Pregnancy support - fathers, partners and carers

Summary

- Whether you are the baby’s father, the pregnant woman’s partner or are supporting a single mother-to-be, you have a crucial role in ensuring she gets the pregnancy support she needs.
- Reading books on pregnancy and newborns, and going to antenatal classes are good ways to help you prepare for the baby’s arrival.
- At home, helping with household chores will give the new mum more time to attend to the baby’s needs and to rest.
- Spending one-on-one time with your baby will help establish a bond.
- It is important to look after your baby, yourself and your relationship. If you need extra help or emotional support, start by speaking with your maternal and child health nurse.

Supporting someone through pregnancy, labour and newborn baby care is an important job. Whether you are the baby’s father, the pregnant woman’s partner or are supporting a single mother-to-be, you have a crucial role in ensuring she gets the support she needs during this life-changing time.

Pregnancy can be an emotional rollercoaster, and for some women, it can feel like the longest nine months of their lives. Caring for a newborn baby can be exhausting and take its toll on relationships. Helping to meet the new mum’s physical and mental health needs is important for the health of the woman, the newborn baby and your relationship.

Providing support during pregnancy

Every woman’s experience of pregnancy is different. Some feel well the whole way through; other women experience morning sickness right up until the time they give birth. Some women even need to be hospitalised if a condition such as pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure) becomes severe.

Morning sickness

Morning sickness is the most common health complaint for pregnant women. It usually begins around the fourth week of pregnancy and settles by the 12th to 14th week. Some women continue to have morning sickness symptoms into their second trimester, and a small percentage experience nausea and vomiting for the entire duration of their pregnancy.

Despite its name, morning sickness is not always restricted to the morning. It can strike at any point during the day or night and symptoms of morning sickness include nausea and vomiting. You can support your partner by:

- preparing meals – cooking smells can make nausea worse
- encouraging her to snack on a few dry crackers or plain sweet biscuits before she gets out of bed or throughout the day as hunger can intensify morning sickness symptoms
- encouraging her to drink as much as possible (water, diluted fruit juice, weak tea, ginger tea, clear soup, beef extract drinks or sucking on ice cubes can help)
- taking on more household chores so she can rest.

Emotional health

Be mindful of how fluctuating hormones can bring on mood swings. Your partner might get teary from time to time or might become frustrated with being pregnant, especially if she feels unwell.

Tiredness can also cause irritability. As your partner gets further along in her pregnancy sleeping is likely to become more and more uncomfortable. The baby’s weight can put pressure on her spine, back muscles, intestines, bladder and major blood vessels, leading to decreased circulation, pain and a frequent need to urinate.

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This can make it difficult to sleep. Getting your partner a full body pillow, giving her backrubs and brewing soothing teas can all help.

After the birth, the ‘baby blues’ can set in due to significant hormonal changes. In most cases this passes within a few days, but if it develops into postnatal depression, it is important that your partner talks about it – if not with you, with a professional. She can start by speaking with her general practitioner (GP) or her maternal and child health nurse or by phoning the PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia) helpline on 1300 726 306 (Monday to Friday, 10 am to 5 pm AEST).

Preparing for childbirth

Reading books on pregnancy and newborns, and attending antenatal classes with your partner are good ways to help you prepare for the baby's arrival. Go to pregnancy appointments if you can, especially the more important ones such as scans, so you can understand first-hand how the pregnancy is progressing.

Think ahead about practical issues such as whether you want to cut the umbilical cord, or if you want to take photos.

When your partner is in labour, help her settle in at the hospital, labour ward, birthing centre or wherever she is having the baby. Make sure she is comfortable and ask about her needs – this might be a hand to hold (or squeeze!), a sip of water or just words of encouragement.

Adjusting to parenthood

After the baby comes, life in your household will change. It is important to look after your baby, yourself and your relationship during this often emotional time.

Get involved with your newborn baby and their care. Help with settling, bathing, changing and playing. Persist with these things even if the baby seems to prefer their mum. Resist the urge to hand the baby back every time the baby gets demanding. Only by doing will you build your confidence and skills.

Spending one-on-one time with your newborn baby will help establish a bond and will also give your partner a rest.

Make time for play – talking with your baby, singing, making funny noises or pulling silly faces. All these things help to build the baby’s communication skills from an early age.

There might be things your partner cannot do while she recovers from childbirth, especially if she has had a caesarean. Be mindful of her limitations and help out where you can.

Helping with breastfeeding

Although you cannot provide the milk, there are things you can do to make breastfeeding easier for your partner. This will also allow you to play a more active role in the baby’s care.

Breastfeeding can be difficult for some new mums, so be supportive if your partner is having trouble. She may feel anxious or even in pain while she is feeding. Each feed may take a long time, which may make her feel frustrated. Help out by seeing what needs doing around the house. Knowing she can take her time might help your partner to relax and will make the experience easier.

There might be an opportunity for you to feed your baby a bottle of expressed milk. This can be a good way to bond with your baby and to give your partner a rest. This will not suit everyone, however. Some women find expressing milk uncomfortable and even painful. If your partner decides to express, it is a good idea to wait a few weeks so the baby can get used to feeding from the breast before you introduce a bottle.

If you are feeding your baby using infant formula, you will be able to help at any feed.

Bonding with your baby

Many parents bond with their newborns the minute they lay eyes on them, but for other new parents (mothers included) the bonding process can take a bit longer. Do not let this worry you. It will happen in time.

Sometimes you might feel your role as a parent has been diminished to ticking tasks off a list – change the baby, sterilise the bottles, take the baby for a walk. Sometimes mothers adapt to their new role by shutting other people out. This might make you feel redundant. You might even feel that you have been replaced in favour of the baby.

However you are feeling, try to be as patient and supportive as you can, although it is important that you let your
partner know your concerns.

**Looking after your relationship**

Once the euphoria of having a newborn baby wears off, parents can become worn down by a constant cycle of caring for their baby and not much time to care for themselves. Lack of sleep and the stress associated with babies who are hard to settle can take its toll.

You will no doubt notice new things about your partner as you see them for the first time as a parent. Different ideas about parenting might become apparent and this too can cause tension, especially when you are both exhausted. Taking the time to talk to each other is the often the best way to handle these issues. If you need more help, there are free support services available.

**Support services for new parents**

If you feel you need some extra support with your parenting role or with your relationship, it is a good idea to talk to someone. You might like to talk to a friend, a GP or another health professional.

**Parentline**

**Parentline Victoria** is a free telephone information, counselling and referral service. This parent helpline service (call 13 22 89) is available to parents of children of all ages – from birth to 18 years of age. Parentline operates between 8 am and midnight, seven days a week. Parentline helps with everyday questions and concerns such as:

- resolving family conflict
- discipline issues
- sleeping problems
- improving family relationships.

**Maternal and Child Health Service**

The **Maternal and Child Health Service** provides information and advice about child health, child development, maternal health, parenting and home safety for families with children from birth to six years. If you have specific issues you want to discuss, contact the service or raise them at your next appointment with your maternal and child health nurse. If the maternal and child health nurse cannot help, they will be able to refer you to specialised services.

**Early Parenting Centre**

Early Parenting Centres can provide:

- support and help for parents of children from birth to 36 months
- help with common difficulties such as sleeping and feeding problems
- a place for parents and children to stay so they can receive 24-hour support (for up to five days)
- day programs (day-stay) that offer a minimum of four hours support.

To find your nearest parenting service, ask your maternal and child health nurse or use the Health Services Directory on this website.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse

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