

Supporting Men in Their Transition to Fatherhood

Jay Warren

Abstract: Today's fathers have few generational or cultural references to guide them through the novel levels of expectations and demands placed upon them as new parents. Increasing rates of both divorce and postpartum depression in men show that new fathers need more support. Through education, communication, and peer support groups, today's fathers can be the active, supportive, loving parents they desire to be for their family.

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Five years ago, I began working in a multi-disciplinary, prenatal wellness center located in Encinitas, CA. It was founded by a holistic-oriented OB-GYN, Dr. Nikolas Capetanakis, in an effort to more comprehensively serve his patients in maintaining a healthy pregnancy, preparing for natural labor and delivery, and recovering in the postpartum period.

A team of providers was assembled—each a specialist within their discipline in prenatal and perinatal care services. I joined the CAP Wellness Center as the prenatal and pediatric chiropractor after 15 years of being in a family-oriented, private practice in San Diego, CA. Other services we offered were acupuncture, massage, yoga, and pilates classes for pregnant women. We also taught a wide range of birth education classes: HypnoBirthing, newborn care, infant CPR, and breastfeeding classes. Our center quickly became known in our community as the hub of “all things birth,” since no other place offered such comprehensive support during pregnancy and the perinatal period.

Dr. Jay Warren has been a prenatal and pediatric chiropractor since March, 2000. He is the Wellness Care Coordinator at the CAP Wellness Center in San Diego, CA, where 90% of his patients are pregnant or postpartum women and infants. Dr. Jay is also an instructor for the ICPA, teaching a course called “Pregnancy, Birth, and Infancy from the Baby’s Perspective.” He is the host of two popular podcasts: “Healthy Births, Happy Babies,” where he interviews experts on perinatal care issues, and “The Dadhood Journey,” where he shares real-life lessons and practical tools to support new dads in navigating their parenthood experience. www.DrJayWarren.com

While we were proud of the strong reputation we had earned, we saw that we were dropping the ball with our new mothers in the postpartum period. We provided great support and information for pregnant women leading up to, and immediately following birth, but did little to support these new mothers afterwards. So we added the additional support services of infant and toddler sleep workshops, pelvic floor physical therapy services, and a weekly breastfeeding support group led by a lactation consultant. We started teaching “Mama & Baby” yoga and “Movers and Shakers” yoga classes for the toddlers. I provided pediatric chiropractic care for infants and babies as well as postpartum care for new mothers, as did the acupuncturists and massage therapists. The CAP Wellness Center was now becoming known as the hub for “all things for new families,” and again we were proud of what we were doing to support them.

However, one important part of the new family was being ignored—the dads. It was probably because I was the only one doing pediatric infant care that I was allowed to see this gap. If a mom came in for the breastfeeding class, Mama & Baby yoga, or postpartum acupuncture treatments, they usually came in alone, or just with their infant. But if a newborn baby was coming in for a chiropractic examination and spinal adjustment to help them recover and heal from any trauma they experienced in their birth, usually the father came to the appointment as well. What I saw on dads’ faces and in their eyes showed me a person that was overwhelmed, stressed, and silently suffering. What I saw was a father that needed support too.

Men now play an essential role in prenatal care, birth preparation, and labor and delivery. Today it is common for us to see images of men massaging their partner’s lower backs in labor, and catching babies in birth tubs. New fathers are also expected to be active caregivers in the first days, weeks, and months of their child’s life. Dads bathe the baby, change diapers, swaddle, clothe, rock, soothe, cuddle, and play with the baby. All of the things a mother does to care for a newborn, the father does as well, as they should do. But this wasn’t always the case. Only a generation ago, men were not a part of pregnancy, birth, or early parenting. The father was relegated to the role of provider and protector of the family unit, and when the child was older, the role of disciplinarian was added. Possibly later, the father took on the role of teacher and mentor.

This puts today’s modern dad in a difficult position. He is now expected to share in all of the pregnancy and newborn care responsibilities, but he has no generational or even common cultural references to support him in it. This often leaves the modern father feeling unsure, incapable, ineffective, lost, and alone. Many men suffer silently in the initial days, weeks, and months after the arrival of their child. In the time that is pivotal for a new family to lay a healthy foundation for their lives together, one part of the new family triad (if this is the couple’s first baby), is in desperate need of support, so he can feel whole again.

My own father was part of a pilot program in the early 1970s, where they experimented with “allowing” fathers to be in the delivery room. My birth fell within their three-month trial period at St. John’s Hospital in Los Angeles, CA. But on the night my mom went into labor, their regular obstetrician was not available and the doctor on call was not supportive of this new program. As the family story goes, my dad and this particular obstetrician were yelling at each other in the hallway about whether or not my father would be permitted into the delivery room when my mom shouted at them, “Would you two figure this out later? I’m going to have a baby!” My dad was allowed in and I was born with him there beside my mom.

