

THE
Parenting for Life Series
PRESENTS

**HANDS-ON
DAD**

**A GUIDE FOR
NEW FATHERS**

Parenting for Life

P R E S E N T S

H A N D S - O N D A D

Hands-on Dad is the second in a series of booklets from the PARENTING FOR LIFE education program. PARENTING FOR LIFE is an award-winning, non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. This unique initiative includes booklets and posters prepared by the writers and editors of *Today's Parent* in collaboration with Strong Minds Strong Kids.

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**Today's
Parent**



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FIRST WORDS

Has anyone called you “Dad” yet? Does it sound a bit funny still? Well, that’s who you are now. And you’re an important guy. Fathers like you are playing a more active role in raising their children than ever before.

We hope the information and ideas in this booklet will help you get off to a good start in that direction. But before we get down to the nuts and bolts, here are two thoughts to keep in mind as you read.

You’ve got what it takes. Many of today’s fathers are living proof that men can be very good at nurturing and caring for their children. Even if you’ve never held a baby before, you can learn to be a great father, too.

Parenting is a partnership. One of a family’s greatest sources of strength is a good parenting partnership. If you and your partner work together and respect each other’s contribution to the family, you can help each other be good parents. If you want to try out some of our suggestions, discuss them with your partner and decide together how to make them work for your family.

Together, you’ve just begun one of the most important phases of your life. Good luck on your journey!

John Hoffman, Author

John Hoffman writes on fatherhood and parenting issues for Today’s Parent and other publications. He is the father of three boys.

Much of the material in this booklet is oriented towards a typical mother-father family. However, we acknowledge other types of families that exist including single parent families, families with two fathers or two mothers and other combinations as well.

PHOTOGRAPHY SUZANNE McCORMICK

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GETTING STARTED

The first two weeks at home

Here you are – finally at home together. This is what you’ve been anticipating for months. How are you feeling? Excited, full of wonder, proud? Or maybe dazed and even a little scared. You’ll have many different feelings in the days to come.

You will likely learn more in the next few weeks than at any other time in your life – except of course when you were a baby yourself. So be patient. You and your partner have lots to work out together. It may take a while before you feel like you know what you’re doing, but that’s OK. **Right now, you’re both just finding your way as parents.**

“At first everything seemed so chaotic. There was so much to do. Some days, just finding time to take a shower seemed like a major challenge. For a while, it was pretty overwhelming.”

Mothercare

New mothers need “tender loving care.” Your grandmother was probably looked after by female relatives in the days after giving birth. Your mother may have stayed in the hospital for a week or more. Now, hospital stays for new mothers are much shorter and relatives may not be as available as they once were. **So you have an essential role to play right from the beginning.**

You can support her recovery best by being at home for a while. Taking two weeks off work might be ideal. If you

haven't been able to get that much time off, talk with your partner about who else might be able to come and help when you're away. Then maybe you can make the arrangements.

Housekeeping

In these first few weeks your partner needs to focus on the baby and her own recovery from childbirth. This will take up most of her time and energy, so your job is to make sure she doesn't have to do much else for a while.

“Everybody wanted to see the baby.

I remember one time a bunch of friends were over, and there was my

wife, getting people things like she usually

did. Everybody stayed until midnight.

The next day Miranda and I were both really exhausted. We learned our lesson the hard way.”

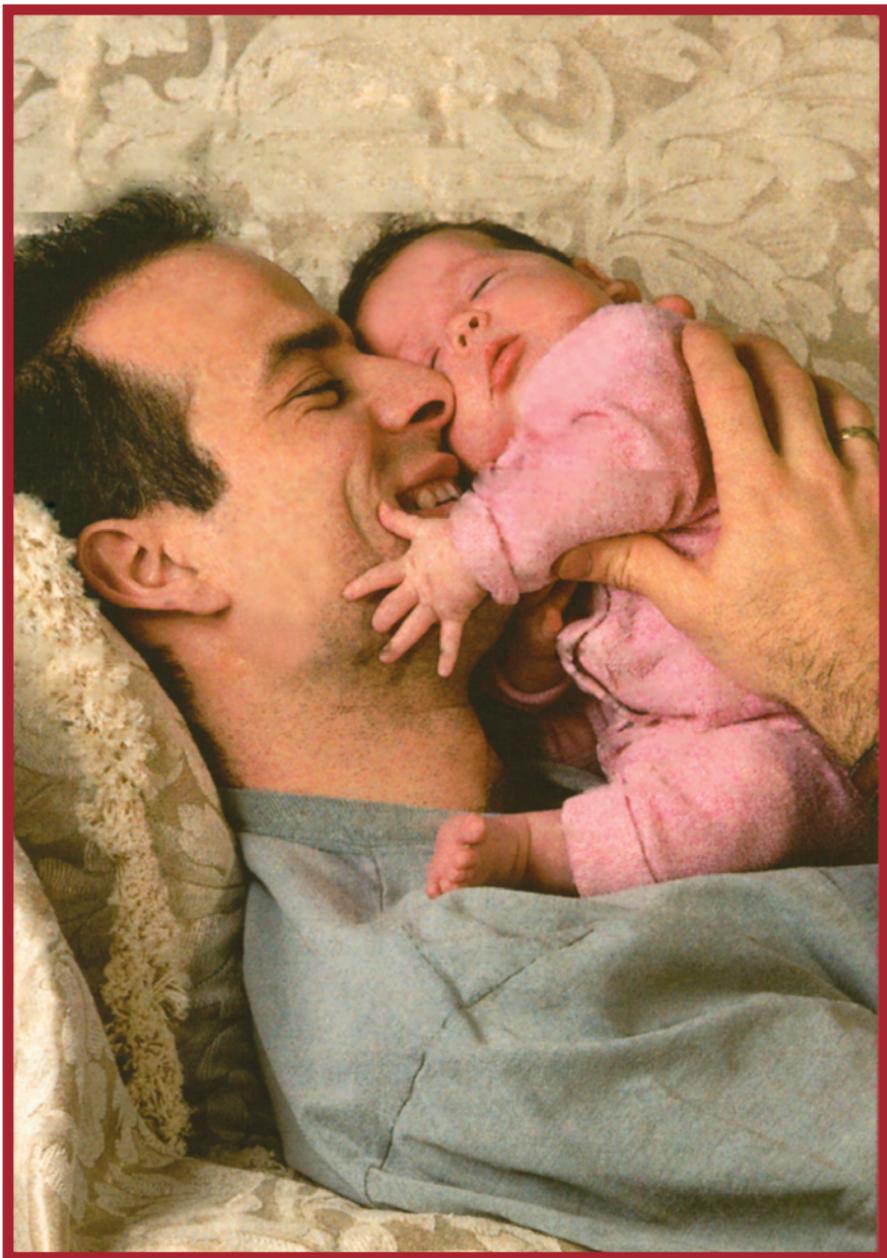
If you can handle the meals, housework and errands, great. If you can't manage it all, a creative combination of volunteer and hired help can ease the load. Perhaps your visitors could pick up some groceries on their way over, or the teen next door could vacuum the house after school. And when friends or relatives ask how they can help, say, “How about a frozen casserole?”

