

Conscious Fathering: Engaging Expectant Dads During the Golden Moment and Equipping Them to Thrive

By **Bernie Dorsey**



Parents as Teachers™

It seems as though new parenthood can be pretty stressful. Just ask anyone who has had a baby in the last, say, 50 years. As quickly as those first few weeks pass, while you are in the moment, it feels as though it will be an eternity.

New things come along that strive to make life easier for new dads and moms. There are never-ending lists of products that we somehow can just not live without or a new technique that promises to be the answer to all that we desire, which is usually sleep. But the basic things are usually all that babies really need, and the most basic is a partnership where their mom and dad share as equally as possible in the care and nurturing of their new child.

However, it is impossible to be a competent partner in caring for a new baby if you know little or nothing about infants. Conscious Fathering, a program developed in 1999, gives expectant fathers a chance to play a little catchup (and, in some cases, a lot of catchup!) in that area. It helps men to not only be better prepared to meet the challenges of new fatherhood, but to parent with mom in partnership.

Usually, men on the eve of fatherhood are ill equipped for the job ahead. It's not surprising, actually, when you consider that up until a few months previously (usually shortly after the "Hey, honey, guess what?" talk) most guys hadn't given fatherhood too much thought. They may have given it some, as in when someone says, "You are going to be such a good dad someday," but beyond that, not much. It's OK, really. It's normal. After all, guys weren't even allowed into the delivery room until the mid-'60s.

Men have been backed into a little bit of a corner when it comes to preparing for fatherhood. The models society puts forth for them to absorb are not always the most positive influence on competent fathering. Beyond their own fathers, or absence thereof, where are they receiving any experience or training? Usually with siblings, friends' kids, or nieces and nephews. Rarely are they unsupervised.

Although the majority of new dads are anxious to get in there and help out, days count, and the earlier they are involved the stronger the bond. So much of parenthood is instinctive, yet if we fail to trust or develop those instincts, what are we to do?



In the Conscious Fathering program, happening in hospitals all over Puget Sound, men are sitting down and learning about babies. There is something magical about a room full of guys in varying states of preparation for their journey to parenthood. Maybe they will discuss the room they are painting, where they last shopped for the latest car seat, or who rates what stroller the best. Almost never will they talk about the latest fathering book they read.



The interesting thing is that they are usually talking about mom and how she is doing. It's an important point to make. There is a lot of anxiety for a new dad that comes from not only not knowing much about babies, but also not knowing how mom will fare through the whole process.

In the Conscious Fathering class, the very first thing these soon-to-be-new dads learn is there is only one thing they cannot do, breastfeed. For two and a half hours, they learn as much as possible about everything else: the very basics of what their children need and how they can meet those needs.

Conscious Fathering is about learning to parent using "Parenting C.P.R.," a philosophy that teaches dads (and moms) to be "consistent, predictable, and reliable" in meeting the needs of their children. Every attendee receives a doll, onesie, sleeper or jumper, diaper, wash cloth, and a receiving blanket to use during the class. They learn that a baby has five basic needs, that these needs create a cycle of care, and that their job is to not only react to their baby's needs, but to anticipate what the next need may be. In using the dolls to practice with (no one seems willing to loan them real newborns), they can simulate holding, burping, changing, and swaddling a baby.

A lot of emphasis is placed on caring for the crying infant. Different ideas for soothing baby are discussed – in addition to making sure everyone caring for the baby has a plan to deal with frustration.

Conscious Fathering is a proactive approach to new fatherhood, and it's way more than infant care. It's about building a definition that empowers men to feel as though they can do this, they can be and do what good fathers are and do, and they can do it from the very first moments of their baby's life.

What Fathers Are Saying "I got a lot out of the program. If I had to pick the most, it would involve the first aid session. I learned a lot about reacting to a child's cold and when it is time to panic. My son is the most important thing in my life, and anything to keep him safe helps me."

– M. H., *Dads in the Mix*, Allegheny Intermediate Unit

Bernie Dorsey is the founder of the [Conscious Fathering Program](#), which teaches prenatal and childhood involvement skills to thousands of fathers throughout the nation. Dorsey provides infant care skills for soon-to-be dads while stressing the benefits of responsible fathering. He has personally taught more than 10,000 fathers during the past 12 years, and through the partnership created by the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program, Conscious Fathering is now available in over 30 locations in 11 states.

Dorsey, who lives in Seattle with his wife of 29 years and 17-year-old son, has been a guest speaker at numerous statewide and national workshops on the topic of fathering and families. In addition, Dorsey's *Guide for Expectant Fathers* is currently being distributed nationwide. He has also produced videos focused on preventing shaken baby syndrome and on postpartum depression awareness. His current work focuses on creating parental balance within systems that serve families.

Last updated: November 2, 2011