

Fathering

COMFORTING THE FUSSY BABY

As a young father, I thought it was primarily mother's job to tend to the baby's fussiness. After all, Martha comforted our babies so easily: when they fusses, she simply plugged them in and nursed. It always worked, Not until the arrival of our last few babies did I realize that I, too, could develop comforting skills. Our babies could be soothed by my body as well as hers. What I found was not that our babies loved her any more or less than me, but that they loved us differently.

Holding and comforting the newborn not only soothes baby but also promotes father-infant attachment and gives mother some much needed relief during fussy periods. Babies enjoy the variety of creative holding patterns that fathers come up with. One that they do not enjoy, however, is the "cradle hold"--a favoured position among breastfeeding mothers. If your baby associates this position with nursing, avoid using it; you will only experience a lot of squirming and frustration when baby finds that you cannot come through with what is expected. Instead, try some of the following uniquely male comforters.

***The front cuddle.** Lying down, hold your baby in your arms and drape baby's arms and legs around your chest and waist, the baby's Head resting over your heart. One benefit of this chest to-chest position is the abundance of body contact.

***The neck nestle.** Begin with the front cuddle, and lift baby up a bit until baby's head nestles in your neck and your chin rests lightly on top of baby's head. This is one of the most comforting and damping holding patterns, primarily because sounds are transmitted through the vibrations of baby's skull bones. So rest baby's skull against your voice box; hum or sing a favourite song; and notice how the slow vibrations of the low-pitched male voice can lull your baby right to sleep. Low-pitched, droning songs such as "Old Man River" are effective lullers. An added attraction of the neck nestle is that the warm air passing from your nose to your baby's face or head is calming and comforting. They call it "magic breath."

***The football hold.** Tucking baby under your arm like a football is a wonderful colic soother. When your baby has abdominal discomfort, drape baby's stomach over your forearm, with baby's head in the crook of your elbow and legs straddling your hand. Grasp the diaper area firmly, and allow baby's tense abdomen to press against your hand and forearm. This position is also called the "colic carry."

***The sling-type carrier hold.** Babies who are carried see things as you see them. They get used to your body, your voice, your rhythm of walking, your odour, and your touch. Because babies become attuned to their mothers' rhythms during the nine months spent in utero, they sometimes take a while to settle into their fathers' carrying rhythms. But once they do, they appreciate the difference in style.

Wear your baby while you walk your walk, rock your rock, and share your world. The more you wear your baby, the more your child will come to know your body and your special ways of being. And the more you will appreciate that your baby is a part of you. Soon, you will feel right when you and your baby are together--and not quite right when you are separate.

Nothing matures a man as much as spending a lot of time with his baby. No longer is there any reason to miss out on what our newborns have to give us.

William Sears, MD, (49) is the father of seven. He is also assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern

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California School of Medicine, author of seven books on child care, and a practicing pediatrician in San Clemente,

California. His books are available in most bookstores or by mail order from Creative Parenting Resources, PO Box

7238, Capistrano Beach, CA 92624.

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THE NEWBORN BABY

William Sears

How often have we heard that behind every successful man is a good woman? Well, now is the time to add a bit of male bias to that saying: "And behind every successful mother is an involved father." Dads who take an active part in the birth and care of the newborn help the entire family off to a good start.

Fathers at Birth

As the father of seven children ranging in age from 1 month to 22 years, I have experienced a wide range of involvement at birth. When our first two children were born, I waited passively in the fathers' waiting room while other played a major roles in the debut of the person I had helped conceive. As each new baby arrived, I participated more and more in the miracle of birth. Finally, with our sixth and seventh children, I not only joined in the event with our birth attendant, but I took on an important role: as my wife birthed our new sons, I caught them.

Fathers, we have a right to participate actively in the birth of our babies. We just have to exercise this right. And in some cases, that may mean knowing what to do.

Be sensitive during labour. Your vital role in childbirth is to ensure, as much as possible, that your wife has the opportunity to follow the natural signals of her body. Appreciate that every woman is equipped with the ability to sensed and respond to what is going on internally. Understand, too, that the schedules and routines of most hospital labour and delivery units do not encourage mothers to follow their bodily signals. This is where you can step in and help. Encourage your wife to move around during labour. Help her assume comfortable positions that will assist her body in the birthing process. Lying flat on one's back for long periods of time is usually the most uncomfortable labouring position, and it also may both limit the amount of oxygen going to the baby and slow the progress of labour. Embrace your wife during contractions, but only if she wants to be touched. Be tuned in to her needs. Be ready with pillows where she needs them for support. Rub her back. A small, 4-inch paint roller is excellent for back massage if your hands tire quickly.