Visitor Overload

Too many visitors, for too long, can be tiring. Try to limit early visitors to your closest friends and relatives, and keep visits short. If you can't end the visit and your partner's looking tired you might say something like, “You've been up for a long time.

CUDDLING A SLEEPING BABY IS ONE OF LIFE'S PLEASURES – AND IT WILL HELP YOU TO FEEL THAT YOU BELONG TOGETHER.





Breastfeeding: What Fathers Should Know

If your partner is breastfeeding, you probably know how good it is for your baby. But you might be thinking, “What does breastfeeding have to do with me? Lots. **Your support is a key factor in breastfeeding success.**

What can I do?

- ★ **MAKE IT EASIER FOR HER.** Change the baby, bring her the baby in bed, fetch her a drink of juice or water. (Breastfeeding mothers get thirsty!)
- ★ **BE HER BIGGEST FAN.** Let your wife know that you believe in and admire what she’s doing.
- ★ **WATCH YOUR BABY NURSE.** Just sit and be with them sometimes. You’ll soon see that breastfeeding is more than just feeding.

Did you know?

- ★ **THE ACTUAL MILK WON’T “COME IN” FOR A FEW DAYS.** At first your wife’s breasts will produce a thick, yellowish fluid called colostrum. There’s not much of it, but it’s just what your newborn needs. When her milk comes in, she may have a day or two of discomfort from engorged (over – full, swollen) breasts. Frequent nursing will help.
- ★ **BREASTFED BABIES NEED TO NURSE OFTEN.** And feeding whenever the baby is hungry helps establish a good milk supply (the more the baby nurses, the more milk is made). The old “four–hour feeding schedule” is not appropriate for breastfed babies!
- ★ **BREASTFEEDING IS A SKILL THAT MOTHER AND BABY LEARN TOGETHER.** It might be a few weeks before it’s the easy, rewarding experience your partner has been looking forward to.
- ★ **BOTTLES AND BREASTS REQUIRE DIFFERENT KINDS OF SUCKING.** If you want to give a bottle, it’s best to wait until your baby is an experienced breastfeeder (about six weeks).

I can look after things if you want to go and lie down for a while.”

When You Need Professional Help

Whether it's a minor concern or a true emergency, **new parents sometimes need outside help.**

It's not always easy to tell what's normal and what's not. If your partner is worried about her own recovery, you can play a very valuable role in encouraging her to seek information and advice. Babies, too, may have troubling symptoms or behaviour that are not clearly illness: are those spots on her face normal? Why does he cry so hard every night?

Sometimes new mothers are so wrapped up in looking after the baby that a simple act like making a phone call will feel like climbing a mountain. So if there is any question about her condition, or the baby's, offer to make the call yourself.

“One day I came home from work and I could see that Suzanne was scared and in a lot of pain. I said, ‘Look, let’s go up to the hospital and get you checked out. If it’s nothing, no harm done’. As it turned out, her Caesarean incision was infected and she needed an antibiotic. It’s a good thing we went.”

Who can help?

- ★ YOUR DOCTOR. Even after hours there is usually a doctor on call if yours is unavailable.
- ★ THE HOSPITAL. Some hospitals have introduced new parent hotlines which allow parents to speak directly to a maternity floor nurse.
- ★ THE PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT. Public health nurses are good sources of information and can also direct you to other services in your community.
- ★ A LACTATION CONSULTANT OR LA LECHE LEAGUE.

A certified lactation consultant offers professional help with breastfeeding problems. Your doctor, hospital or health unit can help you find a lactation consultant near you. La Leche League (LLL) is a breastfeeding support network of trained volunteers who are available by phone just about anytime. LLL now has a national toll-free referral number: 1-800-665-4324.

★ AN EXPERIENCED FRIEND OR RELATIVE may be able to help with “Is this normal?” questions.

Remember, for new parents, there is no such thing as a stupid question!

Last, But Not Least

Amidst all the hustle and bustle, don't forget the best part of this “babymoon” period – getting to know your new baby! For some tips on getting started, read on.

*“Zoe used to do this amazing little smile when she was nursing and just starting to fall asleep.
I thought: Boy, what a lucky kid. I'm glad she's got somebody who can do that for her.”*

Your “Coming Home” Reminder List

- Take care of mom and the house
- Limit visitors
- Support her breastfeeding efforts
- Ask for help when you need it
- Start getting to know your baby