But a generation later, when I myself became a dad, I went to every prenatal visit. I was actively involved in the birth planning and decision making. I was present at my son’s birth at home. The only other people present were the midwife, her assistant, and our doula. I had the opportunity to catch my son. I cut the umbilical cord. I held my son skin-to-skin while his mom was being attended to by the midwife after the birth. I played an integral role in his entrance into the world.

Only a few weeks into my parenting life, I spent my first day alone caring for my son. Then as our parenting lifestyle unfolded, I spent half the week alone with my newborn son. When my wife worked, I spent full days with our baby—just me and my son. When I worked, she would be with him. This did not feel unusual or abnormally stressful to me, because I was “just the dad.” It was simply what I did and what I wanted to do. I enjoyed this experience and felt grateful I was able to spend this time alone with my son.

Unfortunately, there are many families in which the level of the father’s involvement with the baby in the first few months is very different. In our wellness center, we see many fathers-to-be in our birth education classes, attending prenatal visits and the birth. Even so, I still hear from the new moms postpartum that their spouses are not engaged in newborn care, despite their efforts to get their partners involved. I hear complaints about the new father being described to me as detached, uninvolved, uninterested, oblivious, incapable, inconvenienced, frustrated, and annoyed.

In some instances, I am sure it is true that some partners are unhelpful, or physically or emotionally absent in the first months of the baby arriving in their lives. But the majority of the new dads I’ve worked with do not feel this way. They are frustrated, but neither detached nor uninterested. They may be annoyed, but not for the reasons their spouses think. The frustration men feel comes from the pressure of the unclear expectations placed upon them as new dads, and not having any knowledge, training, or guidance on how to fulfill those expectations. We do not have any generational experience to draw upon because our grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and beyond were not involved in this way and never served in this capacity. We have little cultural reference

because this current version of what an active father actually looks and feels like is brand new. So we are lacking the resources and support we need to help us navigate this major life transition into fatherhood.

As frustrating as it is to feel incompetent or useless in the home, it is even worse as a father to feel like we are letting our families down. Estimates of the prevalence of postpartum depression in men varies from 4% to as high as 25% (Kim & Swain, 2007; Cameron, Sedov, & Tomfohr-Madsen, 2016; Scarff, 2019). High rates of depression and anxiety in new fathers, which is often unacknowledged let alone diagnosed and addressed, places a further strain on the already difficult postpartum period, and is a major barrier to the family unit becoming whole, happy, and healthy as they transition into a new life together.

However, in my work with new fathers, I have seen three influences that make dramatic improvements in the father's preparedness, engagement, and overall success in transitioning well into parenthood. Ideally, these three influences would be utilized by all fathers-to-be. But even if a man utilizes only one, I believe it can have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of not only the father, but the mother, the baby, and the whole family unit.

Birth Education Classes

The first thing we can do to help new fathers be prepared for parenthood is to make sure they attend a birth education class. Regardless of what laboring technique is taught, information is also presented about what to expect in the last weeks of pregnancy, during labor and delivery, and in the first minutes, hours, and days once baby arrives. New dads have told me that this was incredibly stress-reducing for them, especially if they had not had any prior, direct experience with labor, delivery, and/or babies.

Learning tools about how to best support their partner in the birthing experience empowers the father and improves the bonding the couple feels as their baby is brought into the world. Many men have told me that prior to taking a birth class, they felt apprehensive and nervous about being present at the birth of their child because they did not know what to do. Instead of shrinking back and not doing anything but being physically in the room, now the father has a more clearly-defined role and responsibility in the experience. The provider archetype can be used to effectively serve the needs and wants of the mother of his child in labor. The protector archetype can be used constructively to help facilitate a more peaceful, harmonious birth.

Being actively involved in a birth class (as well as in other prenatal care appointments and activities) also strengthens the prenatal bond between the father and baby. In Schroth's work about Prenatal Bonding (2015), he emphasizes that the baby is aware of the father in the womb. Thus, the father has the opportunity to bond with his unborn baby and also

plays a significant role in the baby's growth and development by helping provide a physically and emotionally safe pregnancy for the mother.

Teaching Prenatal Bonding techniques to the dads I work with allows them to feel more connected to their child and to their partner. Talking to the baby, singing songs, and reading books through the belly are all ways that men can feel more involved and bonded in the pregnancy. Just as with mothers who practice bonding prenatally, fathers can enjoy the same benefits afterwards of being better able to soothe the baby, experiencing less anxiety and stress, and feeling more connected and bonded with the baby. These outcomes help the whole family start out life together in the best possible way.

