



Patrick Houser offers some tips for how midwives can support young fathers

Most men, at some point in their life, hear a phrase similar to, “Dear, I have something to tell you ... I’m pregnant.” In the majority of cases this proclamation catches them by surprise. How a man reacts to a pregnancy is frequently determined by his maturity and age and if he feels settled and secure in his life, career and relationship. If a teenage boy hears that particular expression, none of the aforementioned is likely to apply.

In addition to this precarious and challenging situation a teenager finds himself in, he will also often encounter criticism, judgement and blame from others. There are many and various condemnations that could be made of expectant teens. However, by the time these young parents reach a midwife all of these issues are pretty much academic and are best put aside; they are having a baby.

Young mothers must be well supported and extra efforts made to assure their successful and secure pregnancy, birth and beyond; but what about the baby’s father? Is he necessary or even relevant? Is he an asset or a liability to the situation at hand and what role does a midwife play regarding him?

Midwives' influence

During the antenatal period midwives have direct influence on new parents. While first priority needs to be with the mother, there is value in a corresponding consideration for the father. There are a few assumptions that can safely be made about teen fathers. They are in no way ‘ready’ for parenthood. They are concerned about their new responsibilities and loss of their life as they know it. They are in a state of shock. In brief, they are terrified.

A midwife’s role during this time typically goes beyond the physical. It also encompasses emotional realms as hormonal changes significantly influence a young mother’s sense of wellbeing. When a

midwife is caring for a mother, and by proxy the baby, the nature of the father’s presence and influence is an important aspect. The care provided by the father can be a significant factor for a mother’s successful pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding.

The frequency of teen fathers’ involvement during pregnancy is likely to be less than older ones. However, if we are to evolve beyond our current situation of fatherless homes, divorce and children with absent fathers, we would do well to pay close attention when the foundations of the family are being laid. Parental support and bonding during the ‘primary time’ – from conception through the baby’s first year – is key to the health and longevity of not just the family unit but also the individual relationship between each parent and the child.

The research is overwhelming as to the importance of fathers’ involvement in the lives of their children (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004, The Fatherhood Institute). If there is no supportive fatherly influence for children, the incidences of truancy, antisocial behaviour, violence and teen pregnancy (*déjà vu?*) are all increased as the children grow up (Flouri 2005, Parke et al 2004, Berdondini and Smith 1996).

Welcoming young fathers

“Welcome” is a word that warms the heart and is particularly applicable here. Think about how you feel when visiting someone’s home or workplace and you are greeted with, “Welcome”. Some other options are, “Hi, how are you?”, “Lousy weather”, “Thanks for coming”, etc. All very rote and they do not solicit the same feeling as “Welcome”.

Now imagine a frightened teen father attending an antenatal appointment. Also remember, you most likely represent an authority figure to him. You have an opportunity here that may seem subtle yet it could be very important. Look him right in

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the eye and say, “Welcome”. Including a smile would be a bonus. If you look closely you may even notice his body relax and his facial expression shift as well.

It is all about relationships. The parent/child relationship is a developing one and each mother and father needs to find their own way in. A mother is operating under a biological imperative; the baby is living inside her body. This gives her a significant advantage in relationship building. She feels her baby’s physical presence. Many mothers also report having a sense of their child’s emotional nature, from the womb.

If an expectant dad feels welcome he is more likely to engage with the pregnancy, and baby, than if he does not. You will not necessarily have ‘control’ over the destiny of the couple’s relationship, but you may have influence over the fate of the father/child relationship simply by finding ways in to his developing connection with his child.

During antenatal appointments regularly scan back and forth between mother and father, making eye contact with both. Include each of them in questions and statements that pertain to the mother’s and baby’s wellbeing. Make suggestions of ways he can support the mother and his baby. Ask him questions without it seeming like an inquisition. Ask what he thinks about certain topics and, if feasible, how he feels. Remember, he is having an experience, too, albeit different from the mother’s. ►

Indirect support

With many teen pregnancies a midwife may not have access to the father but there could still be precious opportunities. If the expectant dad does not come to antenatal visits you can enquire about the nature of the relationship between the mother and father. Are they together? Does he appear to be committed? Have they discussed the future and what his intentions are? Is he supportive? Did she invite him to come to the appointment? Will she invite him to the next one? Is he reading anything about becoming a dad? Suggest something. What do you, the mother, want regarding his involvement, particularly at the birth? Have you two discussed it?

No matter what the answer to these and other questions, change is constant during pregnancy so give 'space' for it regarding the father. This can be the longest nine months of a teen's life. During the pregnancy your influence on teen fathers may be indirect but it could have a real impact on the future of the family.

Birth

If you are working with birth directly, the power of 'welcome' is also significant.

What if each midwife welcomed every father into all labours and births? Of the midwives I have interviewed, most concluded that they did not find a significant difference between teen dads and older ones, during birth. Dads are entering the most female of all possible worlds and most likely do not have a clue as to how to be or what to 'do'. Remember that most men are 'doers'. A father needs to understand the importance of 'not doing'; supporting from stillness and allowing the mother to go inside and find her instinctive, birthing place. He needs to trust her and her ability to give birth. He needs to feel safe and know she is also safe. Remind him.

Regularly look him in the eye and tell him everything is okay, that she is doing great and everything is 'normal'...as it should be. Sometimes a reassuring glance and nod is all that is required rather than words.

Conclusion

The transition to fatherhood is one of the most influential life changes most men will ever face. Its success will be key to the long-term relationship between a father and child. Fathers all need the same things:

kindness, understanding – and then, of course, "Welcome". **TPM**

Patrick M Houser is co-founder of FathersToBe.org and author of the *Fathers-To-Be Handbook*

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MIDATLANTIC CONFERENCE ON BIRTH & PRIMAL HEALTH RESEARCH

All midwives have good reasons to be interested in the future of humanity. This is why they will not miss the 'Midatlantic Conference on Birth and Primal Health Research'.

At this conference there will be an unprecedented association of about fifty speakers representative of the two opposite directions towards which the history of childbirth, and therefore the history of mankind, is pushed. For example the participation of Pr Michael Stark, from Berlin, as the father of the new, easy, fast and safe technique of caesarean, is highly suggestive of one direction. On the other hand Pr Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg, from Stockholm, as a world expert on oxytocin as the main hormone of love, is highly representative of the opposite direction. The participation of Mario Meriardi, coordinator for maternal and perinatal health at WHO, will facilitate the emergence of vital projects that will influence the evolution of midwifery.

Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, has been selected for this historical conference because an island in the middle of the ocean is an ideal location to reinforce links between continents. Since Christopher Columbus spent some time in Las Palmas on his way to America, one cannot imagine a more symbolic city. Another reason is that the prestigious Symphony Hall of the Canary Islands Conference Centre is unique. When the curtain behind the stage is not completely closed, one can see the ocean and the foam of the waves. There is no better place to dream of the rebirth of the Goddess of Love and to justify the famous painting by Botticelli as the logo of the conference.



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