Inviting Fathers In

The Tender Beginnings of Attachment in Men

by Mary Anne, Ph.D., with Trina Strauss

A mother’s attachment to her baby often begins long before birth. By the last trimester many mothers feel like they know their babies, having been enjoying for months their familiar, reassuring movements in the womb.

But about fathers? What are their experiences during those wondrous nine months? How does the attachment process function for them? Why don’t they simply opt to look on with wonder (and sometimes envy) at the beautiful relationship forming between his once-doting partner and this tiny interloper? Is it the extent of his willingness to act as back-rubber, chauffeur and coach that determines his role in the process? Do his roles reflect the monumental potential influence fathers have in their family’s life?

Fathers actually have a natural, even biological, inclination to begin attaching to their babies during pregnancy, but this is largely ignored by the scientific community and our collective culture. We honor absent fathers, but do we really nurture the seeds of their involvement from the very beginning, when it may lay a critical foundation for later attachments?

When a couple announces that they are having a baby, the role of the mother is tightly defined. Her family, friends, co-workers and even strangers treat her in an unambiguous fashion: she is doted on, showered with attention (sometimes to their dismay), and regarded in a way that emphasizes her mother-to-be status. Her partner, on the other hand, has no designated, pre-choreographed role to play. He is usually left to stumble along his path to fatherhood with little direction, or acknowledgment of his own internal processes.

Dr. Michael Trout, director of the Infant-Parent Institute in Champaign, Illinois, writes, “Our language and our culture clearly support the notion that it is never he, only her mate, who is expecting a baby. He is often treated as a dummy, a bystander and—if he is any good at his multitude of vaguely defined jobs—it is said that he will be supportive of the one who is truly important, the only one who is doing any work, the truly pregnant one.”

Yes, pregnancy is a lot of work for a woman’s body—rearranging ligaments, building blood volume and cranking out hormones. Oxytocin, the closest thing in Mother Nature’s pharmacy to an “elixir of love,” spikes at birth and is responsible for “bio-logically inspiring” many maternal behaviors: close contact with her newborn continually stimulates oxytocin release in the mother, causing her to experience intense feelings of caring and increased sensitivity to her baby’s cues.

This is how what fathers, too, experience a hormonal changes during pregnancy that quietly echoes that of their partner. During his mate’s pregnancy, a man’s oxytocin level begins to rise, encouraging him to desire closeness with his mate and child. Together with vasopression, it makes a male more protective of his family and committed to their care. Vasopression has been called “the monogamy hormone” because it causes males to desire the comforts of home as opposed to the thrill of the chase!

While prolactin is mainly recognized for its role in milk production in females, it belongs to the hormone group that promotes caring, bonding and attachment—in both mothers and fathers! Prolactin levels in the male also begin to rise during pregnancy and then, after a few days of close contact with the newborn, surge even higher, increasing his desire to care for and be close to his baby.

Pregnancy, birth and parenting work for all of us, mothers and fathers alike, old feelings and sense-memories of our own womb and babyhood experiences, which further makes parenthesis a journey of unpremeditated proportions. Though it is rare for a father to be considered “pregnant” along with his wife, why should he not be given this consideration and status? He, too, is on a profound, life-altering roller-coaster!

Trina was pregnant, her husband Doug often spoke in terms of “us” and “we” with regard to the pregnancy, his language clearly reflecting his emotional and psychological participation in that monumental life event. One of his female colleagues was annoyed by this and would indignantly declare, “Yes, Doug, are not pregnant? When you get fat and have stretch marks and an aching back every night, come and talk to me!” This response is archetypal in our culture, a staple sitcom punchline.

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This column is an adaptation of a research paper she wrote for a course with Dr. Mary, who, along with her own extraordinary husband John (who sang to their babies in the womb) this summer marked her 20th anniversary of parenthood. She can be reached at 818-366-7310, or via her website at www.QuantumParenting.com.