YOUR BABY

The amazing little stranger

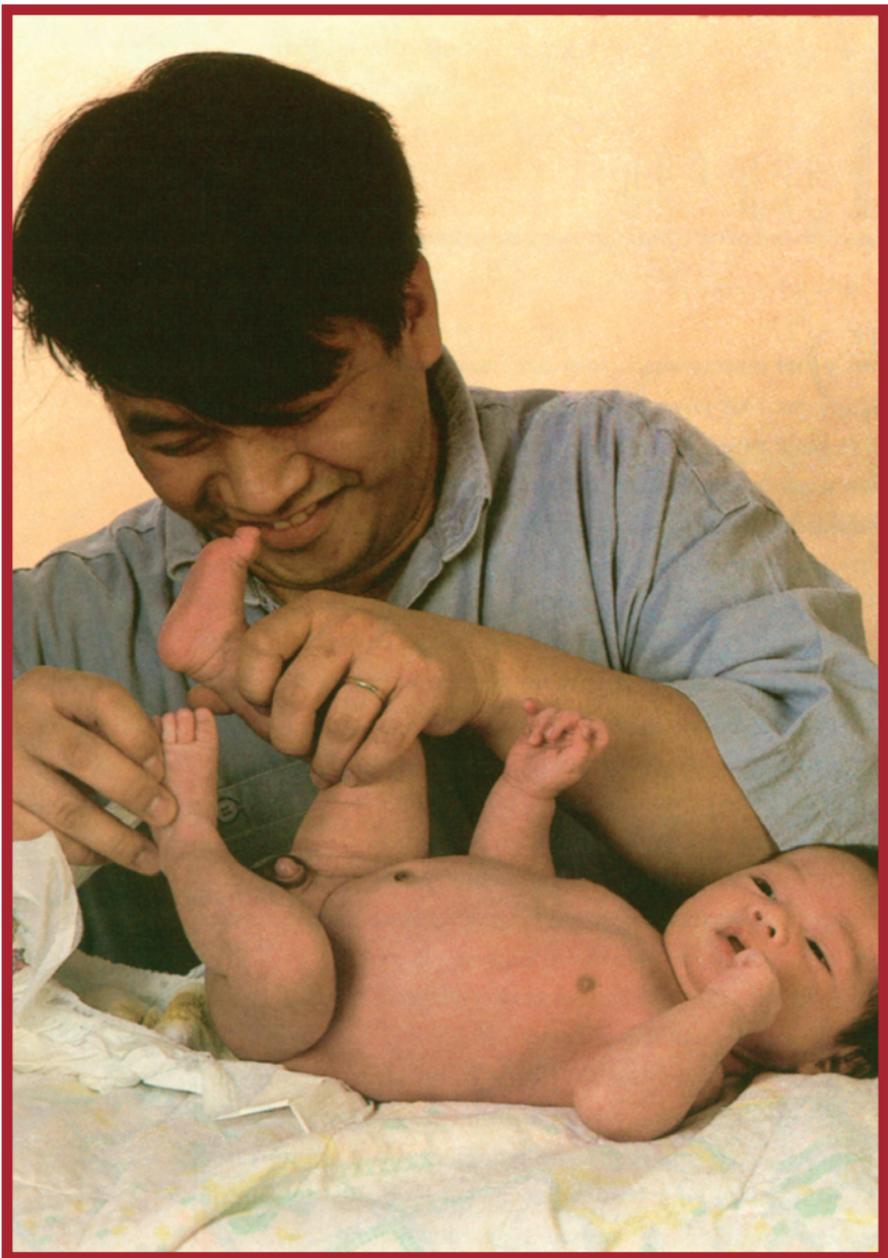
One minute the baby is “in there”, and the next minute he or she is part of your world. If you are like most men, you don’t have much experience with these little bundles. Well, **here’s an invitation to roll your sleeves up and get to know your baby.**

Getting to Know You

You may have heard inspiring stories about fathers who “bonded” with their babies in the delivery room. In truth what we’re really talking about is getting to know a little person, and that takes time. Here are some ideas for connecting with your baby:

*“How can something
be so small,
and you can love
her so much?”*

- ★ **GET INTO HIS WORLD.** This means caring for him: comforting, bathing, changing diapers. With newborns the main language is touch, so the more “hands-on” care you give, the sooner you will feel close to him.
- ★ **HOLD HIM.** Babies like to be held, and that’s good – because the more you hold him, the sooner you’ll “fit” together. If you’re having trouble getting comfortable, try holding your baby when he’s asleep. Just let him lie there cuddled against you. It’s a nice feeling.
- ★ **USE A CARRIER.** Try putting him in a sling or front carrier. Most babies love the movement and the feeling of closeness.



“I was afraid of hurting her. I remember giving Brittany a bath, trying to wash her little arms. I was afraid to stretch them out – it almost seemed like they might break right off if I did it too hard.”

What Your Baby Can Do

Newborn babies already have some amazing skills – like reflexes. Put your finger in her hand and she’ll grip it tightly. Stroke her cheek and she’ll turn her head, looking for a nipple; this is called the rooting reflex. If a sound is too sudden or shrill, she’ll show you how startled she is by throwing her arms out as if she were falling.

Your baby can see from birth, focusing most easily on objects that are just under a foot away – like your face when you hold her. Even though she can’t speak or understand what you’re saying, talk to her anyway – she will soon recognize your voice. She will also get to know the smell of her mom, dad and anyone else who holds her often.

She’ll also begin to show you what her personality is like. **If you pay attention, you’ll see lots of amazing changes in a few short months.**



DESPITE ALL THE JOKES, CHANGING DIAPERS IS NO BIG DEAL. YET YOU AND YOUR BABY CAN GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER THROUGH THESE SIMPLE INTERACTIONS.

“I’ll never forget the first time Josef fell asleep on my shoulder. It had been so much work to settle him that I was afraid to put him down, so I just lay back on the couch and had a rest myself.

That little body felt so good against me. It was like a little bundle of warmth, going straight to my heart.”

“Last night the baby was crying and it seemed like every thing I did was wrong.

Susan was calling out suggestions to me from the bedroom and I was getting pretty flustered. Eventually I put her in the car seat and held it on the dryer while it was running. That helped for a while... Then I turned on the TV. That seemed to mesmerize her or something and eventually she settled down.”

☆ **GO SOLO.** A great way to gain confidence is to spend some time alone with the baby – just the two of you, with no one to step in and take over or make you feel self-conscious. Short sessions (half an hour to an hour) with a freshly fed baby are best to begin with.

Sleeping Like a Baby?

You may hear stories about babies who slept through the night at three weeks of age. It can happen, but not very often. Newborns are designed to wake up and nurse every few hours, and they don’t distinguish between night and day. Some babies mature fairly quickly into a more adult sleep pattern; others take longer. **Realistically, expect to be getting up in the night for months, not weeks.**

In the meantime, you both might need to adjust your own sleep habits so you don’t turn into zombies. That may mean going to bed earlier, napping when the baby sleeps, or giving an exhausted partner a weekend morning sleep-in.

Crybabies

Yes, babies cry. And no, it’s not fun for parents. But crying is how your baby “tells” you that he is uncomfortable or

The High-Need or Colicky Baby

Some babies do more than their “fair share” of crying.

