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# It Can Be Done: Parentcraft Classes Which Include Men

*Dympna Gallagher*

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Thank you all for inviting me to speak to you on the subject of the need for parentcraft classes which include men. This became very evident when, in the late eighties, the Labour Ward opened its doors to the "new man". Unfortunately, however, there was no mention of what to do, or what not to do, or how to do it for these partners.

We were operating day classes within the Health Board which were all very geared towards women - the occasional request for a partner to join in was very infrequent but was encouraged. However, if any man attended, they never came back - maybe because they felt out of place or intimidated.

My colleague Marion and her sister Ann (who is a Health Visitor) became involved in discussions with Derry Well Woman regarding the need for male participation in parentcraft. The Well Woman Centre had recently opened its doors and was coordinated by Karen Meehan, a very forward-thinking, innovative lady, who welcomed this concept with open arms. So, all those years ago, it began - overwhelming in its popularity. Even to this day, the need for advertising is not required.

When clients are booking for their confinement they are offered the choice of venues - Altnagelvin Hospital have recently started a night-time class on a Thursday so we complement each other. Indeed, until September, it was a case of stand and deliver room only in the Well Woman Centre!

We are now able to try to provide facilities for seven couples. The Well Woman Centre's information leaflet has times and content of the classes. In the beginning, couples could attend as many sessions as they felt was necessary. I had one couple who attended for nine weeks! They have since had three children and pop along for a quick update occasionally!

Now things have changed and become more structured. We have a four week programme:

- Labour and Pain Relief in Labour
- Infant Feeding
- Baby Bathing and Preparing for Home
- Changes and Effects of a New Baby in the Home

We encourage the male participants to try and discover how to support their partners:

- I teach active childbirth, so the art of gentle massage is demonstrated - that is without kneading their skin off!
- Fathers-to-be are taught how their partner should breathe during a contraction, how to help her relax and what steps to take to physically support her (and vice versa).

If the fathers wish to cut the cord or participate in any other activity, we explain how to approach staff and give them some insight into the protocols and procedures during the stages of labour in layman's terms. We also help them to recognise and make sense of the medical terms used. This certainly makes the experience less frightening for them and a much more pleasant event.

The class on infant feeding is usually for women only - because I ask a new mother who is breast-feeding to demonstrate for the mums-to-be. On that night if there is a gent who is willing to talk freely to the new fathers-to-be, we organise another room in the centre for them. There is usually much laughter and debate coming from that room, but at the end of the evening a more informed, less nervous, and more relaxed individual comes forth, more prepared for parenthood!

On bath night, I bring a new born to be bathed in front of the class. The emphasis is on the role of the new daddy - especially if the mum is breast-feeding. A long discussion on support available, being able to talk about issues and coping with feelings ensues. This has a very positive effect. I know this because we have a reunion evening every three months after the event when the couples and their new babies are invited to a social night. Everyone is given an opportunity to talk about their experience - either positive or negative.

It was on one such evening when a new dad suggested having the night for new dads-to-be. The fathers say that, overall, they felt needed, involved, and are able to describe how they feel closer to their baby and partner. This has recently been researched and is well documented. If, within their experience, I have omitted some information, they are very quick to let me know. For example ...

- that the door to the main entrance of the hospital closes at 9pm and to park at the back entrance otherwise a long walk is required;
- to bring lots of change for the phone;
- don't use a mobile phone in the hospital;
- wear light clothing because the labour ward is very warm;
- remember to bring shoes when she's going home - slippers are very unattractive ...

Being a new parent is very daunting for both partners, but being prepared for all that it involves is crucial:

- the best adage is to take one day at a time;
- have a week's worth of meals in the freezer;
- take the phone off the hook;
- hide your car;
- let your mother-in-law stay for a week if she can Hoover;
- if your friends are "true friends" they will leave you alone until the adjustment period has passed ...

After all my years as a midwife, it does my heart good to meet new parents who have a balanced outlook on parenting. This is always obvious when I bump into them in the shops etc. I may not remember all their names, but they both remember mine. Their ability to communicate about their children is wonderful and reminds me of the necessity of parenting classes for both parents.

Dympna Gallagher  
Community Midwife  
1 Caw Park  
Limavady Road  
Derry BT47 6LZ  
Mobile Tel: 0795 8057796  
Email: [dympnaadvent@btopenworld.com](mailto:dympnaadvent@btopenworld.com)