



# FACTSHEET

## Resources for families

# Why dads matter before, during and after the birth

## During pregnancy

- The better the relationship between a pregnant woman and her partner, the lower the woman's stress levels. Maternal stress is associated with low birth weight, preterm birth and child behavioural and emotional problems.

## At the birth

- Women whose partners are present and supportive during labour suffer less distress.
- Labouring women benefit when they feel 'in control' of the birth process; this is strongly promoted by having support from their partner during the birth.
- Young mothers are much more likely to have a positive childbirth experience if they feel the baby's father supports the pregnancy.
- Support during delivery provided by a 'close support person' (normally the baby's father) creates a more positive childbirth experience for the mother, with labour being shorter and less painful.
- When labour partners (mostly fathers) know a lot about pain control, women have shorter labours and are less likely to need epidurals.
- Labouring women are generally disappointed by the level of midwife involvement while the involvement of their partner is more likely to meet their expectations.

## Because dads' health choices matter

- Heavy smoking by the father is associated with fussiness and colic in newborns.
- Babies are more likely to cry a lot if their fathers smoke more than fifteen cigarettes a day.

- Pregnant women are almost four times more likely to have consumed alcohol and over twice as likely to have used drugs, if the father has drug and alcohol related problems.
- The daughters of alcoholic fathers are more likely to develop ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).
- Heavy alcohol use by fathers leads to double the risk of relationship problems between the mother and baby.
- Heavy drinking fathers are less sensitive and more negative towards their babies.
- Fathers' heavy drinking is associated with their greater irritation with their baby and aggression towards the mother.
- When fathers enter alcohol treatment programmes, the simple fact of their receiving treatment is associated with improvements in their children's adjustment.

### Because dads impact on post-natal depression

- Fathers are the main source of emotional support after birth; how mothers cope with the new baby is related to their partner's ability to support them.
- Greater father involvement in care of the baby and other household tasks is linked with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers.
- Mothers are more likely to become depressed if the relationship with the father is poor, if the father was absent at the birth and if the father does not provide sufficient emotional or practical support.
- Depressed new mothers receive more support from their partner than from any other individual, including medical staff.
- Women with pre or postnatal psychiatric disorders have shorter stays in hospital if they have supportive partners.
- Partners of depressed women who are supported to find their own ways of caring for their baby are likely to develop a strong connection to their baby, and are also unlikely to develop depression themselves.
- Baby girls who haven't bonded well with their depressed mothers tend to have good levels of interactions with their fathers.
- In most families where the mother suffers from depression the baby establishes a joyful relationship with their father.
- Babies of long-term depressed mothers have been found to learn in response to fathers' (but not mothers' or other women's) baby-directed speech.

- Fathers' support can shield the baby from the negative effects of having a long-term depressed mother and can promote better parenting from the mother.
- Women who, as children, had depressed mothers have a higher risk of developing postnatal depression themselves. Having a warm and positive relationship with their fathers reduces this risk.

**Prepared by Jeremy Davies of the Fatherhood Institute**

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