Inconsolable crying in the early weeks should be checked out with a physician, but in most cases this is not a medical problem. You may be told your baby has colic – which means he has periods of intense, unexplained crying and is otherwise fine. Hang in – colic rarely lasts more than three months.

“High-need” babies are different. They may or may not have bouts of “colicky” crying, but in general they are more easily distressed, and have a harder time calming down, than most babies. They have been described as “needing more of everything – except sleep”. This is not because of anything you’re doing wrong; your baby was born this way.

High-need and colicky babies are a challenge, for sure. Some ideas that may help:

- ★ **DON'T GIVE UP.** It may sometimes seem like you're not doing any good, but these babies still need your comforting. Most high-need babies get even more upset (and harder to soothe) if they're left on their own.
- ★ **LOOK AFTER YOURSELVES.** You and your partner will need to get some breaks. Take turns caring for and taking breaks from your baby, and ask relatives or friends to help you out from time to time.
- ★ **TRY NOT TO COMPARE.** If your friend has a contented, easy baby, you may feel cheated or inadequate. But babies are individuals, and they're all different. Try to put your energy into learning about and enjoying your own baby, rather than comparing him to others.

Soothing Suggestions

A certain amount of crying will happen no matter what parents do – there is no one technique that will always comfort a crying baby. However, there are some strategies to keep in mind.

- ★ **FEED ON DEMAND.** Hunger is the most likely cause of crying, and some babies seem to need extra sucking. Don't worry about overfeeding. Babies are pretty good at knowing when they're hungry and when they've had enough.
- ★ **CARRY THE BABY.** Studies have shown that babies who are carried a lot – even when they're contented – cry less. So if, for example, your baby has a “fussy time” around nine o'clock each night, try carrying her around for most of the early evening.
- ★ **HELP HER FEEL SECURE.** Try close contact, movement (rocking, walking, baby carriers, or car rides often do the trick), and soothing sounds (soft music, your voice or “white noise” – like the hum of a fan).
- ★ **BE INVENTIVE.** If a particular technique doesn't seem to be helping, try something else. Experiment with different holds. Eventually you'll discover what your baby likes.
- ★ **TAKE TURNS.** It's much easier to comfort a baby when you are emotionally fresh – so if one parent is getting frazzled, it's a good idea for the other to take a shift.

upset. That's why it's so important to respond, even though you won't always be able to soothe him right away. You may have heard, "If you pick up the baby every time he cries, you'll spoil him." Not true. **Responding to your baby's cry is a good thing to do. It helps him learn that how he feels matters to someone and that he can trust you to take care of him.**

Playing with Your Baby

Someday you might play soccer together, but in the beginning, parent-child play is very simple. Some fathers like to walk or dance their baby to music. Others find that giving the baby a simple massage is a good way to interact. Both are ways of playing with an infant. Although your baby will enjoy looking at colourful patterns and objects, you don't really need toys yet. **In fact, a baby's favourite "toy" is one of her parents, and your face is the best part.**

Try lying face-to-face with your baby (make sure she is comfortably supported).

Try singing or speaking softly to her. It really doesn't matter what you say. It's the sound of your voice that counts. If you feel self-conscious, go into the bedroom and shut the door. Try sticking your tongue out...she might do it back. She may be fascinated by a light on the wall, or a silly little sound you make. The key is to watch how she responds. If you can do that, you'll get a feel for what she likes. Your play will develop over the months and you'll just 'know' what to do.

Your baby will be most receptive to playing when she is contented and alert. (If she is tired and fussy, she needs soothing, not entertaining.) Remember to be gentle, and watch for signs that she's had enough.

"When Yasmin was brand-new I used to hold her on my lap and sing to her. I remember the first time I got her to turn her head to look at me by singing. That was an amazing feeling. When she got a little older she'd smile like crazy when I sang."

YOUR PARTNER

She needs you now more than ever

You might be wondering when your partner will get back to being her “old self.” She is still herself, but in a way she’s a new person now, too – a mother. **Here’s some information to help you understand what she’s going through right now.**

“Thalia was a changed woman. She was so tuned into the baby. I had to get used to that.”

