



FATHERS - T O - B E

Fathers make a world of difference

Go Ahead...Use the F Word

F-F-F-F-Father, why do you suppose we have such a hard time using that word in our parenting culture?

Almost three years ago I decided that the next phase of my career would be fatherhood education and support, specifically early fatherhood, conception through the family's first year together. I had worked in the field of birth over many years but never so specialised. I became very excited, for myself as a way to make use of my experience and expertise and as a contribution to our families. I realised that I could support men in awakening their fathering instincts and thereby support mothers and babies as well.

I knew what my first step had to be for charting my course. I fired up the ole PC, opened an internet window and went to the tried and trusted sage of our time, Google. I had become aware over the previous five or so years that Google was our foremost social barometer. It will inform anyone probing its world-wide resources just what our culture thinks, and is doing, regarding any particular subject.

I typed into the search field, "*fathers to be*". As I intended to work with expectant dads this was the most commonly used term to identify them. To my considerable illumination Google's response was, '*do you mean mothers to be?*' Our modern, sophisticated and 'know virtually everything about everything resource', Google, came back and thought I was mistaken. I have, on occasion, had this type of response from Google, but usually if I misspelled a word. Google detected I was wanting to reference parenting information however its feedback was that expectant fathers had no place in our parenting culture.

There was a virtual black hole where the F word (father) should have been. In that instant I experienced elation, that there was guaranteed work because there was nothing being offered. However that was short lived and replaced by a deep longing to weep at the fact that fathers were so forgotten, so invisible. I then reserved the URL www.FathersToBe.org for what has become Fathers-To-Be International.

When my colleague, Elmer Postle, and I began Fathers-To-Be we assumed our work would take the form of a two-day weekend workshop for expectant and new dads. Through considerable effort, and many hours of research and creativity, we designed a 14 hour curriculum. We then set about spreading the word. To my considerable surprise no one was turning up; zero. We became conscious that because there was no social precedence for gender specific education for dads', fathers did not know to be on the look out for the offer much less that there was value to be gained.

After much 'trying' our first class was 2 hours on a Saturday afternoon offered, for free, through a father-friendly antenatal teacher/colleague in Brighton, Karel Ironside. On the Thursday night after her couple's antenatal class she said, "Right, all you dads come right back here on Saturday afternoon for a Fathers-To-Be class". Six guys turned up and it was brilliant for all of us. We all learned, had great experiences and we got our 'fathers feet' wet. It was also at this point, due to the effort involved, that I realised we needed to illuminate, before we could educate and I began writing my Fathers-To-Be Handbook.

Over the days following the workshop I held exit interviews with all of the expectant fathers. They unanimously reported being pleased. Most were also admittedly surprised at what they had experienced and the effect of the reflections we stimulated. You see we did not cover anatomy, physiology and medical information; conventional childbirth classes do that. Instead we spoke about our own experience as expectant and new fathers, how *we* were fathered and oh yes ‘what was your father like; how were you fathered?’ We also asked them to say their father’s name. One man told us he had never spoken his father’s name before. A moment of punctuated silence followed as I recall.

Our approach is gender specific, delivered in a room with men only, and stimulates fathers to awaken their natural, instinctive nurturing abilities. This can include prevailing over historical experiences from their own childhood. We also cover, ‘She is having a baby. What am I supposed to be doing?’

There is a monumental paradox surrounding birth which goes largely unrevealed. During birth a woman is doing the most female, womanly thing any woman can, and yet she is ‘using’ what is typically considered to be ‘masculine energy’. Birth is often very energetic and physically demanding. Fortunately, if she is not interfered with, she has significant hormonal resources to assist her in carrying out this ‘work’.

