

First-Time Fathers: Perceptions of Preparedness for Fatherhood

Jeffrey D. Gage and Ray Kirk

On connaît peu de choses sur la façon dont les hommes se préparent à devenir pères. Nous avons entrepris une étude phénoménologique dans le but de décrire les perceptions des nouveaux pères relativement à la transition vers la fonction parentale et à leur degré de préparation. Dix-neuf pères éventuels et nouveaux ont participé à quatre groupes de discussions dans le but de décrire l'expérience unique que vivent les hommes quand ils se préparent à leur nouveau rôle. Quinze thèmes au total se dégagent des discussions : la réalité de la grossesse; la préparation sur les plans physique, émotionnel et financier; les relations avec les amis, les beaux-parents et les professionnels de la santé. Les auteurs passent ces thèmes en revue et concluent que les participants se sont préparés activement, en tentant de s'ajuster aux nouvelles attentes qu'ils percevaient et en cherchant à se renseigner sur la façon d'être un bon père. Ces résultats contribuent à nos connaissances sur le comportement des nouveaux pères et à la recherche sur le sujet. Le fait pour les pères d'être préparés adéquatement a le potentiel de rehausser la santé de la mère, de l'enfant et de la famille.

Mots clés : nouveaux pères, préparation, fonction parentale

Little is known about how men prepare to become fathers. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe first-time fathers' perceptions of preparedness for and the transition to parenthood. Nineteen prospective and new fathers participating in 4 focus groups described the unique experiences of men as they prepared to become fathers. A total of 15 themes emerged from the data. The authors discuss themes in the transition to fatherhood — the reality of the pregnancy; physical, emotional, and financial preparation; and relationships with friends, parents-in-law, and health professionals — and conclude that the participants actively prepared for fatherhood, attempted to adjust to the perceived expectations of their new role, and sought information on how to be a good father. These results contribute to our understanding of behaviour among new fathers and to the body of research on fathering. Appropriate preparation for fatherhood has the potential to enhance maternal, child, and family health.

Keywords: first-time fathers, preparation, parenting

Background

International concern for the well-being of children as a result of parental influence is becoming more explicit. Although parenting

Jeffrey D. Gage, RCpN, MPH, is a doctoral student at the Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri, Columbia, USA. Dr. Ray Kirk is Director, New Zealand Health Technology Assessment, Christchurch, New Zealand.

research has traditionally focused on mothers, the role of fathers and their influence on family health is receiving increased attention (Barclay, Donovan, & Genovese, 1996; Boehm, Duggan, Dinerman, & McGowan, 1995; De Luccie, 1996; Watson, Watson, Wetzel, Bader, & Talbot, 1995).

An involved father can be the primary support person for his partner during pregnancy, contribute to the social and cognitive development of his children, and mitigate adverse health and social outcomes in his children's lives (Hoghughi, 1998; McBride & Darragh, 1995; Nugent, 1991). A man's potential to become an involved, nurturing father is influenced by prior learning experiences, developmental readiness, and means of support (Hall, 1992; Shapiro, 1987).

Little is known however, about men's perceptions of the role of fathering, or their unique capacity to prepare for and make the transition to this new role. Although men and women become parents at the same time, they do not become parents in the same way (Watson et al., 1995). If we are to promote positive fatherhood through effective preparation for parenting, it is important for us to understand these differences from the perspective of men themselves.

Method

This study was conducted in Christchurch, New Zealand, utilizing a sample of convenience after approval had been received from the regional ethics committee. Prospective and recent first-time fathers who had enrolled in prenatal education classes were invited by letter to participate. Exclusion criteria applied to men who were not prospective or recent first-time fathers, men who were non-English speaking, and men for whom the birth event was seriously complicated in outcome.

This phenomenological study was concerned with describing the lived experiences of first-time fathers as they prepared to become parents. The focus group method was particularly useful in being able to generate the stories, opinions, and perceptions of men involved with the phenomenon of new parenting. The rich insights brought out through discussion and interaction might not have been possible with other research methods, such as individual interviews or written or oral surveys.

Four focus groups were conducted ($N = 19$), two with prospective first-time fathers and two with recent first-time fathers (infants aged 3–6 months) who had enrolled in or attended prenatal education classes. The discussion was semi-structured based on six core questions about fathering:

1. What will it mean to you to become a father? What did it mean to you to become a father?
2. What things are you doing to prepare for the birth of your baby? What things did you do to prepare for the birth of your baby?
3. How well prepared are you to become a father? How well prepared were you to become a father?
4. How do you learn to be a good father? How did you learn to be a good father?
5. How do you think relationships will change after the birth of your baby? How did relationships change after the birth of your baby?
6. What can make it difficult to be a father? What made it difficult to be a father? What made it easier?

