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**Daddy cool:** Father and child bond despite increasing pressures on modern men.

# Birth daze for dads

Sometimes fathers are forgotten in the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Three fathers gave their candid perspective from the other side of the bump – and the baby – to SHEILA BROWNE.

**'S**exual desire does wane (for women after the birth). I think men are aware of it in the beginning, but they think it's only going to last six weeks and then they'll go back to normal. You're sitting there thinking 'I'm not going to say anything, but what about me?' ... It's really important to make time (for sex), to remember to court again and all that, before you become too estranged. Some men can't deal with it. I don't think it's the majority of men. Me, personally, I like it, but there are some men who don't, and I have met some men who find the pregnant body a turn-off, or difficult to deal with, or that they need to treat it as something fragile."

– **Peter Gailey, 49, childbirth educator and father of three.**

Mother and newborn are just home from hospital and new dad is holding baby in his arms. His emotions can range from profound love to sheer panic (or both) even slight disbelief that the hospital could let this fragile, little creature go home with him.

Family relationships have been turned upside down in the excitement and sheer exhaustion of early parenthood. And while the mother's role in caring for the baby is still quite straightforward, the father's role is not. He can be expected to be the sole breadwinner but he is also needed as co-nurturer.

What this all indicates is the need for new dads to get together, share their experiences and "network" said Mr Gailey, who has run antenatal classes at hospitals and postnatal support groups for men through Birthing Rites Australia, a childbirth education and counselling organisation in Sydney.

But it's easier said than done. "Whenever there's a group of women together they will network very well, like when there are two or three women in a park with strollers," he said. "But when you see men at a park, most of the time they're pushing strollers alone. Men and women think differently about networking and for men it's really difficult."

At hospital classes for expectant parents, Mr Gailey found, understandably, little emphasis on fathers. "The guys tended to sit around making jokes or asking technical questions," he said.

So he brought in a segment in which the men would be taken aside for an hour to discuss pregnancy and birth and "bit of bonding". Most men, he felt, were relieved to have a place they could talk honestly "because you can't talk about these things at the golf club or the pub".

He also ran a postnatal support group last year for new dads at Birthing Rites, based at Bondi Junction but admitted "it was really hard to keep the guys coming", because they felt they should be at home.

"But the sessions we had were fantastic. I remember vividly one night we sat around and talked about how the children were born and for the first time, just to hear men talking about it, we were all in tears.

"There was one particularly heart-wrenching story about a guy whose baby died and he just went through all this. It was the most powerful experience I've had for a long time."

Mr Gailey is a veteran of life, love, babies and birth. He has a 19-year-old daughter from a relationship in his hippie youth, and two sons, 10 and 6, from a later relationship, now ended.

Tempo spoke to Gailey and two first-time fathers from his classes – Andrew, 31, an advertising director and father of baby Ruby, and Paul, 40, an architect and father of baby Arielle.

**On the idea of men's or fathers' groups:**

**Andrew:** I think it's good but I don't know if I would be as into it, but I'm a different case, I just like being around women.

**Peter:** If there's no spear-sharpening!

**On how the man's role changes when there's a baby:**

**Peter:** We're expected to have more caring contact with the infant. And then we've got to go into this traditional "our father" role of going out and earning the bucks and it's kind of like you've got to take on these two roles: the sensitive new age 21st century guy and also the role that our fathers did.

**Paul:** Today, in most partnerships, people are

working, then suddenly the man is the breadwinner for a certain amount of time and the whole dynamic of the relationship changes. The responsibility level suddenly goes up the bell curve ... and sometimes you cope and other times you go into meltdown; how is this going to work and how am I going to support this child and my wife, pay the bills, pay for the mortgage, pay for the car? The reality sets in.

**The pregnancy:**

**Paul:** We were over the moon about it. It was something we both wanted and it was easy.

**Andrew:** Ours was pretty easy too.

**Peter:** Whenever I talk to men during the pregnancy stage, everything's kind of wonderful and glowing.

**The birth:**

**Andrew** (whose wife, LJ, had a five-hour labour at a hospital birth centre): I felt amazingly involved, amazingly clear, and not as scared as I thought I would be. You've got a role to play and you just get into it.

**Paul** (whose wife, Lyn, had a 36-hour labour, at a private hospital): You realise how strong women are and it gives you a totally new respect for them. Or it did me. I mean, I always respected Lyn. I gathered my strength, the contractions were quite intense.

**Peter:** I remember with my births, particularly my first son – and that was a very long labour and we lost the plot and ended up with a caesar – I would've given anything to have taken over the labour for a while ... with the first child, I was running round up the bush in hippieland in Bellingen. I had about two other girlfriends and a motorbike and I was a young bachelor when she got pregnant, I was in a terrible state.

**On changes in their relationships:**

**Andrew:** It's different, much closer. I don't know the answer to that yet, it's too early.

**Paul:** I feel closer. The respect I had for the woman before is just so much deeper and wider, and sure, she shares the love (with the baby). She has her space, I have my space and the child has her space, and we respect each other's boundaries and I think that's why the child is so contented.

Contact: Birthing Rites Australia: 02 9387 3615.

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