

The Father Zone. Four guys talk about what it's like

by John Hoffman

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I've noticed some common characteristics about the many new fathers I've interviewed: They are all somewhat in awe of their partner's mothering. They tend to identify their baby by full name: Jessica Lynn Brown-Smith or Jason Brock Spencer. They give their child's age in months. And, of course, they're all pretty gaa gaa about their baby.

It seems to me, though, that men's vocabulary for talking about parenthood is often not quite as well developed as that of most mothers. Could this be due to lack of practice? I wonder how many people actually ask fathers to talk about their babies. When I do, they are usually eager to talk. Maybe we should all ask a little more often.

Here's a little window on the world of four new, and slightly used, fathers. They come from all over, but at present they all live in the Toronto area.

Michael Gelfand

Occupation: advertising copywriter

Birthplace: Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Children: Jamie (ten) and Leo (three)

Favourite thing to do with the baby:

I liked getting up early with Leo when he was a baby. We'd go down to the family room and watch early morning Sports Desk and sort of shake out the cobwebs together. I can divide my "holding tight" time with him into two camps. One was in the evening, trying to get him to mellow out. That was hard work. In the mornings his body language was completely different. His body would sort of fold into me. It was a very easygoing time.

A funny memory:

I think I block that stuff out. But my wife claims that one time when Leo was really little, he woke up in the morning and I said I wanted to change his diaper — trying to make myself useful, I guess. She was lying there trying to get back to sleep and listening. She says she kept hearing the tabs on the diaper being ripped open and then done up, over and over again, as if I couldn't get them right. She swears it took at least 45 minutes. I don't remember.

Hardest adjustment:

I'm still learning that being a parent is not about being a boss all the time. It's just as easy to say yes as it is to say no. My strongest asset as a parent: I like to play. I get enjoyment out of many of the same things as my kids. I like to read the books, do the puzzles and watch the cartoons.

What I like about fatherhood:

I like having my own family — the sense of true connection and belonging. These are the people I live with, who I take care of, who take care of me. It's my team.

How starting out as a stepfather affected my outlook on fatherhood:

I think the hardest thing for most parents is getting used to the idea that all this time is no longer yours. It's more than just responsibility and obligation to your children, it's a commitment to family. I started going out with Bonny when Jamie was four so I was able to learn this gradually; it was probably less jarring for me than for most people.

Patrick Bunzigiye

Occupation: medical researcher

Birthplace: Bukavu, Republic of the Congo

Child: Zawadi, 23 months

What I felt on first seeing the baby:

I did not see my daughter until she was 14 months old. We were living in Kenya, but I had to go back home to the Congo (Kinshasa) and I was trapped there during the political unrest. I couldn't get back for a year and a half and I had to spend time in a refugee camp. So when I first saw Zawadi, I felt guilty. I was wishing many things: that I could have been home when she was born, that I could have seen her as an infant and that I could have been able to support her and help my wife. She was also very reserved with me. She would peek out at me from behind her mother and sometimes she would only look at me from across the room. That went on for about a month. It was very hard.

Favourite thing to do with the baby:

I like to have her sleeping in my arms. Right now, she seems more relaxed and comfortable sleeping in my arms than in her mother's, so I'm usually the one who puts her to sleep.

One thing I've learned:

It's the extent to which from the moment the child is born until the day you die, it's sacrifice. You put the child's well-being ahead of everything else. I knew it would be like this, but I didn't realize the magnitude.

How fatherhood is different here:

Back home fathers are not so involved in parenting. Women are mainly at home, nannies are very affordable and usually one of the grandmothers or another female relative is nearby, so mothers have lots of help. Here the support system is not the same and families have busier lives, so fathers must share equally the responsibilities of bringing up kids.

Hardest adjustment:

Before I was a father, I was impatient. I was very practical and wanted things to be done as I conceived them. I have learned to be more patient and to overcome my anger.

Best thing about fatherhood:

I like the feeling that you've achieved something and that you're still building something with your child.

John Ivison

Occupation: journalist

Birthplace: Bradford-on-Avon, UK

Child: James, 11 weeks

What I felt on first seeing the baby:

Relief! There had been some arrhythmia in the baby's heartbeat leading up to the birth, so I was pretty worried. But when he came out, the obstetrician turned to me and said, "I think he'll play rugby at Murrayfield for Scotland someday." (He knew I was a football fan.) Then I knew that everything was OK.

Favourite thing to do with the baby:

I like first thing in the morning. I get up with James at about 6:30 so my wife can sleep. I put him in his little chair while I make breakfast and I sing to him. He loves to pump and kick his legs so I often sing an old Queen song — "I like to ride my bicycle." He's usually in a very good mood. This is our time together.

One thing I've learned:

It's brought emotions to the surface. I love my wife and I love my parents but this is completely different. The night James was born I sat up and drank wine with my father and I was in tears most of the time. It was like a dam bursting.

Biggest surprise:

Everybody told me, you won't be able to do things, but, so far, we've done a lot. We took him out to a banquet when he was six weeks old and we just got back from a week in Florida. He was no problem on the plane. A woman across the aisle said she didn't even realize there was a baby on the flight.

Hardest adjustment:

That's hard to say because it's wonderful so far. I guess it's the amount of laundry. Every day I'm amazed at the amount of washing we have to do, both his and ours.

My strongest asset as a parent:

I'm quite easygoing. We're content right now to let him follow his own path without trying to control him all the time or get him on a schedule. That's the way I was raised.

What I like about fatherhood:

The reaction I get when he recognizes me. You walk into the room and he sees you, and you get this big smile with the arms waving and the legs kicking. It's the greatest joy when you get that big smile.

Michael Ritter

Occupation: chartered accountant

Birthplace: Melbourne, Australia

Child: Mitchell, eight months

What I felt on first seeing the baby:

It's a boy was my first thought, because that's the first thing I saw. But shortly after that I was amazed at how real it seemed. I thought it might feel weird to suddenly be holding this baby, but it seemed like he'd always been here.

A funny memory:

When Jenn was in labour, I had to go back down to the car and get a few things. When I got back up to the labour and delivery floor, I went straight past her door into the wrong room and walked in on another family. They could have been at any point in the labour! I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just said, "Good Luck!" and walked out. I kept hoping I wouldn't run into them in the hall after that.

One thing I've learned:

You can function with very little sleep and nothing embarrasses you any more. Your baby can poop and pee on you anywhere, anyplace, anytime and it doesn't bother you.

Biggest surprise:

I didn't realize you could love somebody so much that quickly. You love your wife 100 percent, but you think of that as something that grows deeper and deeper all the time, but with Mitchell it was instantaneous. To feel that for somebody who comes out of the blue was a little surreal but immensely satisfying.

Hardest adjustment:

Learning how to fit everything into one day. Every day I wake up and think, This is what I have to get done and this is what's really going to happen.

My strongest asset as a parent:

Flexibility. The ability to go with the flow. It would be easy to think so much about what you are doing [as a parent] and what he's doing that you could get very worried. But it takes a lot to get me rattled.

What I like about fatherhood:

Just coming home and being able to see him. I like to make him laugh. Well, when I come home and take off my jacket, he laughs! He's just a very happy baby, I guess.