

A Rookie Dad's Guide to Newborns. Getting comfy with the new addition

By John Hoffman

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When our first son was born, I was a musician, which meant that, apart from not making much money, I was home a lot during the day with my wife and baby. Sometimes, when I saw she was exhausted, I would try to help out by shooping her off to bed. "Don't worry," I'd say to Holly. "I'll look after him. Get some rest."

Inevitably, Riley would start fussing. I'd be working away to comfort him, and before long I would hear the thump, thump, thump of Holly running down the stairs as if the house were on fire. Although she never actually said these words, the urgency of her movement and her body language said, "What are you doing to my baby?!" It was as if she just had to know, at that millisecond, exactly what was going on and what she could do about it. Eventually we were able to joke about it, but at first I saw it as interference. I wanted the chance to learn to comfort Riley myself, and I needed the time and space to work it out. I wasn't going to get anywhere if I got rescued whenever the going got tough.

What I didn't realize was that my wife's behaviour was much more about her than it was about me. I didn't understand the pressure she felt to become an instantly competent mom, nor her intense need to bring order to her drastically altered world, and that meant being able to calm her baby.

It might seem odd to begin an article about fathers and babies with a story about a father and mother. However, I think that's where you have to start because, while a mother has a pretty direct line to her baby, a father's connection goes through the mother and, in the beginning, the father-infant relationship can never totally exclude her. When a new dad wants to build his relationship with the baby (which we'll get into later) he must remember that it develops within the context of the mother-baby relationship. If he doesn't understand this, he may run into trouble.

There was a time when we didn't need to think about this. Gender roles were clearly divided and babies were seen by everyone as women's territory. But now, fathers have invaded that territory. In our culture, most fathers want to be — and are expected to be — involved with their babies. That's good, but we need to keep in mind that some of the realities from the past still hold true today.

Women are still socially and biologically programmed to be parents much more strongly than men are. Mothers expect to be "in charge" of babies and, in most families, they assume that role early on. When a father moves in to pick up the baby, he's moving into her world. Therefore he needs to understand a little about that world.

The first thing to recognize is the intense nature of her relationship with her child. She's in love, or at least falling in love. Clearly it's not exactly the same as it is with a lover, but the emotional intensity and the obsession are similar. At times she acts as though the

rest of the world is irrelevant. Observant fathers pick up on this and quickly get a sense that something of great significance is going on between their partner and the new baby. Often they are in awe of this relationship and will defer to mother and baby in order to keep from interfering with it. This is partly a good thing — the emerging mother-baby relationship needs to be supported, and fathers can play an important role by mothering the mother. (Somehow, “fathering the mother” doesn’t have quite the right ring to it.) But a father needs to develop his own connection, which means he needs to get at the baby. This is when he can become an “intruder” if he doesn’t watch his step, as my first experiences with Riley illustrated.

These encounters taught me (although I didn’t fully understand it until later) that the relationship between my wife and our sons was palpably physical. The mind and body of a mother are intimately connected. When a nursing woman hears her baby cry, even if she’s in another room, it triggers the release of a hormone that lets down her milk and makes her breasts leak. That kind of physical response, combined with the strong emotional connection, means that most mothers respond to a baby’s distress more quickly and strongly than fathers. That’s what compelled Holly to take the baby from me sometimes. Even though she desperately needed rest, there was just no way for her to lie up there and relax while he was crying. If her baby was in distress, she was in distress.

It wasn’t really a question of who was right and who was wrong. Holly was right to respond to those cues. That was part of what helped her become a good mom. But, at the same time, I was right to want to learn to comfort Riley myself.

This dynamic plays out a little differently in each family, but I think it speaks to an incompatibility that a man must acknowledge and work around. It requires an adroit balance: He must patiently persist in establishing his own connection with his child, while at the same time supporting and respecting his partner’s relationship with the baby. It’s one step forward, one step back. The idea is to make the forward steps a little bigger.

