



# KAYDEE WELCHONS MIDWIFERY

fertility | pregnancy | birth

## SUPPORTING THE FATHER IN PREGNANCY, BIRTH & POSTPARTUM

Our culture is changing, and many researchers are finding that men are spending significantly more time with their children than they used to. Presently, 90% of fathers are attending the births of their children. This is a vast increase in the last few decades, but the research is also showing an enormous lack in the recognition and support of fathers-to-be. It is obvious the support women need through pregnancy, birth and after, a woman's whole body physically changes, she carries a constant visual reminder to the world of the work she is doing and the transformation that is happening. For men the transformation to fatherhood is less obvious, and their involvement may seem less important, but it is not! You are needed!

The father is the best support person a mother can have. We have unintentionally and regretfully demoted fathers in our literature as a "support person". Many others can come alongside a laboring mother and be a "support person": a sister, mother, friend, a doula, or midwife. However, no one can take the place of the father; he holds the highest honor as an equal parent.

There is no shame in getting physical help or direction, but no one can give the emotional, grounding support of a father before, during or after the birth. Women don't need anything fixed, especially during labor, their bodies are meant to give birth and nurse children, however that doesn't make it easy, they need someone to believe they can do it, someone they can grab hold of that will not let them go. You know your partner like no one else does. You know her ins and outs and her triggers, do not second guess yourself. Be intentional, confident, and secure.

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## The Role of the Father in Pregnancy

Considerable research has shown how the woman's reproductive experience changes her neurobiological composition, preparing her for parenting. Men, these changes affect you too. Men experience a 30% increase in estrogen the month prior to birth and it stays elevated 12 weeks into the postpartum time.

About 22% of men encounter a proposed condition called Couvade's Syndrome, in which fathers physiologically experience some of the symptoms of pregnancy in an empathetic response to their pregnant partners. Fathers-to-be report an increase in appetite, weight gain, nausea, and disturbed sleep patterns.

Fathers should make an effort to bond with their unborn child. Babies recognize the voices they have heard repeatedly while developing. I have watched countless times as a baby looks over at her father when she hears his voice.

- Sing, read or talk to your baby during their active time in the evening
- Play games with them: when they kick, tap back in a rhythm while saying something, often after a few nights of a routine you will notice your baby engaging with you.
- Statistically, fathers report greater satisfaction with their role and initial bonding with their baby when they:
  - Attend for the pregnancy test result and ultrasounds
  - Engage with the care provider early in pregnancy
  - Attend prenatal appointments and classes

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## The Role of the Father at Birth

Fathers typically attend birth as one of the following:

- Coach - the main support, directing additional support persons, the one with the highest involvement with the mother
- Teammate - partnering with additional support, willing to do what needs to be done
- Witness-- observing, unsure of comfort or involvement abilities

The role of the father at birth can be largely influenced by the father's personality, but it can also be affected by the education in the pregnancy and birth process. What roll do you want to play as the father? Are you actively choosing that roll or is it your roll by default?

Fathers need to be informed, involved, respected, and supported to be the best labor coaches possible. If this is the role you and the mother see for yourself, share with your birth team how they can best support you. There is a direct correlation between a father's participation in pregnancy and birth and his satisfaction with his role as Father.

Fear of the unknown surrounds birth; the majority of men have never seen a birth before the birth of their own child. Most would not be surprised to know that in a recent research study 50% of dads were nervous, anxious, and restless. However, that same study found that fathers who are involved in the birth also have an overwhelming amount of love and gratefulness for their wives through the birthing process.

It's important to acknowledge the profound heart of men for the natural protectors they are and the deep sense of responsibility they hold for their families. However, childbirth can be unfamiliar to many men, and it's helpful to know that the birth of your child is equally strenuous on you as it is on your partner, though perhaps in different ways. Even though the stress is different than what the mother experiences, it is no less valid and deserves recognition and discussion.

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## The Role of the Father Postpartum

Studies indicate testosterone can drop 33% in the first weeks after birth and remain lowered up to 7 weeks postpartum. Prolactin levels also raise by approximately 20%, which is a hormone believed to help in parental behaviors, like getting up in the middle of the night to take care of a crying baby. So rest assured your body is going to help you manage through those sleepless nights! Connecting within the postpartum period may not come naturally. Initially, the mother and baby need to spend a lot of time together bonding to get breastfeeding off to a good start. During this time dads shouldn't become bystanders; there are many ways for fathers to remain active parents and partners after the birth:

- Plan ahead to take a proficient amount of time off from work to bond with your new family. Maternal well-being at 3 months postpartum is also associated with paternity leave. Look up getting state paid family leave to help with the financial burden.
- Spend time skin-to-skin with your infant, this promotes bonding between you and your child and helps to develop confidence and early parenting skills.

Help carry the burden of tasks that the mother normally does like cooking, cleaning, etc. to allow the mother to spend more time resting and bonding. There will be lots of laundry with a newborn!

Even when you do not know what to do or how to help, stay present physically and emotionally. Being close-by facilitates early bonding and helps develop a mutually supportive parenting unit.

Huge adjustments are going to be made after the baby is born. The initial excitement can be overwhelmed by sleepless nights and the unfamiliar and unknowns of having a newborn. For example, you won't be able to fix all the problems and there will be an increased demand on your time and patience. There will be many extra duties for you - without extra pay. However, you will be the hero of all things at home! This lifestyle change will be the most rewarding one of your life, and is thankfully interspersed with much love and joy. It is the support of fathers like you that are changing a culture.

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REFERENCES FOR THE INFORMATION IN THIS HANDOUT CAN BE FOUND:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26165171> witness to coach The findings also suggest that there are a number of facilitators and barriers to fathers' involvement during labour and birth.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25358873> informed, involved and respected

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1993982> they are co-laboring in one of three roles: coach, teammate, or witness

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18507579> father and mothers love doulas 100% of the time

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3043266/> attendance by fathers has evoked positive feelings about their wife/partner, the delivery, the staff and the hospital environment.

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