Spare your wife the hassles. A labouring mother's job is not to be rational and diplomatic with attending medical personnel but to be turned in to her own needs and the baby's so that she can get on with the birthing. So step in and take care of any hassles that might arise with the attending personnel, as well as any paperwork or matters related to the hospital policy and routines. When entering the hospitals, let the nurse in charge know that you plan to have a major role in this drama. And remember that although mother takes center stage, dad is the stage manager--and all details should be cleared through him.

Be aware of any subtle difficulties that can get in the way of labour. A labouring mother is particularly vulnerable to suggestions that she may not be making progress as fast as the doctor or nurse wants her to. Remain alert to such comments as "Tsk, tsk, still only 6 centimeters dilated!" If you sense a negative or nonproductive dialogue developing between mother and attending personnel, step in and redirect the communication.

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Choose the role you perform best. Expectant fathers sometimes feel that the role of "labour coach" is more than they are equipped to handle. Indeed, there is something to be said for men coaching Little League teams, not women in labour. It is difficult for a man to help a woman tune in to her body during childbirth. Men are less biologically equipped to understand the dynamics than are women who have experienced the process of birth. . It may be better for you to assume the role perform best--that of loving your wife, caressing her, and saying caring things to her--and to let a trained labour support person assist your wife in working with her body during labour.

Form a bonding triangle. When the concept of bonding at birth was popularized IO years ago, most of the attentions was given to mother-infant bonding. Father was given a fine-print honorable mention. Now, however, the beneficial effect of the father-baby relationship are being acknowledged and studies. The father-mother-baby bonding triangle is a reality.

The term "engrossment" is used to describe the adoption, preoccupation, and interest that the newborn evokes from a father, Engrossment describes not so much what the father does for the baby as well as what the baby does for the father. A father who is engrossed in his baby is a totally absorbed in his baby's unique features. He feels that his baby is distinctly different from other babies, and he cannot wait to hold, talk to, and interact with his child.

The unfortunate stereotype of father, especially new ones, portrays dad as well-meaning but fumbling and inept--afraid to touch his baby and exhibiting very few intuitive, nurturing responses. Studies have shown, in fact, that fathers are very nurturing when they encouraged to take part in holding and comforting their newborns. Given the opportunity, fathers touch, look at, talk to, and kiss their newborns as often as mothers do.

So be patient. Realize that because the "nurturing father" role model is not prevalent in our society, your nurturing responses may be less automatic and a little slower to unfold than those of your wife. But unfold they will! As a father, you are capable of a strong attachment to your infant during the newborn period.

Participate in the medically necessary cesarean. If a cesarean becomes medically necessary, be prepared to take over as second in command. Depending on the type of surgery and anaesthesia used, mother-infant contact may be delayed. If it is, be sure to get immediately involved with your baby. In many hospitals, fathers are encouraged to be present at cesarean births. Immediately upon delivery, the pediatrician performs any needed medical care, such as suctioning mucus or administering oxygen to stimulate breathing. Then, as soon as the medical personnel have ensures that the baby has made a healthy transition into postnatal life, the father is invited to hold and interact with the baby. Fathers who get their hands on their babies and take an active role in their care immediately after birth are the ones who find it easiest to get hooked on their babies.

One new father, whose wife recently had a cesarean, did not want to get involved with the birth. After all, he figured, this whole scene was a "woman's thing," and he would be better off in the waiting room until "all the commotion" was over. Nevertheless, I invited Jim to join me in the delivery suite; and after performing my pediatric duties and making sure the baby was warm, pink, and breathing well, I asked Jim to accompany the baby and me to the newborn nursery. Although this new dad was still in awe of all the technology surrounding the operation, he obediently followed us to the nursery.

After placing his baby in the infant warmer, I said, "Jim, I need to attend another birth, and it's very important that someone stay with your baby and stimulate him because babies breathe better when they are stroked and spoken to." I encouraged him to get his hands on the baby and sing to him and rub his back, and I promised to return in about 15 minutes. Despite the uncertainty characteristic of new fathers, and despite the wrongful image cast by the media, Jim bonded with his baby while I was gone. Upon my return, I found a father-son two-some. The next day, when I made hospital rounds and went in to talk to

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Jim's wife, she exclaimed, "What on earth has happened to my husband? I can't get our baby away from him. He's really hooked. I never thought I'd see that guy be so sensitive."