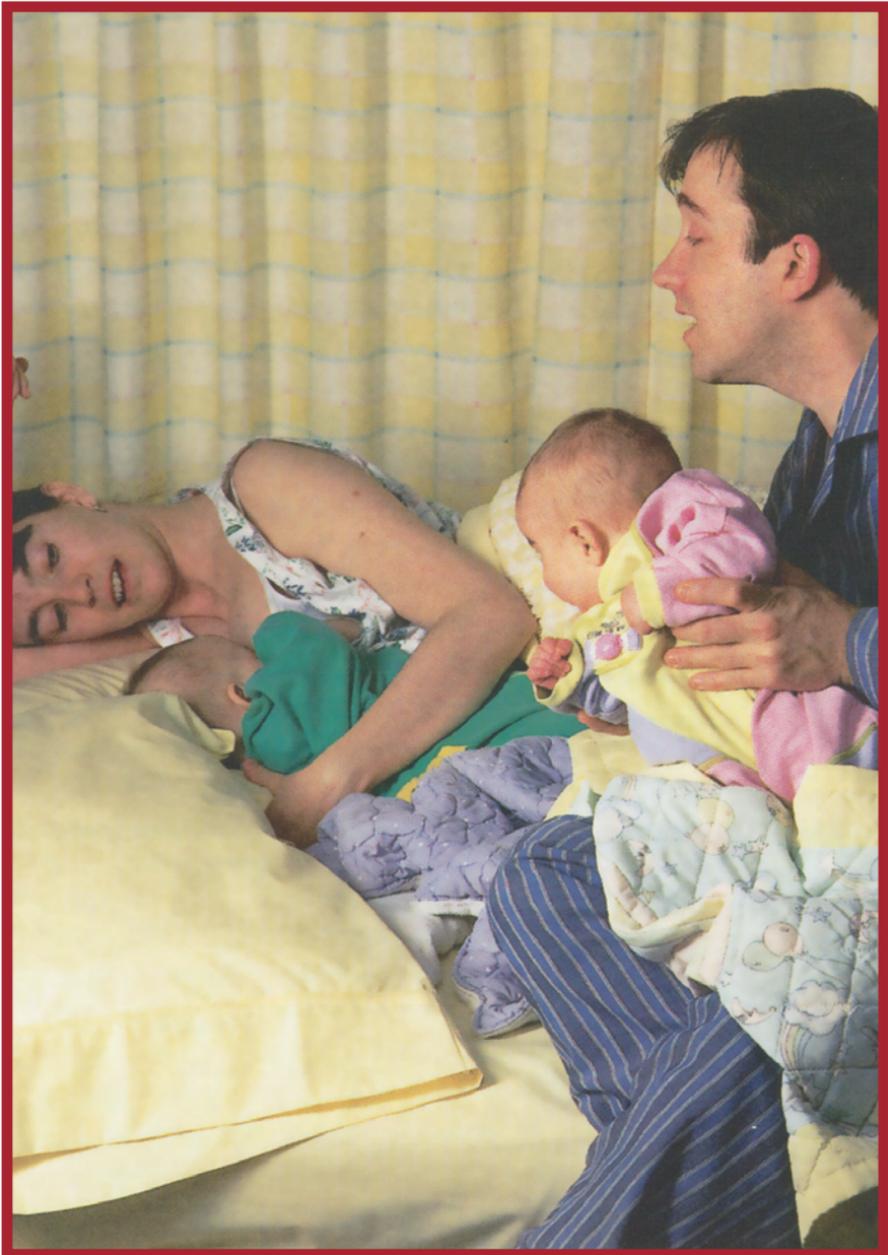
What’s Going On with Her Body

After a woman has a baby, her body undergoes many changes as it becomes “unpregnant.” At the same time, she is recovering from the birth, waking up several times a night, and perhaps establishing breastfeeding. No wonder she’s tired!

☆ **HER UTERUS.** It takes about six weeks for a new mother’s uterus to shrink back down to its normal size – so she might still look pregnant for a while. The uterus shrinks by contracting, causing “afterpains” (especially when she breastfeeds) in the first week. She will have a bloody

YOUR INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT IS THE BEST THING YOU CAN GIVE YOUR PARTNER RIGHT NOW .





“Kari had all this stuff to deal with – ice packs, warm baths, the heat lamp... Sometimes she’d be kind of irritable about it. Finally I clued in that she was trying to fit these things in around baby care, and it was stressing her out. I said, ‘Remember, I’m here to help. Let me know when you need to look after yourself, and I’ll take over with Gemma’.”

discharge from her vagina, like a heavy period at first. This will gradually diminish, but may continue up to six weeks.

☆ **OTHER BODY DISCOMFORTS.** Your partner’s vaginal area will likely be swollen and tender, and if she had stitches they will be sore (especially if she’s on her feet for too long). She will have to spend some time looking after this with ice packs and/or sitz baths.

As the milk comes in, her breasts may be quite uncomfortable for a few days – even if she’s not breastfeeding.

If she’s had a Caesarean section she will need extra help. No, she’s not sick, but she is recovering from major abdominal surgery. She really does need to take it easy.

Hormones: Where mind and body meet

Your partner’s hormone levels are changing rapidly. For example, when a baby nurses – or cries when the mother’s breasts are full – her body releases a hormone called oxytocin which starts her milk flowing. Prolactin, progesterone and estrogen are other hormones that fluctuate in the postpartum weeks. At times, this might affect the way she feels and acts.

Her Thoughts and Feelings

The early days of motherhood (and fatherhood!) are a time of emotional ups and downs. Hormones play a role, but there's more – new demands, fatigue and, of course, strong feelings of love for the baby.

★ **FALLING IN LOVE.** It really is hard to describe the way a new baby can fill up a new mother's head and heart, not to mention a 24-hour day!

Of course it's important for parents to love their babies – but new fathers are sometimes taken aback by the intensity of the mother-baby bond. Don't worry. That strong connection is good for both of them – think of it as Nature's plan to make sure babies are well looked after. Your wife is learning to be a mother. As she becomes comfortable in her new role, her world will expand again.

★ **LEARNING A NEW SKILL.** Men often think that women have an instinctive ability to mother. There may be a grain of truth in this – but really, parenting is a skill that we all have to learn. A woman may feel that she has to be a perfect mother right from the start. This, of course, is an impossible and stressful expectation. At times, she might get rattled and seem to take it out on you. Try to be understanding – as she gains experience and confidence, you'll both feel less on edge.

★ **HER SELF-IMAGE.** What did your wife do before she became a mother? Maybe she saw herself as an artist, a valued employee, a good cook or your lover. She may wonder if she'll ever be those things again. Of course she

“The baby's crying triggered this amazing, instant response – Lise would bolt right out of a sound asleep. It was almost like there was this physical thing that happened to her when he cried.”

will but, for the time being, her old roles are on the back-burner. There's a new little person who's taking up a lot of space in her life (and yours). Both of you need to get used to this feeling.

*“My wife had a day
when everything
seemed to make her cry.
And I was getting really
frustrated, trying to
figure out what was
wrong. Did she need to
sleep? Was I upsetting her?
Finally she said to me,
‘Don’t try to make it
better. Just be nice
to me while I cry’.”*

★ **BABY BLUES.** This is a short-lived period of weepiness which often occurs in the first week. You may feel like it's your fault, but most experts believe that a rapid shift in hormone levels is the cause. Just keep on looking after her needs, and let it run its course. Baby blues is not the same as post partum depression, a much more serious and long-term condition. See “Postpartum Depression”.

How Can I Help?

Once you're back at work and things seem to be settling down, it's easy to forget that looking after a baby is hard work. Your partner still needs your support:

★ **KEEP ON PITCHING IN.** Studies have shown that after having a baby many women take on a greater share of the household work than before – yet many feel exhausted in the months after the birth. So keep up the good work you started in the first week by doing as much of the housework and child care as you can.

★ **LISTEN.** As she gets used to a whole new lifestyle, your partner will need to talk about her feelings with someone who understands. That can be you.

★ **TELL HER SHE'S GREAT.** Parents hardly ever get told

what a good job they're doing. Yet it means a lot when someone notices your hard work and dedication – so show your admiration!

- ☆ **GIVE HER A DAY OFF.** If she's feeling stressed out, offer her a "rest-cure": bring her meals and snacks, take over the baby care (except nursing), and let her sleep, read, watch a video, visit a friend – whatever she wants.

