

First time fathers need more support

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Fathers who want to be more involved with their newborn children feel held back by lack of support from health staff, government and society, a study by Oxford University researchers has shown. The team also identified other issues such as financial and practical concerns, as well as dads' own beliefs about what makes an ideal father.

Led by Dr Anna Machin, from Oxford University's Department of Experimental Psychology, the project followed 15 first-time fathers from two months before their child's birth to six months after. All

wanted to be involved with raising their children, but their experiences revealed a number of areas that held them back from being as involved as they wanted.

Anna Machin explained: "The dads in this study, whatever their intentions about sharing roles with their partners, found they were ending up in quite traditional structures where mother raised the child and father worked to [support](#) them. Often, that came down to the attitudes of work colleagues and [health professionals](#). Many commented that the attitude of wider society relegated them to the role of supporter rather than parent."

One struggle was balancing being an involved father with working to support the family, particularly while the mother was on maternity leave. For some this led to concerns regarding their future career progression or the nature of the bond with their baby, for others guilt as they tried to cope with the demands of both job and parenthood. While some took additional paternity leave, most found it was unaffordable for them to be out of work much longer than the statutory two weeks. Many commented that government policy paid only lip service to the idea of dads being important.

The dads in the study also felt under-supported by health staff, saying that services were aimed at mothers, with no specific support for fathers. Given the extremes of joy and worry that they experienced, this lack of support could cause issues. Of the 15 fathers involved, five showed signs of mild to moderate depression two weeks after their child's birth and one showed symptoms of moderately severe depression at six months. This coincided with the times that fathers reported the lowest levels of support from health workers.

Anna Machin said: "The demands on fathers were eased to some extent by the right to take some paternity leave following the birth of a child,

but have not been helped by the very short time period, mainly the birth, during which the father is the focus of NHS care.

"Health professionals are talking about the need to support fathers but the needs of fathers are not being met at the moment. In some cases this has severe adverse effects on dads' wellbeing. Treating fathers as individuals with their own questions and concerns, and their own relationship with the baby, could make a difference."

It was not just external pressures that made things harder for the first time fathers. The study showed fathers wanted the same relationship with their child that they saw the mother having. It recommends that helping dads understand that they have a different but no less important relationship could help avoid some of the low points that these fathers experienced.

The plan now is to carry out a larger scale study to confirm the results and get more information for different groups of fathers. Dr Machin explains why understanding how to improve support for [dads](#) who want to be involved in raising their newborns is important:

"Research shows that if [fathers](#) are involved with their children, taking the time to support and affectionately care for their child, their children are not only happier but their physical and behavioural development benefits too."

Provided by Oxford University

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