

A Handbook for New and Expectant Fathers

A Word about the Author

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*Dedicated to my loving wife Ann
without whom this manual, or my two wonderful
sons, would not have been possible.*

Introduction

The intent of this small manual is to inform fathers of their importance and influence in their child's development. Most males are very familiar with reading owner's manuals. For every new household item or tool in your shop, you have received an extensive operator's guide, but for the most important and challenging task of your life, your child is handed over to you with little more than "Congratulations and good luck." Most of us have had little experience in child care until we have our own child. Hopefully, what follows will serve as a starting point for you and your spouse to open a conversation about your ideas and expectations of fatherhood.

Operation

Visually inspect all parts after delivery. If you have any questions, ask your service representative (Doctor). Make physical contact with your baby as soon as it is possible (bonding). Bonding, baby to father and father to baby, is critical for the establishment of a long term relationship. Don't be afraid to handle the baby; he (she) is well constructed and surprisingly sturdy. Get some pointers, then experiment with developing your own handling style.



Counter to old wives tales, newborns can smell, hear, taste and see.

Don't allow the good intentions of nurses, your wife, or other relatives to be critical of your skills and remove the baby. Fathering is not just an extension of mothering; it is a set of concepts and behaviors unique unto itself.

Sometimes a new mother will be critical of a father in order to ensure her roll as a caregiver, later to find herself crying in a therapist's office saying, "I don't know why he doesn't know his own children." Don't be afraid of experimentation. If the baby's mother shows you how to hold the baby and it just doesn't work, try another position. Women have a slightly curved forearm and extended hip, perfect for holding a baby. Fathers have a more developed upper body and wide shoulder, also perfect for holding a baby.

Most new fathers have expectations of an infant's behavior to be that of a child 6 to 12 months old. Take time to observe other infants and ask the age of the child you observe.

Operation During Break-In Period

A. Take care of yourself

1. Be good to yourself. You're under stress, and good stress or bad, your body doesn't know the difference. Your resistance to disease, as well as your patience and decision making ability may be diminished for a while.
2. When the baby arrives home, you will be losing a lot of sleep. Take naps whenever you can. Organize your work on the job, if at all possible, in order to reduce stress. You may need to take a few days off, so be prepared.
3. Delegate routine tasks to volunteers and relatives. Remember, the primary objective for you and your wife is to have time to bond as a family.

B. Take care of your wife

1. Forget the baseball mitt or teddy for the baby. Get something for the mother.
2. The mother needs your nurturing. One of the best things that a father can do for his child is to love its mother. She will not be the same well-adjusted, secure woman for a while. She is going through massive hormonal changes, and will need a lot of your tender understanding and support over the next few weeks.
3. Let go of the false conception that your life and relationship will with time return to its previous state. You can take the best that once was, and construct a new relationship, but not return to a life style void of children. For a lot of men the adjustment is impaired by their suppressing or denying feelings. If this is not resolved, it will in time erode the husband-wife relationship. Don't be afraid of your feelings, or of not knowing all the answers. Talk to each other. Don't be afraid of asking for professional assistance. An entire science of how relationships develop, function, and break down has developed (Marriage Therapy). Marriage therapy is usually short term and non-judgmental. Just ask; help is out there and it does work.
4. Run interference for your spouse and baby. People you have not heard from in years will tramp into your life. Politely organize visitation so that it is convenient for your wife and baby.
5. Feeding the family

If you are not a master chef, and your spouse has not stocked up the refrigerator, go to the store and get some frozen dinners.



They are cheaper and better nutritionally balanced than fast food. Good nutrition is especially important now for your wife's recovery and your new responsibilities. If well-wishers bring in casseroles, take the time to wash and return the right empty dish to the right person.

6. When a few weeks pass and the routine sets in, plan some time just to be alone with your wife. Remember she will be a bit resistive; find a good caregiver and assure her that all will be well. Make the first venture our short and romantic. This is important because she is experiencing anxiety due to separation from the child, and secondly, even though she looks great, she is still physically exhausted.

Air Intake and Outlet (MOUTH)

Keep any and all items away from the air intake. Any item within approximately three feet will likely be drawn in. Newborns do not sleep quietly. They gasp, groan, and make all manner of noise. Many hospitals offer classes in infant CPR that can give new parents the confidence they need. Be cautious of baby powder. Exuberant application can cause it to be drawn into the air intake.

Fuel System (Feeding)

Procedures do vary, and heated arguments are waged by all sides of the feeding issue (breast vs. bottle). A couple should talk over the psychological and physical advantages and disadvantages of each method. Remember, the issue is not just the baby's benefit, but the parent's needs as well. Happy parents make the healthiest children. Feeding is a time of bonding and of validation for the child. Validating means sending a physical message that the world is a safe place, you are loved, and you are special. Never prop a bottle up. First, because it is not safe, and second, you are sending a totally different message to the child.

Audio System (Ears)

Babies hear much better than was previously thought. To program your child to the sound of your voice, some experts feel that talking to the child while in the womb has benefits. After birth, take every opportunity to talk and read to your infant. It is known that early readers often come from homes where the parents have read to them from the beginning.



Routine Maintenance

Babies need routine in their lives, and gain security from knowing that their needs will be met. Making a newborn wait to be fed or changed will not teach him patience-he(she) only knows that he is hungry and wet. This may mean making some changes in your own plans and activities for a while, but the payoff of a happy, secure infant is well worth the effort. Don't neglect to throw in a big dose of cuddling, and as your baby grows, playing with him (her). For the baby, play is not just recreation, it is learning. Dad's more physical play style encourages the development of trust and spatial skills.

Oil and Lubrication

Use oils, creams and lotions sparingly. Baby skin is very sensitive and prone to rashes. Don't use old family remedies without clearance from the doctor. Plain old petroleum jelly is often all you need to use.

Car Seats

More children are alive today, not just because of vast improvements in medical care, but because of the wider use of car seats. Fathers are notorious for not using them. If you don't shop for any other baby item, do shop for the car seat. The best safety feature in a car seat is its ease of operation to ensure that you will use it every time, so shop carefully.

Seat Covers (Diapers)

Fathering is much more than routine maintenance. It involves role modeling, and the teaching of values. A father's responsibility does not stop with the physical and psychological environment of the nursery. Values are changing from the live-for-today disposable world, to responsibility for our children's future world. Many parents are considering this when they choose between a disposable plastic and paper diaper, and a reusable natural cotton diaper. Cotton is the softest, most absorbent and comfortable fiber available; a natural choice to go next to our baby's skin. Add to this the extra safety and convenience of a diaper-service diaper, and you've got an unbeatable combination. You will also be pleasantly surprised to find that, for once, the best is actually less expensive.

Thinking Ahead

Periodically inspect your home for potential safety hazards. Get down to the baby's eye level and observe. This will allow you to keep pace with your child's newly developing mobility, and to discover potential hazards before your baby does. Keep one bottle of syrup of Ipecac in your medicine chest at home and one in your car, in case a problem arises when you are away from home. This drug is used to induce vomiting in case of accidental poisoning. Never give your child syrup of Ipecac without first consulting with your physician or poison control center.

In Closing

Fathering is a lot like receiving a job title without a job description. You can define and involve yourself to whatever degree you choose. As with life, your gains will be proportional to your investment. I strongly recommend rolling up your sleeves and diving into Fathering. It truly can be the most rewarding and challenging endeavor in a man's life, as well as a lot of fun. Good luck!