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What's a Dad to do?

By Ruth Hungerford

"No Ruth I won't show you how to put on baby's nappy. That's Simon's job!" And with those words my midwife knelt down, beside the heater, with my newborn, 2 hour old baby and her daddy, and showed him how to wrap a cloth nappy around his daughter's tiny nether regions. That set the pattern of our life in the early weeks, as for the next three weeks my Simon changed every single nappy for his new daughter, day ... and night.

I, meanwhile, learned how to feed the baby, then fed the baby, slept, and ate and made milk, and Simon made me food, changed nappies, bathed the baby, walked the baby up and down the hall in the middle of the night when I was too exhausted to stand, washed and folded nappies and sicked-up-on baby and mummy clothes, answered phone calls, entertained visitors, cleaned the house, grocery shopped, and generally did everything else ..

One of the things I noticed when I was pregnant, and something that Simon and I have talked about since, is that the baby wasn't really 'real' to him until she slid out and he caught her, and then it hit him all of a sudden. Other Dads that he has spoken to have expressed the same feelings. For me, it was different because I was intimately and quite literally connected to the baby every day for 41 weeks and 1 day.

It seems pretty obvious that the experience of pregnancy and birth and parenting is quite a different experience for men than it is for women. Some women tell me that their husbands / partners feel 'left out' of the process of pregnancy or birth or once the baby is born they don't really see that they are needed much until the baby can walk and talk and kick a ball around.

Some men have said they can feel a bit sidelined in the whole birth thing, wondering what the point of the home birth is and feeling worried about "what if something goes wrong" and "shouldn't we go to hospital and have the men in white coats and the beeping machines just in case?"

A few years back, I asked Simon what he thought about our plan to have a home birth with our first baby and he said "well, you have to have the baby so it should be up to you, and you would have done your research, and I just have to support what you want to do."

We were probably at an advantage here because , a few years earlier, Simon and I had both been present at the hospital birth of our nephew (a forceps birth), which was quite traumatic and distressing and a classic case of the 'cascade of intervention' in practice, beginning with going to hospital, artificial rupture of membranes, no staff around to support, an epidural and finally a forceps delivery and blood transfusions for my sister in law.

Both Simon and I separately came to the same conclusion about that birth .. that is that the

breaking the waters seemed to start a series of events that led to the outcome. While our nephew (and sister) survived the birth it was very stressful for all concerned and certainly not the natural birth she had planned and hoped for.

After I had our baby at home, and Simon caught her, he said to me “it was how I always thought birth was supposed to be”, which was pretty cool.

However, having a new baby in the house was not something that despite all our reading, we were really prepared for (in hindsight I think that all new parents feel like their whole world is turned upside down). We can look back and laugh now but at the time it just seemed like a huge amount of work.

Some funny incidents do stick in my mind—like sending Simon out to buy me new knickers. While I was pregnant, my growing belly had stretched my knickers to their maximum, and after I'd had the baby I realized that the elastic in most of my undies had given up and I was suddenly in dire need of some new ones. So Simon manfully headed off to the ladies' undies section of Farmers and gallantly bought me a supply of brand new underwear. Unfortunately he (bless him) bought me size 'small' which despite wishful thinking on my part was never going to get onto my just-had-a-baby-two-days-ago sized figure! I was flattered that he thought I even had a hope of getting into a 'small', although it didn't solve the underwear problem.

After I had baby number two and had mastitis and a very swollen infected breast that was obviously at least three times bigger than the other side, I tearfully exclaimed to Simon “you can tell even through my clothes that this side is so HUGE” and he just smiled and said in a very practical matter of fact tone “well it's not as if you're not going out anywhere, so who'll see it!”. So blimmin' practical! It did make me laugh though (through my tears)!

So to answer the question at the top of this page - “what's a dad to do?” it really depends on what you need, and everyone will have different needs, but for me, the bottom line was that Simon took care of me. The saying “*the best thing a dad can do for his kids, is love their mother*” held very true for me.

When I was pregnant Simon protected me from the stupid, hurtful comments that people made when they heard we were planning a home birth. When labour started he dashed outside to the garage (sorry, I mean man's shed) and whipped up a birth mat (after getting me a hottie first, to put on my tummy), then he was back inside setting up that birth pool and running hoses and laying tarpaulins on the carpet (I think it was how men do their nesting—you know, building stuff and using tarps, preferably with the aid of a few power tools and duct tape).

Then while I laboured away, he boiled water, put hot towels on my tummy with each contraction and let me squeeze his hand so tight I left nail prints. In the days after the birth, he sat with me and told me I could do it, as I struggled to learn to breastfeed, keeping the visitors away from me, phoning the midwives and La Leche League, and keeping away the “just give her a bottle” peoples. And he loved his daughter and he took care of her too. In between running the house, changing nappies, making me eat and drink and laugh, he walked his daughter up and down, learning the best soothing ways to hold her—it was at this time that he developed his ‘three hold theory’ - he would try three different holds to try and settle her, and if she still was unsettled, she needed me and so back she'd come for more nursing. I think he should patent the theory—maybe he could sell it as a part of a ‘skills for new dads’ course?

So, what's a dad to do -? in my case, quite a lot and boy did I need it.

Ruth Hungerford

P.S. Eventually Simon consented to show me how to work the nappies so that I could change the occasional one, although it still remained one of his main jobs for at least the first 12 months.