



Men's Experiences of Antenatal Services: Findings from the 'Men as Fathers' Study

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Introduction

Timescapes is a qualitative longitudinal study taking place over five years, the first major study of its kind in the UK. Based on seven projects at five universities, Timescapes documents peoples lives, identities and relationships as they change over time.

Project 4 or the ‘Men as Fathers’ study is based at Cardiff University and follows the lives of men as they experience the transition to first time fatherhood. Our research involves a sample of men aged between 15 and 41. We interview them once during late pregnancy and twice within the year after the birth of their first child to talk about their experiences of the transition to fatherhood.

As part of this, the men described their experiences of antenatal (and to a lesser extent postnatal) services, which forms the basis of this report. Whilst overwhelmingly the men were positive about the service they and their partners had received, there were a few areas of concern. This brief document provides an overview of the men’s experiences of antenatal care and areas they felt could be improved.

Information

Good information about pregnancy, birth and beyond was seen as key for helping men to become good fathers and to feel confident in their own abilities. However participants suggested that there was little information targeted specifically at fathers and most men felt that having this would be beneficial. Whilst they could access details about practicalities, it was more difficult to find accounts of how new fathers feel. However the men often did not articulate their desire for this type of information in case they were seen as selfish.

One comment from participants was that they could be bombarded with information, particularly early on in the pregnancy, which was often not the kind of information they wanted and could be particularly confusing. Most people bought or borrowed books on pregnancy, birth and childrearing but these often conflicted with one another and the men found it difficult to know what advice to follow. Some participants suggested it would be useful to have a list of key resources and recommendations from other parents or health care professionals. Whilst there is a huge amount of information available, it appears it could often be difficult to distinguish what is ‘good quality’

Um yeah I mean I probably said that we were amazed at the actual number of bodies and organizations and books and literature that was available, it was quite overwhelming in some cases. Um it is quite confusing sometimes, a lot of the books that we were buying or borrowing whatever, um gave misleading information. I wouldn't say misleading it wasn't always the same in each book that you would read. Which would obviously raise some questions as to whose was the correct information

Some men commented on the level of information they received; whilst they did not want to be talked down to, they also found jargon confusing. It was suggested that a list of terminology and definitions would be helpful and allow them greater understanding.

Around half the men in our sample actively sought information themselves, whilst others waited for it to be provided. Female partners often acted as ‘filters’ of information for

the men, showing them particular articles to read if they did not pick them up on their own

my wife reads books all the time and she, erm, she edits them for me to read each bit, “just the bit you need to know”

I mean a lot of it’s presented to me by me wife, you know, she’ll, she’ll sort of say ‘Oh, look in this book’ and you know, ‘this is what’s going on at the moment’

Men sometimes described ‘sneaking’ a look at their wife’s reading material – when she was not there, or over her shoulder – as if they were not necessarily expected to be as interested. Therefore whilst some of the men may be reluctant to actively seek information, they were likely to read it when it was easily accessible.

And all along, we bought books to try to get some background, we’ve had books on pregnancy and the fathering of pregnancy and all this, and I have been reading them slyly rather than sitting there. I don’t know why I do it slyly. I think she thinks I’m not totally interested, but I’m probably more interested than she knows. So I’ve been trying to gen up on quite a bit of it.

Of the information they received, most men cited details on how the baby was developing over time – particularly its current stage – as the most interesting.

I certainly the side, the development side, the way that different stages, what will happen, not just the physical stages but the mental development and the, being able to appreciate and learn things, yeah that’s, I’m sort of drawn, if I do find a book that [wife] got or someone’s lent us, I will look through the basic sections

However information often centred on pregnancy and birth and the men felt that they would benefit from receiving more information about how to deal with the baby once it arrived

Um what happens after it arrives, and I think that there is a lot about the pregnancy and what women can expect. But it’s after it and thinking how am I going to know what to do with this; am I going to feed it, how many times am I going to feed it? Then again, and I know the midwives say that they are there to help, but I don’t want to be a complete you know um duffer and not know anything about it. To be forewarned is forearmed I think, a little bit of an inkling of what’s going on, and that I don’t feel like a complete spare part.

