baby.”

Michael Johnson fits his time with the baby in between the other tasks that fill up his days — finishing school and a weekly 90-minute commute to his part-time job. He says his outlook on life is totally different now. “Take today, for example,” he says. “It’s a Friday, so normally I would have been looking forward to going out with my friends on the weekend. I don’t do that now. My fun is to hang around with Kathryn and Noah. I think about different things now. I think about what Noah’s going to do today that I’ve never seen him do. That’s the big thing in my life now.”

Whether your fatherhood clothes feel comfortable right away or it takes a while to grow into them, the important thing is to make fatherhood a priority. And that might mean you have to push yourself a bit at first since, as we’ve seen, fatherhood is not quite as automatic as motherhood. But chances are, the sooner you spend time comforting, holding, changing and bathing your baby, the sooner you’ll feel at home.

Several weeks later, the process of re-identifying himself continues for Croft. “It’s a gradual reawakening. I felt like a father from the beginning, but every week is different and I see myself in a new light,” he explains. “In the first couple of weeks it didn’t feel like James knew who I was, but now I’m getting the feeling that he recognizes me and so it feels different again.” Croft pauses, and jokes: “Maybe by the time I’m 80 I’ll feel like a complete father.”