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken following a sequential process to identify specific patterns and themes (Kingry, Tiedje, & Friedman, 1990). Key ideas were extracted from the written notes and audiotapes for each group. Categories were formulated for each question, for the two groups of prospective fathers, and for the two groups of recent fathers. The categories from both sets of groups were clustered in order to identify each within a common theme. Supporting quotes were assigned to each category.

Validity in qualitative research can be determined on the basis of whether the method measures what it proposes to measure and whether the results are credible (Krueger, 1994). We attempted to ensure the validity of our results by following established procedures for focus group interviews: preparing questions that were based on the literature and that progressed from general to specific, using a skilful moderating technique, ensuring that the moderator and assistant worked as a team, and analyzing and presenting results in a systematic and verifiable way (Kingry et al., 1990; Krueger; Sim, 1998). The same questions were posed in each group, and data collection continued until saturation of opinions was reached and no new ideas were articulated. In addition, each participant was given the opportunity to clarify, amend, or add comments prior to the conclusion of each focus group.

Participants

The 19 participants ranged in age from 25 to 44 years. Seventeen men indicated their ethnicity to be European and two New Zealand Maori.

Seventeen men were employed full-time ($n = 17$) and two part-time. Two men earned less than (NZ) \$33,000 and 13 in excess of (NZ) \$51,000 per year. Eighteen men were married and 17 men indicated that the pregnancy was a planned event; the length of the relationship ranged from 3 years to more than 10 years. The mean age for the babies of recent fathers was 10 weeks.

Results

The Reality of Becoming a Father

In response to the first question, what it meant to become a father, the men talked about how they came to acknowledge the reality of the pregnancy and the implications for them beyond the birth. It took longer for the men to acknowledge the reality of parenthood than it did for their partners: "As the time got closer, the reality seemed to hit. It didn't seem like a reality for a long time." The reality of fatherhood increased as the pregnancy progressed. The men began to think about the longer-term implications: "If you buy a new car you might get the manual for a couple of months and read up how it all works — you don't get that, you just have to wing it."

The growing reality of their situation also stimulated thinking about the increased responsibilities of being a father. One prospective father had changed his behaviour as he reflected on becoming a father:

I went down to the store the other night and I thought, shit, I didn't have my seatbelt on, and I thought, hell, if I was to go through the window... that's your father gone; that kid would grow up without a father.

Physical Preparation

When the men discussed the things they were doing to prepare for the birth, physical preparation was a priority. Most men took an active role in the preparation of their home: "I've had the room set up for months." Other men said they planned to complete house renovations prior to the baby's arrival, planned to get a bigger car to accommodate a larger family, or made sure that the car was filled with gas and made "trial runs" to the hospital.

Emotional Preparation

In response to the question about how well prepared they were to become fathers, the men made comments about their emotional preparation:

Perceptions of Preparedness for Fatherhood

Physically we've done everything we need to, but mentally, you know, we haven't really. We've been too busy getting all the physical stuff done...and haven't thought much about actually being a dad...past the labour and the birth.

The men expressed a desire to nurture their emotional relationships with their children. One father expressed it in the following way: "I don't remember my father saying, 'I love you'... I hope to show a bit more of my emotions, like saying to a son, "Hey, man, I love you'."

The men acknowledged the expectation in today's society for fathers to demonstrate more emotion towards their children. They hoped they would be able to live up to this expectation. Some thought that by having children they could bridge the emotional gap between themselves and their own fathers.