Being able to access good quality information and feeling prepared meant men were less likely to feel left out

Yeah it is very important I think to have some knowledge of what is going on. And just to be able to share it as well, and I know I would feel so left out, so distant from it if I couldn’t read up about it.

Whether men seek information directly or have it 'filtered' via their partners, they suggest targeted information for fathers would be helpful, particularly around what to expect post-birth and how to cope with this. This would not necessarily have to be in a written format, as some suggest it would be useful to hear from someone with experience of fatherhood, although a written reference guide may be appreciated. Being well informed helped men to feel involved in the pregnancy and post-birth period, a time when they can often feel quite detached.

Perceptions of Antenatal classes

A number of men were concerned about attending antenatal classes because of comic perceptions they had from TV programmes, whilst others were sceptical that the classes would be useful.

I think that it's breathing and things. I've been doing that for the last 34 years so I know how to do it.

I think, erm, perhaps it's not portrayed in the best way on telly, and I think that's one of the concerns, the episodes of comedy sketches always in a maternity class isn't it, (laughter) and I think, well if it's like that, too many jokes and I'll be just, I don't know. I'm not very good at things like that, I've got to be honest, I'm not very good at things like that, I'm not too comfortable about going there.

Yeah they are a bit daunting to start off with, because I think, and again it goes back to your parents' time when they had to lie on the floor and practice breathing. And I think have I really got to do that?

Once they started attending the classes most men's concerns about this were allayed. There was some embarrassment about attending classes and sharing a private event with other people. It was anticipated that it would be an uncomfortable experience, although the men found it easier if they perceived other people in the group to be similar to them

I think having a child is personal, it's private isn't it really? Although eventually it won't be, because the nature of having to give birth anyway, but it's quite a private issue and I found, I found it quite embarrassing

Some men felt that classes were targeted too much at women to the exclusion of male partners, which was not entirely unexpected. A few men complained that they had not been asked for their opinions or how much they would like to be involved. For example it was assumed they would be at the birth and they did not have the opportunity to discuss their concerns about this, particularly if they found it difficult to speak to their partners of these concerns

I mean, it's targeted very much at the woman, I think, and if the chap wants to tag along then that's, that's fine, you know, and it almost seems to be expected that the father will be involved with the birth, erm, that almost seems to be taken as read, so I don't know. No-one asked me anything, how much I want, no-one asked me how much I

wanted to know, how much I wanted to be involved, what I thought, you know people could easily feel excluded I think.

in some of the antenatal classes fathers are overlooked and marginalised, you know, and that can be quite difficult for men, they can feel quite angry, you know, that they've been kind of pushed to one side, you know. I'm making sacrifices about giving things up as well, and that's difficult, you know, and when the child comes along, for the child to live, you know, effectively, means the father has to be considered, you know, as, erm, to be thought about as to "What's going to make it work", you know, "What's going to make things successful for the child", you know, and of course the father's input is, is substantial, you know,

Most men commented on how the attention and information was geared towards their partners, which most of them expected. No man wanted to take any attention away from his partner but felt they needed greater recognition in this process as they would have a significant involvement in the child's life. Some of the men had concerns which they did not feel able to discuss with their partner, in case they caused her anxiety. They would appreciate opportunities to discuss these concerns, with several feeling they were better able to do this in a men-only session. Because men generally felt less informed than their partners sometimes they did not want to raise concerns in group sessions for fear of asking a silly question.

Benefits

NCT classes were contrasted favourably with NHS versions as they provided more opportunities for asking questions and discussion. They were also felt to be more inclusive rather than taking a teacher-led approach. NCT classes were reported as helping participants to feel prepared and alleviating a lot of fears about the birth

I think it certainly prepared us for the birth and took a lot of fear away from what was going to happen, and so that was very good. And to have other people our age who were in the same situation, to be able to talk it through with them and have a relationship with them.