Now, about that baby.

With a new baby, there are two essential tasks: taking care of him and getting to know him. Looking after babies involves relatively simple skills. You need to feed them, interact with them, comfort them when they’re upset, keep them reasonably clean and give them a safe, comfortable place to sleep. Mind you, the skills may not seem so simple the first time you’re confronted with a little mass of waving arms and kicking legs who, upon being lowered to the change table, reaches desperately as if you had dropped him into an abyss. However, baby care is easily learned by almost anyone who is willing to (or has to) get in there and do it.

Getting in there and doing it also helps with your other task, which is getting to know him. In fact, the two are interdependent: You get to know your baby partly by handling and caring for him. At the same time, knowing him makes you more attentive, which

enables you to better understand and respond to his needs. And all of this helps you bond with your baby.

I remember asking a friend once — this was before I had kids — how he knew what the baby wanted. “He tells you,” my friend replied. I had no idea what he meant. How can a baby tell you? But now that I’ve looked after three babies of my own, I understand. The baby does tell you, but not with words or gestures or even looks that pass between you. It’s more that, as you spend time together, you learn to read the baby’s cues — his body language or his cries or coos in various situations. Whatever you might think of your wife’s apparent instinct for this, it’s an acquired skill that requires time and togetherness.

Part of developing the ability to read cues involves fathers and babies becoming comfortable together. I mean physically comfortable. Again, this takes time and daily caregiving helps because changing, dressing, bathing and comforting all require you to touch the baby. But there’s a particular level of physical contact that comes when parents and babies are just hanging out, and getting to this place means finding the way your bodies fit together. Each one of my kids seemed to want me to hold him differently, and it usually took a little time for us to figure out what that was. Quiet, relaxed time together helps you find this fit.

Mothers usually experience this by default. The child is born of her body, they usually spend a lot of time together and, if she’s nursing, they have a way to quite literally plug in to one another. For fathers it’s not quite as straightforward. It helps to make sure you get some of your holding time with a happy baby. Dads’ holding time is often “work” — caregiving, or coping with a fussy baby when mom is at the end of her rope. This is necessary, but you also need some undemanding time where you and the baby can just feel good together. Those are the moments when your baby’s body seems to melt into yours.

I have a half-baked theory that when parents and babies are together like this, little invisible love chemicals pass between them. Whether that’s true or not, the feeling you get from this kind of physical contact teaches you that babies give something back. Yes, they can be a lot of work, but there is a wonderful payoff that comes from having his body language tell you, “I feel good with you. I want to be with you.” There is no better feeling in the world.

Helpful hints for hands-on dads

* **Wear your baby.** Slings and front packs enable you to give your baby the closeness she needs without always having your arms full. Babies are also usually content in these carriers (particularly helpful with fussy babies), which helps promote bonding.

* **Your forearm makes a nice pillow.** If your baby is always looking for a breast when you hold him, try this position: Hold your baby face down over one arm with his cheek nestled against the soft underside of your forearm and your hand cupping him

under the crotch. Some people say this is good for gas. I don't know about that, but there's something about a manly forearm that seems to fit well with a baby's head.

* **Sing her a song.** Singing is one of the best ways to get a baby to respond and pay close attention to you. And it doesn't matter what you sing or how good your voice is.

* **Go it alone.** It's hard for a father to work out his own style while mom is looking over his shoulder. It can help if fathers are sometimes left to their own devices with no one to bail them out. Short solo stints (as little as 20 to 30 minutes) with a freshly fed baby are best in the beginning. Early morning is a good time to try this, since many babies are in a good mood at this time of the day, and mom usually needs the sleep anyway.

* **Develop a thick skin.** Your partner will correct you at times. Other times it may seem like she wants everything to be done her way. This is normal. It's just her way of trying to bring order to a situation that often feels out of control (plus she might actually be right sometimes). This should ease up as her self-confidence and her confidence in your parenting skills increase.