Financial Preparation

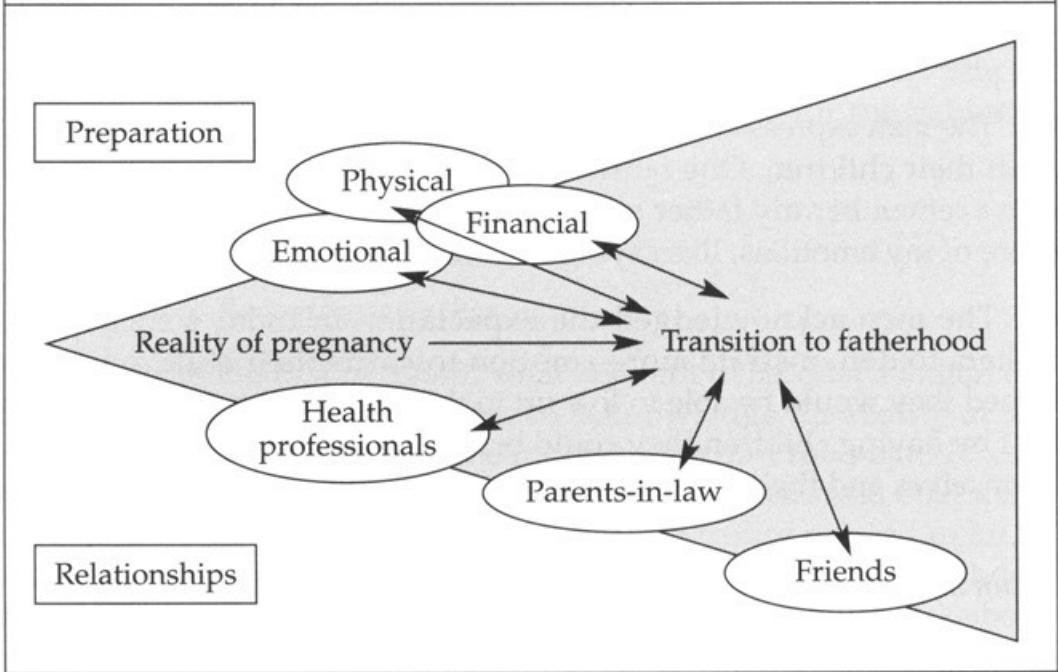
Financial stress caused by the possibility of reducing their income to one wage was a concern for most of the men: "We saved as much of my wife's wage as we could in preparation before she finished work." The focus of this discussion had implications for their choice of infant feeding method: "If you choose to breastfeed it really only leaves one person left to work"; "We're taking another approach...expressing the milk, so that means [wife's name] can carry on with her career." Some prospective fathers anticipated that flexibility in their employment would be required if the couple chose to breastfeed. Reducing to one job would make breastfeeding a more convenient option, but the loss of income would add to the financial stress.

Relationships

Most of the fathers believed that their relationships with friends, parents-in-law, and health professionals had undergone considerable change prior to and after the birth. Some of these changes were stressful while others were a source of support as the men made the transition to new social networks.

Friends. Some of the men said that their strong friendships had not changed, while others indicated that their relationships with childless friends had become strained: "Some friends would say to come over but don't bring the baby...it's like saying come over but don't bring your right arm."

Figure 1 *The Transition to Fatherhood*



Some of the new fathers said that tiredness had lessened their enthusiasm for entertaining but that they were developing friendships with other new parents. Other men anticipated that less time would be available so they reduced or ceased their sporting commitments prior to the birth. Some of these commitments had occupied a large amount of time, which they now considered less important than the time spent with their wife and baby.

Parents-in-law. Parents-in-law could be both supportive and critical. Some couples were determined to begin parenting by establishing their own independence: "My wife is very careful to make sure it's her child before it's their grandchild." One man said:

I put my foot down and I said, "Excuse me, I'm the father. I'll be choosing the name... me and my wife will be choosing it, not you. You had your chance when your baby was born."

While parents-in-law could also be supportive during the transition to new parenting, the men enjoyed the opportunity to begin their fathering role by making their decisions together with their partner as a couple.

Health professionals. The men received well-intentioned advice from health professionals, but in some situations this contributed to an already stressful time for new fathers: "Every professional has good

advice that slightly conflicts... I respected the advice of people who gave me the option"; "It's amazing...the pregnancy police are everywhere, every corner — it's incredible."

The men were more likely to listen to the advice of health professionals in the early stages of the pregnancy. The credibility of the advice was measured partly on the basis of whether the professional had personal childrearing experience. Nearer to the time of the birth the men expressed a desire to become increasingly more independent in their decision-making.

Discussion

This study describes the preparation of men for parenting through the experiences of prospective and recent first-time fathers. Analysis of the results indicates that the transition to fatherhood is influenced by multiple preparation strategies and relationships. This transition is depicted in Figure 1.

As the pregnancy progressed, the reality of becoming a father increased for the participants. The men actively prepared for parenting, physically, financially, and emotionally. These themes were interrelated in that they influenced the decision-making processes of each couple — for example, that of choosing an infant feeding method. The men's relationships with their friends, their parents-in-law, and health professionals also influenced their transition to fatherhood, but these relationships were generally not interrelated.

The participants in this study were actively preparing for fatherhood. This finding is consistent with those of other studies indicating that men choose to be "instrumental" during the pregnancy, focusing on specific tasks (Ferketich & Mercer, 1995; May, 1980). Interestingly, the methods they described for doing so might well have gone unnoticed. This indicates that the phenomenon of fathering preparation is not well understood.

The influences that the men perceived as affecting their ability to become involved fathers, as well as their actions and responses to new roles, may be underestimated. Holland (1994) found that becoming a father is likely to increase one's sense of awareness and responsibility. Some men in the present study indicated that they had developed a heightened sense of responsibility during the pregnancy, and altered their health behaviour as a result. The man who decided to buckle his seatbelt when going to the store is one example. This might indicate that a partner's pregnancy makes young men more receptive to health-

promotion messages. This could be an opportune time to promote positive health behaviour for men, as well as for mothers and infants.