One man in particular said the NCT classes had been very good at detailing different birth options and presenting them in a way the NHS had not done. This meant he and his wife planned for a home birth, which they felt much more comfortable with

we've been going to the National Childbirth Trust antenatal classes, which I have to say are a lot better than the NHS ones, the NHS ones are not good where we are. But the NCT ones are very good actually and one of the things they actually do is present the [birth] options to you in a way which the NHS hadn't done for [wife] and I think that made her think about it more

One of the main benefits participants saw from attending NCT classes was being able to talk to (or just be around) people in a similar situation, so they know they are not the only person with these worries.

the antenatal classes are good in that way that they do let you ask questions and do let you discuss things between you, and it's always better when you can talk to somebody else in a similar situation, because you then find out that you're not the only person who thinks that, you're not the only person who's worried about that,

A large proportion of our participants who attended NCT classes reported regular contact with classmates several months afterwards and intended to continue this. Such contacts were particularly important for older fathers as they were less likely to have any friends their own age going through a similar experience. Making new friends in similar situations helped to reduce feelings of isolation. These relationships could be established more easily through NCT groups than NHS sessions because NCT classes were smaller and took place over a longer period of time, allowing issues to be explored in greater depth.

As noted above, many men felt they were unprepared for fatherhood and would have benefited from more information before the birth about how to cope when the baby arrived. Several of them felt a 'straight talking' approach would be best where a new father could give them advice from his own experience, in contrast to what was perceived as a more woman-centred or emotional approach. Whilst friends could tell them about their own experiences, comments were made that it would be more effective coming from an 'official'

I don't think blokes are very good at taking advice. Or reading it and thinking about oh yeah that's about right, they need to be told straight sometimes.

The first thing I should say is there's certainly scope for fathers groups in the same way as the NCT is very much directed at women, certainly seems to be the case, there's certainly scope for fathers groups in the same way. The flip side of that is probably people won't go, I wouldn't have gone. But maybe if it was you know fathers talking to expectant fathers saying "you know this is gonna be bloody tough" (amusement). Less sort of hand, less sort of touchy-feely emotional things just "look bloody hell get your sleep in now" (amusement). I dunno whether it would, whether there would be much interest in that but I certainly would've liked somebody to, you know friends say it to you but if you've got somebody who's officially saying "this is what you're gonna need to do" um yeah I think that might have been beneficial. Whether I would've attended I don't know, hindsight is a wonderful thing, so I dunno

The difficulty with such suggestions is that men recognised fathers would be unlikely to attend and it was only with hindsight they realised what would have been useful. Those who did attend NCT classes with father-only groups felt this was useful. Therefore perhaps making father-only sessions a section of an existing class rather than a separate function would encourage attendance.

Asking questions

Some men commented that they felt less able to ask questions than their partners, or that questions were viewed as less important because it was the male partner asking them rather than the pregnant woman

You tend to feel, well I tend to feel that um, the question I'm asking is not very important because it's coming from me, but if my wife asks the same question it would be important, or it would only be important if it looks like it's the sort of question that might worry my wife, that's the only time the question would be important

Men were often concerned about asking questions in a group setting, although found it easier to do so in men-only sessions. It was easier to be able to ask questions when everyone was felt to have the same level of knowledge and they could help one another, giving a sense of all being in the same boat

Yeah as a man you kind of get a bit worried about certain questions so you tend to sort of immerse yourself in books or just go by what your wife tells you. But with other men you can perhaps ask questions, embarrassing questions really, to other men that you wouldn't feel comfortable asking a woman about so yeah that's good. It was good with NCT; the boys were saying certain things that I knew the answers to and vice versa you know so it's good to have that kind of male bonding thing. I think it should be done in a pub not a classroom you know but (laughs)

However some people felt unable to ask questions even in these situations, suggesting perhaps being able to do this anonymously would be preferable.

Summary

It appears that a significant group of men feel unwilling or unable to ask for advice and information during the pregnancy. This stems from concern about asking silly questions or feeling that their opinions are not valued. Whilst there may be some reluctance to actively seek information, men often reported reading what was easily available to them; provided by friends or 'filtered' by their partners. However this information lacked detail about fatherhood, particularly post-birth experiences, which men were reluctant to ask about due to concerns about appearing selfish. Those who had access to good quality information felt they could have greater involvement and felt more confident in their abilities as a father. Running separate sessions for fathers during NCT classes was appreciated by those who attended as they felt it provided an opportunity to address some of their concerns. However, whilst these were advocated, the men felt if they had been offered stand-alone sessions they would have been unlikely to attend. By making father only time during an existing NCT session, the men were much more likely to attend.

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