

Becoming a Father: The First Two Years

The experience of becoming a father begins the moment that the father is born and begins to experience his own father. Years later, when that man accepts the responsibility of becoming a father, he starts on the journey of a lifetime: building a relationship with his son or daughter and the child's mother. For the last 25 years, researchers have been studying the transition men make as they accept becoming a father and their unique development as fathers.

The Father's Self-concept and Self-esteem

The way a man perceives himself (self-concept) and the positive or negative value (self-esteem) he places on himself as an individual relates directly to his perception and value of himself as a father. Becoming a new father changes a man's sense of himself. Many men report that after they became fathers, they display different aspects of themselves at work and at home.

The experience of becoming a father allows men to develop their more nurturing characteristics at work, and they often become more organized at home. Having a new baby causes fathers to become more adaptable and interested in the lives of their co-workers. Studies that compared the self-esteem or self-concept of the father both before and after the birth of his child found that these two concepts remained stable across the first two years of parenthood.

Mother/Father Roles and Communication

Becoming parents leads to changes in how married couples divide their responsibilities within the home. During pregnancy, most couples predict they will share the responsibility for their child equally. However, as early as six months after the birth of their first child, parents begin to divide household tasks and decision-making along *modified* traditional lines. For example, mothers do more of the household tasks while fathers spend more time preparing meals, shopping, and doing housework plus providing more of the family income. Over the first year of parenthood, mothers continue to increase their role in household tasks and child care while fathers become more involved in the daily care of their child.

During the infant's first 18 months, many fathers report a decrease in the amount of quality time they spend with the mother of their child. Fathers also report devoting more time to their relationship with their young infant. Many mothers and fathers become unhappy when their expectations are not met about the way their spouse behaves after the birth of their child. Mothers and fathers report different changes in their couple relationship, which can lead to either parent feeling dissatisfied. Clear communication about what each person wants as a couple and as a parent is crucial to long-term satisfaction.

Parenting Attitudes and Stress

Most parents say that their expectations of being a parent changed dramatically after they actually became parents. Being with a young child 24 hours a day causes every idealistic father and mother to become realistic quickly. Fathers report that they changed their ideas about being a parent soon after their child was born. Over the first two years of parenting, fathers reported adopting an attitude of control when their children did not do what the father wanted them to do.

Fathers set more limits and tended to intervene in their child's behavior more directly as the child entered toddlerhood. Fathers described their toddlers as being more demanding and difficult than when they were infants. These same fathers did not report an increase in the stress of being a parent as their child transitioned from infancy into toddlerhood.

Father's Changing Relationship with His Parents

For the most part, new fathers increase their contact with their own parents, especially their own fathers. Some new fathers report that becoming a father makes them feel like a grown-up and that other people now treat them as adults. Other fathers consider their own relationship with their father and determine to make positive changes in their relationship with their own child. These fathers want to know their own child better than their fathers knew them. The experience men had with their own fathers directly impacts on the way they plan to build their relationship with their own child.

Support and Stress in the Community

The number of fathers who choose to remain at home with their new babies is growing. Still, the trend is that mothers take time off from work to remain at home for at least the first few months after the baby's birth. Fathers report receiving increased community support during the first six months after the birth of their first child. For most fathers, however, that experience of community support decreases after the first few months.

The transition into being a parent presents fathers with both an opportunity to learn a new role and the experience of stress and change. Every man brings his own unique history, experiences, and individual characteristics to his understanding of what it means to be a father and a parent. It is helpful for every father to know that with the birth of his child, changes will happen within himself and with all his relationships—with his child, the mother of his child, his own parents, and with the surrounding community.

Prepared by Linda D. Ladd, Ph.D., Family Development Specialist, Texas Cooperative Extension, October 2000.

Source:

Cowan, Philip. (1988). Change and Consistency: Pregnancy to 18 Months Postpartum. In P. Bronstein and C. Cowan (Eds). Fatherhood Today: Men's Changing Role in the Family (pp. 13-35). NY: John Wiley & Sons.