The participants described their experiences of the pregnancy to be less real for them, in the early stages, than for their partner. The literature suggests that it is not uncommon for men to be less developmentally ready for parenthood than their partner (Shapiro, 1987), for mothers to embrace their new role more than fathers (Alexander & Higgins, 1993), and for pregnancy to be a time of transition for men as they seek to define their identity and sense of self (Barclay et al., 1996; Jordan, 1990). The men in the present study did, however, actively seek information about fathering, in addition to what they learned about the labour and birth process in prenatal education. As a professional group, nurses need to engage in research to assess strategies for imparting information to men in ways and at times that more adequately meet their needs as they prepare for fathering.

In addition, nurses should be aware that the promotion of father involvement can be beneficial for pregnant women and their babies — for example, in the areas of social support, breastfeeding, and smoking cessation (Bar-Yam, 1997; Haug, Aaro, & Fugelli, 1992; Mermelstein, Cohen, Lichtenstein, Baer, & Kamarck, 1986). The participants in this study intended to make joint parenting decisions and to be actively involved in the parenting process, before and after the birth. The results indicate that there is a need to engage fathers in the prenatal care of the mother and infant, and that fathers, too, have unique needs as they prepare to become parents.

Conclusion

This study describes some unique insights into the experiences of men as they prepare for parenting and highlights specific influences on the process of preparing young men for future life roles. Further research is required to explicate the role of new fathers and their potential to influence their own health and the health of their families.

References

- Alexander, M. J., & Higgins, E. T. (1993). Emotional trade-offs of becoming a parent: How social roles influence self-discrepancy effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 1259–1269.
- Barclay, L., Donovan, J., & Genovese, A. (1996). Men's experiences during their partner's first pregnancy: A grounded theory analysis. *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 13, 12–24.

Perceptions of Preparedness for Fatherhood

- Bar-Yam, N. B. (1997). Fathers and breastfeeding: A review of the literature. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 13, 45-50.
- Boehm, K. E., Duggan, A. K., Dinerman, L. M., & McGowan, M. P. (1995). Social support of inner-city fathers and mothers. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 149, 868-872.
- De Luccie, M. (1996). Predictors of paternal involvement and satisfaction. *Psychological Reports*, 79, 1351-1359.
- Ferketich, S. L., & Mercer, R. T. (1995). Predictors of role competence for experienced and inexperienced fathers. *Nursing Research*, 44, 89-95.
- Hall, W. A. (1992). Comparison of the experience of women and men in dual-earner families following the birth of their first infant. *Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 24, 33-38.
- Haug, K., Aaro, L., & Fugelli, P. (1992). Smoking habits in early pregnancy and attitudes towards smoking cessation among pregnant women and their partners. *Family Practice*, 9, 494-499.
- Hoghughi, M. (1998). The importance of parenting in child health: Doctors as well as the government should do more to support parents. *British Medical Journal*, 316, 1545.
- Holland, A. (1994). Fathers' involvement in child rearing: Chasing an ideal or challenging barriers? *Children Australia*, 19, 9-13.
- Jordan, P. L. (1990). Laboring for relevance: Expectant and new fatherhood. *Nursing Research*, 39, 11-16.
- Kingry, M., Tiedje, L., & Friedman, L. (1990). Focus groups: A research technique for nursing. *Nursing Research*, 39, 124-125.
- Krueger, R. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd Ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- May, K. A. (1980). A typology of detachment/involvement styles adopted during pregnancy by first-time expectant fathers. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 2, 444-461.
- McBride, B. A., & Darragh, J. (1995). Interpreting the data on father involvement: Implications for parenting programs for men. *Families in Society: Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 76, 490-497.
- Mermelstein, R., Cohen, S., Lichtenstein, E., Baer, J., & Kamarck, T. (1986). Social support and smoking cessation and maintenance. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 54, 447-453.
- Nugent, J. K. (1991). Cultural and psychological influences on the father's role in infant development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 475-485.
- Shapiro, J. L. (1987). *When men are pregnant: Needs and concerns of expectant fathers*. New York: Dell.
- Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28, 345-352.
- Watson, W. J., Watson, L., Wetzell, W., Bader, E., & Talbot, Y. (1995). Transition to parenthood: What about fathers? *Canadian Family Physician*, 41, 807-812.

Authors' Note

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Parents' Centre, St. Helen's Maternity Services, the Pregnancy Centre, and Burwood Birthing Services, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Correspondence concerning this article may be directed to Jeffrey Gage, 205 Briarcrest Court, Columbia, Missouri 65203 USA. E-mail: jdg2m2@mizzou.edu