Open Communication about Parenting

Another factor that improves the father's success in parenting often comes as a side effect of the birth education classes. During all of the work in crafting a birth plan, lines of communication open up and hopefully strengthen between the couple. In learning about the options available to expectant parents in their birth experience, the couple dialogues about what obstetric interventions will be permitted, who will be present at the birth, and what their general vision of an ideal birth will be.

If the communication strategies involved in agreeing on a birth plan are carried into their parenting experience together, the couple will fare much better. Continuing this exploration of what parenthood is going to look like for each partner once the baby has arrived and about the expectations each partner has for the first days, weeks, and months together, may help avoid strife. Conversations should continue about what expectations each has for the other partner in their roles as a parent, what fears they might have in becoming a parent, and what help they might need as they transition into these new roles.

Parents-to-be should have discussions such as: How are the tasks of nighttime diaper changes, laundry, meal prep, and dishes going to be divided and who is responsible for each? Who is going to which appointments for the baby? Who's going to address upcoming issues with the grandparents and other family members if they happen? Who will make sure the bills are paid on time? Who is going back to work and when? What is the transfer going to be like when the other parent walks through the door from work at the end of the day? What does that (and so much more that is involved with early parenting) all look like?

Getting both parents on the same page is essential for their family unit to be strong and functional during this significant transition from couple-hood into parenthood. This encourages the mother and father to continually work as a team as they get used to being the parents of their child. Rather than bickering and criticizing, they can constructively communicate together. Rather than feeling overburdened and resentful

towards a perceived lack of effort, they can ask for the help they need. Mom feels supported, dad feels useful, and the baby is well taken care of.

Support Groups for Dads

New fathers also need support from other men through this transition into fatherhood—a kind of support that can only come from other men. In my experience, men in group class settings with their spouses sitting right next to them share only a superficial layer of what is really going on inside them. For generations, men have been taught that when it comes to their family, they need to provide, protect, and lead. I feel that these roles are indeed important to both the man and the family unit. But what it means to be a protector, a provider, and a leader in today's family is much different than what it meant to generations of fathers long ago. The roles that were passed on to us by prior generations need an upgrade for today's modern dad. This is new territory for our society and I feel new fathers need ways to explore this and figure it out together.

This is why I started a new dads group that meets monthly at the CAP Wellness Center. It is the first support structure of any kind that we have offered solely for fathers. In this “men only” environment, a safe space is set up for sharing openly, without fear of judgement or ridicule. Ground rules are established around confidentiality, and boundaries are consistently maintained, so the men feel comfortable in opening up, being vulnerable, and asking for help.

The response has been incredible. New fathers are sharing their frustration about not relating well with their children, and their sadness about the level of disconnection they feel with their partners. They are candid about their fear of losing their marriage and screwing up their children, despite trying everything they can to keep it all together. Sometimes this is the first time a man has not only said these things out loud to another person, but the first time they have even admitted to, and been honest with themselves about, these feelings.

Our new dads need this kind of space to be able to open up and show their “chinks in the armor” without worrying that their family will think less of them. When trust is built, vulnerability can be shared. When safety is felt, worries and fears can be shared. Statements such as, “I never seem to be able to calm the baby down quickly enough. So then she swoops in, frustrated with me that she has to take over again,” are responded to with new tips and tools that might do the trick next time. Confessions like, “I just don't feel that connected to my baby yet, not like her mom is. And I'm worried I'm not going to love her enough,” are answered by, “I went through the same thing. Don't worry, it's normal. Keep with it, and you'll feel that bond soon enough.”

But the most common responses I get from the dads after they attend one of my meetings is, “I'm glad to know I'm not the only one going through

this,” and, “I don’t feel so alone anymore.” When you are experiencing overwhelm and have retreated inside yourself in order to not let anyone know that you are struggling, a simple reassurance that what you’re going through is normal, and that we’ve all been there too, can make a huge difference.

Of course, a “men only” new dads’ group is not the only place where this can happen. But I have seen that sometimes it is easier for men to start opening up with a group of relative strangers with whom they share a common bond—fatherhood. Even if the monthly meeting is a place to “blow off steam” and a time to not feel so alone, it will help the family be just a little bit healthier. However, the hope is that with practice and repetition, this new ability to express vulnerability and honesty is brought back home and shared within the family to make an even greater impact where it matters most.

The transition into fatherhood can be an overwhelming experience for men, just as the transition into motherhood can be for women. But we do not have to feel so alone in figuring it out. Becoming more educated about the coming parenting experience empowers the father to play a more active, powerful role in his family. Communicating and managing expectations is the key to both parents feeling supported, cared for, and loved as they navigate their way in becoming a happy, healthy family together. Finding a new dads group provides a unique level of support and guidance that is missing in today’s society for men to navigate their transition into parenthood in a healthy and empowered way.

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