Postpartum Depression

If your partner seems sad, depressed, anxious or withdrawn for more than two weeks, she may have postpartum depression (PPD). Unlike the "baby blues", PPD doesn't pass quickly. Understand that this disorder requires professional help. She can't "snap out of it".

If you're worried your wife may have PPD, talk with her about finding help. You may have to take the first step for her; try calling your doctor or local public health unit. Another source of information about PPD is the Pacific Post Partum Support Society, an organization that can help find local sources of help, at (604) 255-7999 or www.postpartum.org.

"It was a very difficult time. Sometimes I wondered if she'd ever 'come back'. What got us through was help from friends and the fact that she found another mother to talk to who had been through the same thing."

YOUR SELF

Here's looking at you dad

*“Once you have a baby,
your whole focus changes.
I realize that I’ve hardly
thought about myself
since Justin was born.”*

Becoming a father changes your life forever. It’s exciting, but it’s also a big step into the unknown – so **it’s normal to have mixed feelings right now.**

Worries and Fears

While everyone is congratulating you about the birth, you might be disturbed to find that not all your feelings are positive. There’s no need to feel guilty about it. Lots of fathers (and mothers!) have gone through the same struggle.

★ **HAVE I LOST SOMETHING?** It’s very common for men to fear that fatherhood will take something away from them – freedom, money, vacations, whatever. Is it all gone? Not forever.

Becoming a father is one of life’s major changes. But it’s not your first. Transitions like getting married or starting your first job all required you to adjust and get used to something new.

What’s certain is that you have gained something, too. The relationship that you can have with this child is one of the most precious and rewarding experiences life has to offer.

★ **NEW RESPONSIBILITIES.** You thought about this while you were expecting, but it may have hit home with real

force after the birth. There's nothing that makes you feel more like a "grownup" than being a parent – and that can be a bit scary. But your new responsibilities will feel more comfortable once you have had a chance to grow into them.

★ **FEELING LEFT OUT.** Everyone's attention is centred on the baby first and the mother second. Your partner has less time and energy for you. You may also feel left out of that close mother-baby relationship. No wonder some men feel like they're on the outside looking in, thinking, "Where do I fit into all of this?".

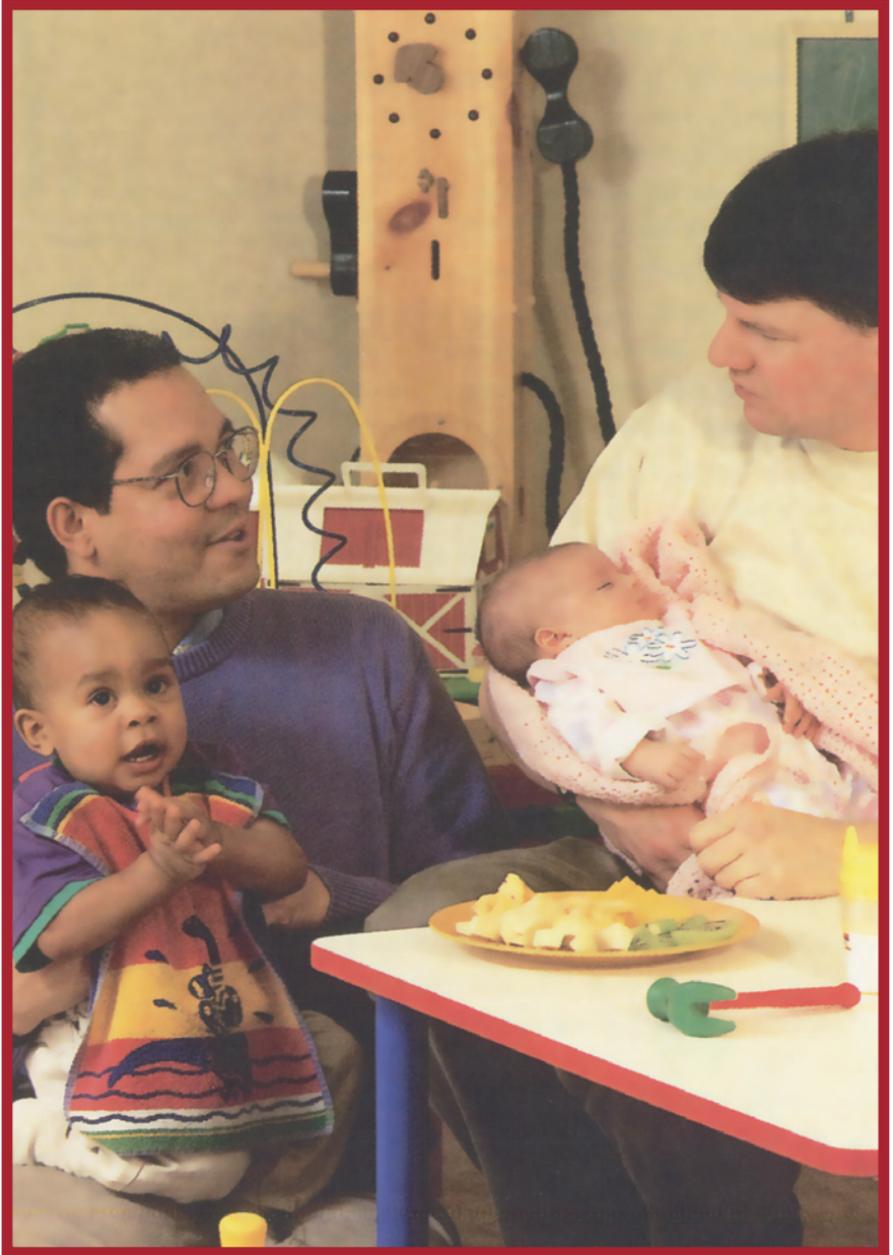
It doesn't have to be that way. You can (and should) develop your own connection to the baby. Mom is "number one" in your baby's life right now, but as you and your baby discover each other, you, too, will fall in love.

★ **"AFRAID" OF THE BABY.** If you haven't been around babies much, you may feel pretty nervous about looking after your own. What's the cure? Experience! Parenting skills are something we learn, not something we're born with. The more you look after your baby, the more confident you will feel.

