

New fathers in UK felt isolated by maternity restrictions, but bonded better with baby during pandemic, study finds

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A new study suggests that due to restrictions on maternity care caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, new fathers in the UK were left feeling

isolated, with a sense of loss and disconnection, by being excluded from aspects of their partner's pregnancy and baby's birth.

Nevertheless, it also suggests that the nationwide lockdowns and work-from-home rules that came with the pandemic greatly increased fathers' presence and involvement in the care of their baby in the longer term.

Led by the Centre for Maternal and Child Health Research at City, University of London, the study is the first of its kind to directly investigate the impact of the [maternity care restrictions](#) upon father-baby bonding.

Father involvement in the maternity period before, during and after birth is known to improve pregnancy outcomes and support the mother's psychosocial well-being. It also contributes to father-baby bonding, with an early bond known to be associated with better physical, social, and psychological outcomes for the child.

During the pandemic, most NHS Trusts excluded birth partners, usually the father, from all contacts in pregnancy other than to join the mother during established labor, with many NHS Trusts implementing a 'no partner' visiting rule thereafter. This meant that fathers were uninvolved in maternity and initially spent little time with their new-borns.

Twenty fathers participated in the study, taking part in semi-structured interviews which inquired upon their lived experiences of the birth of their child under pandemic conditions. The researchers used gentle probing as appropriate to help participants talk through their emotions. Thirteen of the fathers were first-time dads, and all were cohabiting with their partners.

The interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analyses performed coding this qualitative data into the overarching themes describing

fathers' experiences of the maternity restrictions and the father-baby relationship.

The themes are:

1. The impact on paternal experience: this theme describes a collective negative paternal maternity experience as a result of the restrictions. Notably, excluding fathers produced feelings of isolation and a sense of loss, along with feeling disconnected from the pregnancy.
2. The impact on the father-baby relationship: this theme outlines the adverse consequence of the restrictions on initial father-baby bonding; and includes a particularly hard felt response to being excluded from antenatal ultrasound scans.
3. Observed impact on mothers: the observed detrimental impact that excluding fathers had on maternal mental health and well-being, including the fear of the mother receiving bad news alone.
4. Fatherhood in the 'new normal': the change of daily living during the pandemic aided profound family relationship building, improving long-term father-baby bonding, compared to pre-pandemic conditions.

The authors conclude that these findings can inform decisions among service providers to reintroduce the inclusion of birth partners in maternity care, and as similar restrictions, lockdowns and work-from-home rules will have been experienced across the globe, the experiences of fathers shared here may be relevant at an international scale.

Lead Author, Kathryn Andrews MSc and Midwifery Educator says that "this is the first study to examine the effects of the COVID-19 restrictions on father-baby bonding. Many fathers felt the restrictions reflected an outdated view that they are inessential in [maternity care](#). Being barred from antenatal appointments and scans and the limited post-

birth access led to an initial disconnection from the pregnancy and baby. However, fathers enjoyed their increased involvement in childrearing during the pandemic which led to long-term, profound father-baby bonding. We hope the findings can challenge traditional views of the father's role in both maternity and parenthood."

The study is published online in the journal *Midwifery*.

More information: Kathryn Andrews et al, The experience of fathers during the covid-19 UK maternity care restrictions, *Midwifery* (2022).
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