FATHER'S ROLE IN MOTHER-BABY ATTACHMENT

During the first months, when a newborn baby primarily needs food and comfort, many fathers feel unequipped and unable to satisfy these vital needs. John resolved his confusion in this way: "I can't nurse her, and I don't always have the means to comfort her, but at least I can create a supportive environment that encourages my wife to nurse our baby better."

My own experience convinces me that fathers have a tough job during the newborn period. Actually, fathers have two jobs: to care for their babies indirectly by taking care of the mother. One way to approach this dual task is to create a setting in which mother and baby develop each other.

Every baby comes endowed with attachment--promoting behaviours: a round, attractive face with penetrating eyes, a vocabulary of cries and coos, soft skin, and cuddliness. These and other qualities are designed to alert caregivers to baby's needs and to promote caregiver attachment. At the same time, every mother is designed with a built-in "receiver" that picks up her baby's signals. The role of the father is to make it easier for the signaler and receiver to get together.

When baby breastfeeds, mother produces a hormone called prolactin. This is the mothering hormone, also known as the "intuition hormone" or the perseverance hormone." Prolactin functions as the receiver and promotes intuitively nurturing behaviours. In fact, when prolactin is injected into male experimental animals, they take on mothering mannerisms. Although, I don't fully understand this hormone, I have grown to respect it. If you can envision a magical substance travelling throughout the highways of a mother's body and telling her which turn to take, then you can understand the importance of creating a setting that allows this biological interaction to occur.

Picture the mutual giving that transpires between the mother and infant as they get to know each other. The baby's nursing helps the mother produce the hormone that enables her to be a better mother. Nursing and developing mother's intuition is thus baby's way of participating in his or her own care. The more time baby spends in mother arms or at her breast, the more mother learns about baby's personality and needs. She gets to know baby's smell, touch, breathing rhythms, sleep cycles, facial expressions, cries, and pre-cry signals. She witnesses everything baby does and draws conclusion based on her observations. When baby gives a cue and mother responds, they both feel better.

As time goes on, babies who have learned that they will get a predictable response are motivated to give more cues. The mother-baby pair thus continues to learn about each other and enjoy each other. As one attached mother told me, "I'm absolutely addicted to by baby." Once this happens, the mother's responses become more spontaneous, her mothering skills improve, and the relationship flourishes.

Here's how you can help your wife and baby develop this mutual harmony. **First, take time out.** A bit of paternity leave if possible. **Second, prepare the nest.** Make your home as conducive as possible to mothering. Take over the housekeeping, or hire some help if you can afford it. Due to the tremendous physiological and emotional changes of the postpartum period, your wife's emotions may be easily upset by the slightest untidiness in her nest. My wife Martha, for example, becomes quite upset by one dirty dish during the early postpartum period, whereas at other times, a sink full of dirty dishes does not phase her. So keep the nest clean and tidy, recognizing that an organized environment helps foster an organized emotional state in both mother and baby. Stroll around the house each day, take inventory of actual and potential problems, and then take care of them. Remember that upsets felt by your wife may be transferred to your baby.

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Third, improve your serve. When Stan, a professional tennis player, asked how he could help with his newborn baby, I replied, "Improve your serve." Many of us, used to being served by our wives, need to view postpartum as a time to improve our service to them. Serve your wife breakfast in bed. Take a walk with the baby while mother takes a shower and has some time to herself--preferably in the morning or during the notorious 4:00 to 6:00 PM fussy period. Give your wife frequent "I care" messages. Post a Do Not Disturb sign on the front door, and take the phone off the hook when mother and baby are sleeping. Guard the gates of your home against well-meaning but instructive visitors who might upset the delicate harmony within. Fend off purveyors of bad baby advice. Out of love for her baby, a new mother is apt to be particularly vulnerable to implications that she might not be doing the best thing for her child. If you sense that outside advice is even slightly upsetting, put a stop to it--even if the baby-raising tips come from your mother.

Fourth, heighten your awareness of your wife's needs. Many new mothers are reluctant to ask for what they need. Some feel uncomfortable depending on someone else; others are afraid of shattering their image as a perfect mother and of appearing weak in the eyes of their husbands. If this is true of your situation, you may have to figure out just what your wife's needs may be. As one mother told me, "I'd have to hit my husband over the head before he'd realize that I'm giving out."