If the baby is not what you expected or hoped for – if he is premature or disabled, or even just colicky – your normal feelings of loss or anger may make it harder at first to feel close to your baby. Keep trying! Your baby and partner both need you now, and as you spend time caring for him, your love and acceptance will grow.

"Sherry just didn't seem to be interested in anything but the baby – including me. For a while, I felt almost like a stranger in my own house."

"It was an incredible thing to suddenly have this new, helpless little person in our lives. But, you know, it didn't take long before it seemed like Anna had always been with us."



Balancing Work and Family

Work does come between a man (or woman) and his family. That's reality. On the other hand, your family benefits from your employment and you may be the only source of income for a while.

While there are many good reasons to work hard at our jobs, the trick for a new father is to keep a healthy balance.

If all the work you are doing is necessary just to make enough money to get by, that's one thing.

But if you have a choice, this is a good time to limit extra work commitments. Ask yourself, "What's the most important thing for my family right now? Do I really have to take on this overtime or business trip, or stay late every night?"

"I figured I had to shuffle my priorities after the baby was born, and now my priority is my wife and kid. I always thought of myself as a salesman. Now I think, sales is what I do and a father is what I am."

Growing into Fatherhood

Most fathers do "grow into" their new role. You will, too. But you don't need to do it alone. **There are people who can help you get comfortable with fatherhood - starting with your baby.**

★ GET INVOLVED WITH YOUR BABY. The more you become part of the scene in your family, the better fatherhood will feel. And as you get to know your baby,



**DO YOU KNOW ANOTHER FATHER? IF YOU GET TOGETHER,
YOU'LL PROBABLY FIND YOU HAVE LOTS TO TALK ABOUT.**

“I remember this one time I was trying to comfort the baby. First my wife offered to take over, then my sister-in-law, then my mother-in-law. It would have been so easy to give up. But, I figured, this is my kid, I’ve got to learn how to do this sooner or later. Now’s as good a time as any.”

that “Yikes!” feeling will be replaced by a sense of competence, confidence, and pleasure.

★ **FIND YOUR PEER GROUP.** Of all the things that can help you cope with the rough spots of fatherhood, talking with men who have “been there” is one of the most important. Do you know another new dad? If so, get together for a coffee or a beer. You might be surprised at how eager he is to talk to someone who understands his experience.

★ **TALK TO YOUR PARTNER.** She is the one who knows and loves you. In a quiet moment, share your joys, your worries and your frustrations.

Back-seat Drivers

You’re looking after the baby so your wife can nap, but at the first hint of crying she runs downstairs and scoops the baby away. Or she hovers while you change the baby’s diaper, “correcting” your every move. How do you feel?

It might help to know that a certain amount of “back-seat driving” from mom is normal. You may feel like she doesn’t trust you, but it’s more likely that she’s very strongly “wired” to respond to her baby. Try to see her protective feelings as a good sign that she’s attached to her baby.

At the same time, you do need to find your own way. Be quietly persistent in your efforts to care for your child. In time, and as she sees your growing skill with the baby, your partner should find it easier to “let go”.

Your baby is the centre of the universe right now, isn't she? That's good, but **you still need to look after the relationship between mom and dad.** After all, your baby needs you both.

Meet You at the Baby

Good relationships are built on shared experience, and the big thing you and your wife have in common right now is this baby you have created together. That's where you meet. **If you can share this experience, you will strengthen your relationship in several ways:**

- ★ **YOU WILL UNDERSTAND HER BETTER.** An involved father finds it easier to appreciate the demands on a new mother and to understand her feelings.
- ★ **YOU'LL BE A TEAM.** When a father knows and understands his infant, he is better able to share both the tough times and the good moments. That way the baby brings you and your partner together, instead of coming between you.
- ★ **SHE WILL LOVE YOU FOR IT.** A father who is a good caregiver to his baby is a new mother's best friend.

“Some friends of ours seemed to drift apart after they had kids.

For us, becoming parents seemed to bring us closer. I think that's because I was 'into' the kids as much as Maria.”

Teamwork

“Our baby was born in the summer so we used to take walks down by the river. One of us would have the baby in the ‘Snugli’, and she usually slept, so this was our chance to talk about what was on our minds.”

Parenting works best (and is the most fun) when mom and dad work as a team. You’ll need to talk about how you are going to handle issues like crying, nightwaking and feeding. But quiet moments alone can take some planning.

Most infants will sleep in the car, so going for a leisurely drive might be one way to find a chance to talk. Or there may be certain quiet times in your baby’s day when you can take a few minutes for a cup of tea and a chat. How is she feeling? How

are you feeling? Are there any problems you need to sort out together?

Timing is important. The best time for an intimate talk is not in the middle of a mini-crisis. So don’t blunder in when you’re both too stressed or mad to listen to each other. Wait until things have calmed down, and then sit down together and work things through.

