Mantenatal – what do men really think?

Rebekah Fox, NCT senior research and evaluation officer, speaks to four first-time fathers about their views on the Mantenatal course in St Neots, run by NCT antenatal teacher Jenny Barrett.

The response to NCT’s Mantenatal courses was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Within two hours of sending email invitations I had four volunteers who were all keen to speak to me the next day. All of them were extremely positive about the course and said that they would recommend it to friends.

Chris, a sales director and father of twins, says, ‘As a guy you’d be stupid not to [attend]: it’s free, it’s local and it’s an hour of my evening. An hour is nothing and the knowledge you get out of it, the final feeling of getting to labour and not panicking like a madman, is invaluable – you can’t put a price on it.’

All the men agree that a knowledge of what to expect during labour was one of the key benefits of the course. ‘The biggest thing I got was knowing what I should be doing while mum is in labour,’ says Andy, a product manager. ‘What to expect at the different stages and how to support her and know that to some degree I’m playing an important part in this as well’.

Only men allowed
Participants also appreciated the fact that the course was men-only, enabling them to focus on their own feelings and experiences, something that they felt was sometimes missing in mixed classes. ‘Just the fact that you’re all guys who are technically in the same boat, no matter what background you’re from,’ says Neil. ‘OK you get laughing and joking around, but it’s more than just a blokes’ gathering down the pub and it’s focused and you know you’re all there for the same reason. I don’t think your mates necessarily want to hear about it if they’re not parents themselves, so it’s nice to have that forum to go and share your experiences.’ Chris agrees: ‘You can ask those bizarre questions that typically, if you asked them in front of your wife or another mother, you may feel a little silly. Like, “Where can I park when she goes into labour and I have to go to the hospital?” And because it’s men only you don’t have to feel embarrassed about it.’

The men also valued the interactive approach Jenny took to teaching the course. ‘We were asked a lot of questions about our opinions and thoughts on things – it wasn’t just somebody standing in front of you telling you what was going to happen,’ says Andy, an accounts manager. ‘In one session Jenny brought a rucksack full of things that were equivalent to what the female was carrying at different stages of pregnancy, which really gave you an appreciation of what she was coping with.’

The session where recent dads returned to talk about their experiences was particularly popular, giving the opportunity to ask questions ‘one-to-one, man-to-man’ in a way that they might not do outside the context of the classes. Two of the dads found this session so valuable that they had been back to try and help a lot of relationships and save a lot of earache. In the end the guy was petrified when she went into labour and came out of the birth a nervous wreck, whereas our experience, despite the twist at the end with the emergency caesarean, was quite a nice relaxed and calm one.’

‘One guy was petrified when his wife went into labour and came out a nervous wreck - our experience, despite the emergency caesarean, was quite relaxed and calm.’

with their own children to talk to expectant fathers in a later course. The course also provided the opportunity for social networking, with several of the participants saying they had swapped numbers or met up with the others from the group at a later date. However, the pressures of work and early parenthood meant that this did not happen as often as they may have liked.

When things go wrong
Perhaps the aspects of the course that men felt could have been covered more were what to do when things went wrong either during or after the birth. As Chris puts it, ‘Without wanting to scare people, probably only one in 20 people have the perfect birth story, so perhaps a bit more info on how things could change in an instant and what to expect in those situations.’

They would have liked more information on how to support partners when breastfeeding did not go as planned, or how to cope with the onset of postnatal depression. More practically, Chris suggests it would be useful to have an overview of the ‘minefield’ of baby products available, ‘because ultimately it’s us that goes to the shop at unearthly hours of the morning and need to come back with something passable for a nappy’.

Spreading the word
Men can be cautious about the idea of attending a men-only antenatal course. ‘We tried to get one of my friends to go on it and he refused point blank,’ says Chris. ‘I told him a real man would go. I think it would help a lot of relationships and save a lot of earache. In the end the guy was petrified when she went into labour and came out of the birth a nervous wreck, whereas our experience, despite the twist at the end with the emergency caesarean, was quite a nice relaxed and calm one.’

None of the men had heard about the course independently, but had had it recommended by their partners or other female friends. It can be difficult to target fathers directly in order to boost course numbers. Sebastian, a full-time magician, admits to having reservations about going on the course before it began: ‘I was worried it was going to be a bit blokey to start with, a bit gimmicky in that respect, but I didn’t find that at all.’

All the men felt that with improved advertising this was a model that could be effectively adopted across the country and that antenatal education for dads was not just a passing trend. ‘I think more people need to be offering things like this to dads,’ says Neil. ‘The focus is generally on mums, and rightly so, but we need to make sure dads are not forgotten and that it is a different experience for them.’