

Mother Nurture

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Jan Hanson, L.Ac. 2004

Getting a Father to Help More with the Baby

It's been three months since the baby was born, but my husband still holds her like she was made of nitroglycerine and gives her back to me as soon as he can. He avoids changing diapers by saying that he's no good at it because she always cries – no wonder, since he's a little rough and awkward – and heaven help us if I want him to walk her so I can get a little sleep. When I get irritated, he tries to joke it all away by saying things like, "Don't worry, I'll get more involved when she can throw a ball."

Ah, yes, we know the type! Many new fathers – not all, to be sure – love their children enormously . . . but from a safe distance. Studies have found that the average mother is working about twenty hours a week more than her partner is – doing one task or another – whether or not she's drawing a paycheck.

OK, so we all know that it's important for a dad to help with the baby. But how do you accomplish that, especially if his idea of childcare is putting her in a motorized swing while he watches Sportscenter?

Involve Him in the Pregnancy

Getting help from the father starts during your pregnancy. Since he's observing more from the outside, it's extra important to look for little, doable ways to strengthen his sense of connection with his child:

- Bring him to appointments with the OB-GYN – especially if you're having a sonogram.
- Talk about your hopes for family life. Make them concrete, imagining a typical day with a three-month-old, or when she's one or two years old.
- Ask about any concerns he has, like not knowing what to do with a little one. Reassure him that he'll be a great dad, that just like he's learned to be successful at his work he'll learn to be skillful with a baby.
- Discuss in advance his involvement in routine care of the baby. Walk through typical situations – like feeding, changing diapers, settling a fussy baby, or whose lap a squirmy toddler sits on in a restaurant or airplane (!) – and ask him what he plans to do.
- Be honest and realistic about the help you expect from him and what you want your roles to be. Explain the reasons why, in terms of the benefits to his child, to himself, to you, and to your marriage. Don't be afraid to make it a matter of principle, of simple fair play: *"Raising our precious child is just as important as bringing home a paycheck – maybe more so. If I'm doing dishes (or changing a diaper or reading a story or putting the baby to sleep or . . .) why should you be watching TV?"*
- Sometimes you've just got to assert yourself. Keep remembering that you're doing so for the sake of your child, and that fairness is on your side. Don't be afraid to be blunt,

like: *“How would you feel about someone at work who doesn’t pull his weight? Or someone who promises to help but keeps avoiding it?”*

- Ask third parties, such as your OB-GYN, birth educator, or trusted family friend to give him a “second opinion” about how important it will be to the baby (and to you and the marriage!) for him to be really involved and helpful.

Once the Baby Arrives

- Have confidence in his fundamental ability to be a parent. Hundreds of studies have shown that a father is just as able to parent with love and skill as a mother.
- Encourage him. Be supportive (though not patronizing) if he is learning a new skill or doing something uncomfortable. You could self-disclose about ways you, too, have occasionally felt a little klutzy.
- Acknowledge him. Admit it when his way worked even though it was different from yours, or when you learned something from him. Emphasize what you appreciate about his parenting rather than what you wish were different.
- Understand the whole picture before jumping in. Otherwise, you might make a mistake.
- Don’t micro-manage. Don't be controlling, dogmatic, or self-righteous about small matters. That way, you’ll be more credible when you discuss the big ones, and your partner will probably feel less defensive. If he puts an orange top and purple pants on the baby, maybe you should just smile to yourself and let it go.
- When you do offer suggestions, be respectful and specific. Give a positive idea of what he could do rather than what he should not do. Try to filter out any implicit criticisms or commands in what you say.
- It’s alright for you to take the lead. He is probably entering a flow of activities that you’ve been managing, and he's just being a good team player when he asks you, the quarterback, what the play is. It's OK to tell him at the time what you’d like him to do. Later on, you could talk about similar situations in the future and figure out what he could do in them without you having to say anything.
- Arrange for him to have lots of experiences with the kids. Let him be the one who handles a fussy baby from start to finish or tries to get a toddler to eat some carrots. Direct the kids to him sometimes. Try to arrange for him to spend extended times alone with the children, such as an entire evening from dinner to bed, or better yet, a full day or two.
- When there’s a meeting with the pediatrician or a teacher, try to have your husband come, perhaps by emphasizing that the person wants to talk with both parents. In the meeting, try to have roughly half of the conversation be with the father. For example, if a doctor speaks mainly to you, shift your gaze to your partner, sending a nonverbal signal to the doctor to do the same. If the professional asks a question, encourage your husband to answer by looking at him and remaining silent, or simply smiling and asking, *“What do you think?”*

Time Is on Your Side

Even if it's rocky during the first few years, most dads naturally become more involved as their kids get older – and yes, more able to catch a ball. Plus if you keep at it, and keep asking for what the baby and you and your marriage need, most men will respond. Maybe not perfectly or all the time, but usually with a steady improvement.

Plus the endless tasks of caring for a little one do diminish. Amazingly, there finally comes a time when you no longer have to change a single diaper. Really!

* * *

(Rick Hanson, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac., is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 13 and 16. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)