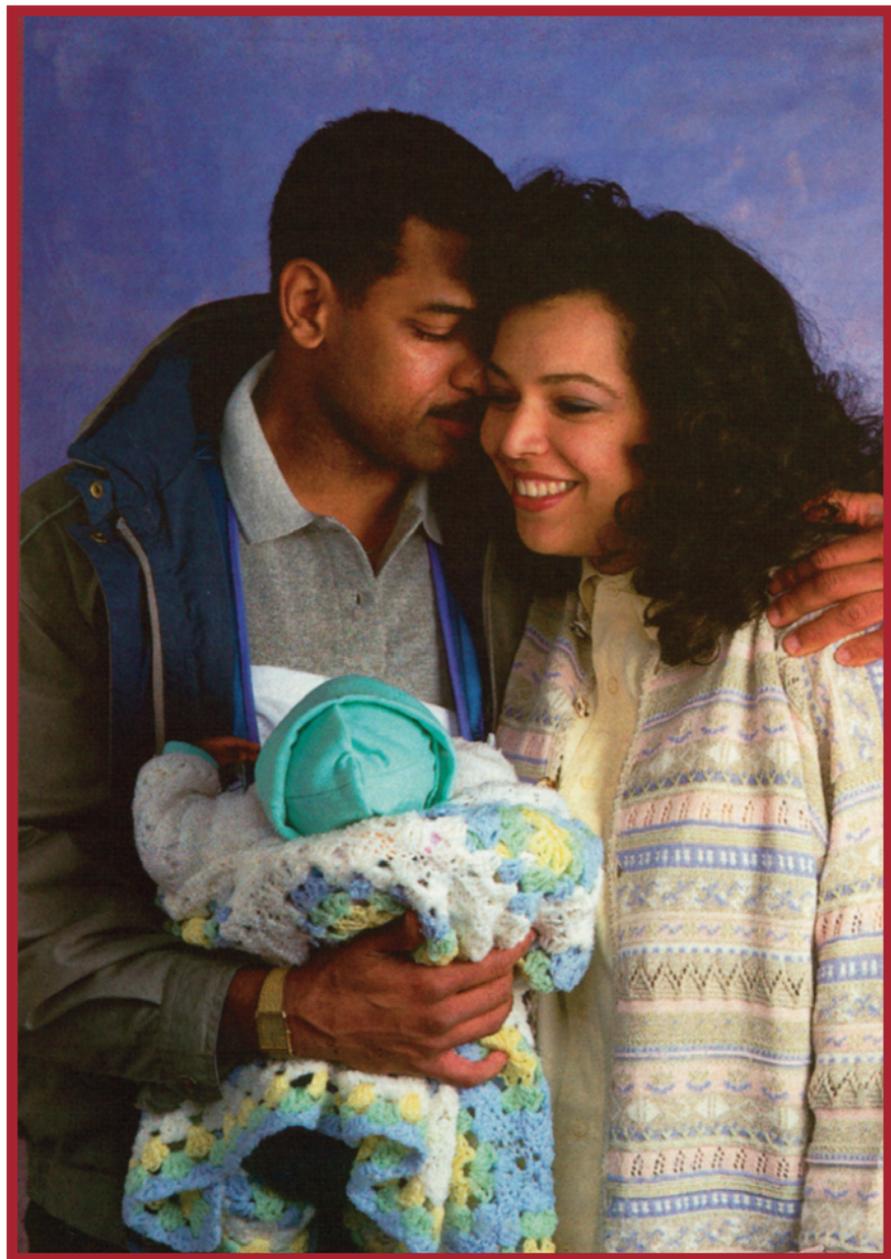
“Time Out” Together

Everybody needs an occasional break, including parents. And busy couples need a little time alone to get back in touch with each other. So ask one of your relatives or friends – someone you feel good about leaving the baby with – to baby sit, and go on a date.

A note of caution: getaways can backfire when they exceed the mother’s comfort zone for leaving the baby.

TIME ALONE IS HARD TO FIND. BUT YOU CAN STILL STAY CLOSE AS A COUPLE BY SHARING THE UPS AND DOWNS OF NEW PARENTHOOD.





Here's how to “babyproof” your date:

- ☆ **AVOID DEADLINES.** It's best to have a flexible start time for your first few outings. You want to leave a contented, freshly fed and changed baby, so you may not be able to get away exactly at the moment you planned.
- ☆ **START SMALL.** A whole evening may be too much at first. It might be stressful for your partner to leave the baby for that long, and if she's nursing, her breasts may get uncomfortable. Something shorter, like a quiet breakfast in your local diner, is still a nice break.
- ☆ **TAKE THE BABY.** You don't even have to leave the baby behind. Young babies are very portable, and some events are quite baby-friendly, like music festivals or sporting events.

Sex – or Lack of It

For the first couple of months after the baby is born, there will be so much else going on you might not think about sex that much. But the time will come when you'll wonder: How will we get back on track with sex?

Sex after childbirth involves several factors. One of them is physical – your partner's recovery and how tired both of you are. Just as important is her emotional readiness. It's quite common for women to have a lower (or fluctuating) sex drive at this time of their lives. That can be frustrating if you're ready and she doesn't seem to be – but it won't last forever.

Some people suggest that a man needs to woo his wife all over again after she's had a baby (flowers, candlelight, soft music). But it might be an even better idea to give her some rest and time to herself, so she can “recharge her batteries”. Some Saturday, put the baby in the carrier and take him for a walk. Let your wife have a good nap. Then cook, or order in, supper. **You may or may not end up making love but, either way, you will still have done something good for your relationship.**

LAST WORDS

Getting involved in fathering is one of the best things that you can ever do, for your kids, your partner – and for yourself, too. That’s because children give us so much back, if we take the time to build a relationship with them. No matter what success or fame we achieve in our lives, it’s a safe bet that nothing makes life seem more precious than our own children.

In closing, we’d like to leave you with two more simple ideas:

Be yourself. Every family is different. One new father put it this way: “Before you have your baby, you might think that there’s a certain way things are supposed to happen. It’s not like that. You have to be flexible. You can read a thousand books, but you’ve got to make things happen in your own way.”

Have fun! Yes, parenting is sometimes hard work. That’s unavoidable. But it can also be a great pleasure. You can have some of the greatest times of your life with your children. And they help us to rediscover the world, as they discover it themselves.

Dad’s Checklist

- Take care of your partner and yourself
- Care for and play with your baby
- Be patient during this learning period
- Accept that you will both have mixed feelings
- Talk to each other, and to other parents
- Work as a team
- Ask for help when you need it

Parenting for Life

The success of tomorrow's world depends largely on how we live in it today. Building strong, healthy families is key to our future and the right information at the right time can be a vital support for growing families. Education and skills that enable parents and children to learn, play and grow together, are the foundation we need to give flight to our future. That's what Parenting for Life is all about.

Strong Minds Strong Kids and Today's Parent Group originally joined efforts to develop Parenting for Life – a non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. The resources, including booklets and posters from Parenting for Life, are used as a part of many parent education programs across Canada. In 1998, Parenting for Life received the FRP Canada Media Award from the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

Research clearly demonstrates that a strong and healthy parent-child relationship is crucial to raising resilient, productive and mentally healthy individuals. Family by family, we need to strengthen our efforts and create a better world for our children. Please join us in this unique initiative.

Dr. Ester Cole, C. Psych.

Chair, Parenting for Life Program and Past Chair

Strong Minds Strong Kids

**Today's
Parent**



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The information contained in this booklet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a psychologist, physician or other qualified expert.

Également disponible en français sous le titre *Un père actif : Guide pour le nouveau père.*

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