Fathers’ experiences of birth and parenthood

Jenny Barrett


The first study I have chosen to highlight involves research on the feelings of fathers recruited from NCT antenatal groups in Oxford. Although a small study with only 15 participants, it raises issues of interest to us all.

The fathers gave their views through questionnaires and interviews, from seven months of gestation to six months after the birth of their baby. Among the findings during both the antenatal and postnatal period, the dads particularly reported feeling unsupported by health professionals. One father commented that he felt a lack of a ‘dads’ network’ or father-focussed support during his first few months as a new dad. I wonder if there is more that NCT practitioners could do to encourage fathers in our groups to see each other as that support network? Although the study participants felt better supported by health professionals during the birth, they also reported feeling helpless and anxious. Although most of the fathers held their babies immediately after birth, two thirds stated that the baby was wrapped in a blanket. Could we encourage more skin-to-skin contact, for example, by having photos of this practice on display during classes? Study participants were asked to choose three words describing their emotions at various points. The words given about leaving partners and babies in hospital after birth are particularly stark: ‘frightened’, ‘excluded’, ‘anxious’, ‘nervous’, ‘distressed’ and ‘powerless’ being common. Perhaps NCT could encourage more birthing units to enable fathers to stay in hospital after the birth, and maybe our classes should include discussion of dads’ feelings about hospital stays. The study revealed a common theme to be the balancing of participants’ perceptions that they would ‘co-parent’ and the difficulties in achieving this. Participants found that breastfeeding and the strength of the bond between babies and mothers (in all cases the primary caregiver) made it harder than anticipated for fathers to...
bond with their babies, although they did adopt behaviours to promote bonding. The participants also felt that financial demands left them struggling with work-home life balance, particularly with partners on maternity leave. They therefore felt that recent changes to parental leave were not a real option, and that society as a whole did not support them in their new role.

Fathers experienced many ups and downs in their transition to fatherhood, but even so they chose positive words to express their emotions around becoming a father, with ‘proud’, ‘happy’ and ‘joyous’ being the most common. What is clear is that fathers’ experiences are distinctly different from those of new mothers and we need to ensure we are doing all we can to prepare and support them.

### Fathers’ experience of home birth

My second research highlight is about the experiences of fathers in Ireland whose partners had planned home births – a rarely considered perspective in ‘place of birth’ studies.


Through interviews conducted postnatally, the study found that the majority of fathers were initially against the suggestion of a home birth - which in all cases came from their partners. Much emphasis is given to the joint fact-finding that couples did, with all the fathers reporting feeling involved in decisionmaking. Many of the fathers described the birth using the term ‘our’, and felt actively involved in the process. There are mentions of the difference it made to be in their own home environment for the birth rather than in hospital (which some had experienced previously). I was left wondering if the continuity of care from midwives during these home births had also made a difference to the fathers, in the way that other research has shown for mothers. The fathers described their feelings immediately after the birth, with words such as ‘amazing’, ‘ecstatic’ and ‘fantastic’ (quite a contrast from words used after hospital births in the research by Machin, outlined above).

The birth experience has had lasting effects on the fathers: confirming their belief in natural birth, strengthening relationships with partners and in some cases changing their outlook on life - leaving them more open to new ideas and ‘natural’ approaches. The study is small in size (eight fathers), and as the authors acknowledge only includes planned home births that went ahead, without requiring transfers into hospital. Their experiences are framed within the Irish system (where self-employed community midwives offer a limited home birth service), but it remains hugely valuable to hear directly fathers’ own voices.

### About the author, Jenny Barrett

Jenny has been an NCT Antenatal Teacher for 12 years, and is a mentor to other NCT practitioners. Her special interest in supporting dads antenatally inspired her to create the Mantenatal course, held initially through her local Children’s Centre in St Neots, Cambridgeshire, and now being piloted as a stand-alone NCT workshop in Cambridge. Jenny includes a dads-only session within her NCT Signature antenatal courses, runs NCT Mother and Baby Yoga sessions and co-ordinates her local NCT Bumps and Babies group.

### Tips and Tools for New Parents

NCT has launched a brand new postnatal Tips and Tools for New Parents course offering parents the opportunity to explore and share their thoughts and feelings with other recent parents, in an open and friendly environment. This relaxed and friendly course centres around four key themes:

1. Being the parent you want to be
2. Understanding baby/child behaviour
3. Assessing the needs and tensions within the family
4. Recognising the impact of those around you.

For more details see [www.nct.org.uk/courses/postnatal/tips-and-tools-for-new-parents](http://www.nct.org.uk/courses/postnatal/tips-and-tools-for-new-parents)