The father at birth, on the other hand, is at his best when he enters into *a stillness*, a quiet and reflective presence. He is best at birth when supporting the birthing mother with listening and calm; more archetypically female. Yet how is a man to achieve this, and be truly helpful to his loving partner, without proper preparation? How can he feel safe in this female world? Most fathers are not aware that they are going to have an emotional experience surrounding birth. The intensity of labour can encumber them significantly if they are unprepared, under informed or not feeling safe and welcome. The moment of the birth itself, or upon first holding their newborn, can open a floodgate for many fathers. Everyone does better if *he* has the opportunity to prepare.

Fairly early on we realised that supporting the fathers was only half of the job. We also *needed* to work with the wonderful and dedicated women: midwives, birth support professionals, doulas, lactation consultants and childbirth educators. Society *allowed* fathers into the birthing environment decades ago but also neglected to support the childbirth professionals to know how to integrate and welcome them. None had been provided with a class during their basic or continuing education called, ‘Fathers 101, what to do with the elephant in the room’. We run Study Days for midwives (student and in service), childbirth professionals and educators, with great success.

In order to advance this aspect of the Fathers-To-Be initiative I began trolling through dozens, maybe hundreds, of websites on pregnancy, birth, midwifery and parenting. I collected brochures every chance I got. I read midwifery policy statements, health initiatives regarding maternity and hospital policies and procedure statements and guidelines. I also followed birthing conferences, their websites, brochures and topics being offered. There was one thing virtually all of them had in common. If the topic surrounding the early family time referred to a father at all, the word Father word was rarely being used. Euphemisms like parent, birth partner, family, the rest of the family, other family members, etc were used but almost none would identify the other half of the parenting equation and use the F word. Fathers were completely invisible and unacknowledged. This explained Google’s response. Google was right after all, as to its accuracy in reporting this actual cultural phenomenon. Research also shows that fathers do not tend to see/include themselves if they are not named; father or dad.

Fathers have been participating at birth for decades so why are we not speaking about them and to them or supporting them. Approximately 90% of fathers are at the birth of their children. The fact is, “*For the majority of mothers, a significant key to her successful pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding depends on the quality of care she receives from the father*”.

In the last 30 years the time fathers spend with their children, on a daily basis, has increased by 800%. Our children are the ultimate recipients of parent's, and society's, actions AND inactions. Fathers' participation in early family life has evolved but our culture of support has not.

Our background as a patriarchal society could have a hand in this also. Men have been in charge of so much that perhaps birth is a last strong hold for women and they are reluctant, consciously or subconsciously, to let fathers in...they are, after all, men. Women's fears are understandable considering what the 'male model' of dealing with birth has become. A patriarchal model is responsible for over medicalised birth which has interfered with, drugged and controlled birthing mothers for generations. Whether men, as such, were the only perpetrators or not, the system is patriarchal in nature. It has been disempowering of mothers and limits their loving and creative potential during birth. "Humanity can not invent a drug that can work better than a mother's body can manufacture nor a knife that is sharper than her instinctual nature." (F2B Handbook)

One thing I have learned from the expectant fathers I have had the pleasure of working with is that they are fathers first and men second. They are keen to engage with and support their partner and child in every way possible. Yet they have few role models to draw on and virtually no social precedence or gender specific community support. Our children and our families' futures are worth more than this; aren't they?

Divorce/separation rates are at an all time high. If fathers are made to feel welcome, included and safe while the foundations of the family are being laid, it will have long term implications for the family. Fathers will stay if they feel like they belong. The alternative, leaving, can look like emotional withdrawal, over work, alcohol and drug use, infidelity and being absent in general; with the almost inevitable outcome of divorce/separation. *Fathers-To-Be supports expectant and new dads by reinforcing their relationship with themselves, their partners, their babies, and the health professionals caring for the family.*

So...go ahead, use the F word, fathers are listening... *OUR CHILDREN ARE LISTENING*. Say it loud and say it proud. Let's have the courage to speak the word FATHER, spell it out and include it on brochures and websites, hospital, maternity, parenting and children's policies. The more we use it the more everyone benefits, children, mothers, fathers, healthcare providers and society; everyone. And the more fathers will feel included and welcome to take up their role of raising their children with pride and confidence.

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