

Seven Steps to Success:

Supporting your wife during baby's first 6 weeks

BY KAREN OLESCH-WILLIAMS

photo: Kathleen Murphy

Eyes half closed, the mother sat in the rocker, cradling her two-day-old baby boy under her breast. It was 4 a.m. Her husband lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling guilty that his wife was up again and wondering if there was something he could do.

Expecting a child is exciting—and anxiety provoking—for both the mother and the father. It is difficult to plan for something you have no experience with, and many first-time parents imagine life will just carry on as usual after the birth of the child. Even experienced parents have trouble remembering how demanding a newborn can be and how exhausted they felt. And fathers, whether they've been through this before or not, sometimes have difficulty deciding on the best ways to pitch in.

I spoke with experienced mothers, new mothers, and women who were expecting. Here are the suggestions they had for expecting fathers:

1. Take time off work. It's common for mothers to take a six-week maternity leave and for fathers to take a few days off after the child's birth. Fathers: A few days will not be enough. Depending on the rigors of birth and possible complications, you will both be physically and mentally exhausted for the next several months, so talk to your boss about taking as much time off as possible. Ask colleagues for help and keep them abreast of the projects you are working on. "My husband works for a family-friendly company and is taking six weeks off," says Elizabeth York, who is expecting her first child in September. "During the first two weeks, I will breastfeed and sleep while he does everything else." If you must work, see if you can work from home part-time.



2. Help with the chores. Hats off to all you fathers out there who have engrossed yourselves (or plan to engross yourselves) in household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Having a clean house and nourishing meals cuts back on the chaotic feeling at home, gives your wife peace of mind, and helps you both feel a little less out of control.

3. Participate in childcare. Cooking and cleaning (though much appreciated) aren't enough. Remember, even though you might be feeling unsure, that parenting is new for your wife, too. Sharing the childcare and giving your wife a few minutes to herself to take a shower can strengthen the bond between you. "After my child was born, I was very tired," says Kathy Holmes, who delivered her first baby in March. Lucky for Holmes, breastfeeding was her only childcare responsibility at first, thanks to family help. "I was grateful that my husband and

mother handled most of the childcare during the first week," Holmes says. Remember, the more you participate, the easier it will become and the closer you will feel to your newborn.

4. Help with feedings. The baby will want to eat every two hours and it will take 30 to 40 minutes to feed her. Talk to your wife before the baby is born about how she would like to handle the feedings. If she is bottle-feeding, or is breastfeeding and is comfortable with pumping her breast milk, take turns with the feedings. This is a tremendous way to bond with your child, and will give you both a little rest—especially if you share in the nighttime feedings. "My husband is a night owl," says York, "and he will be responsible for the feedings until 2 a.m." If you are not using bottles, you can still help by handling the inevitable diaper change either before or after the feeding. "Because I was breastfeeding, the hardest part

for my husband was that he couldn't feed the children," says Cheryl Adair, mother of three. "He did get up during the night with me for moral support, though."

5. Form a support group. If possible, have a family member stay with you to help during the first or second week. Keep in contact with friends and ask them to help out with shopping or sending out birth announcements. This type of support, as well as some childcare coaching, made life easier for Marge Sweeney, whose children are 2 and 5. "We had lots of family help, and our relatives showed us what to do," she says. Carol Shomas, mother of a 2 year old and a brand-new baby, is looking forward to that same kind of help. "I think it will be easier with the second one because I will have more support from family and friends," she says. Don't forget to depend on friends and family for emotional support as well.

6. Arrange for meals. Toward the end of the pregnancy, cook lots and freeze the leftovers. "About three months before I was due, we started freezing meals," says Holmes. "I was also glad to have quick meals like frozen pizza available." You can ask friends and family to bring over a meal, but explain to them that you only want them to drop off the food, and that there will be plenty of time for them to spend with the baby in a few weeks.

7. Spend some time alone. Call a babysitter you feel comfortable with. If you and your wife are too tired to plan an evening out, have the babysitter take the baby for a walk so that you and your wife can have a few moments alone.

Following this advice, and doing whatever else you can to help out, will help make the first six weeks with your new baby an enriching experience that will strengthen your marriage and deepen the bonds between you, your wife, and your new child.

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