

Blokes at Birth

Men can make wonderful birth-partners ~ they just need a little ... guidance. Childbirth educator, birth attendant (doula) and mother of two **Kristin Beckedahl** provides blokes with five tips.

Having a baby these days seems to no longer be 'secret women's business'. Today, most men are expected to be at the birth of their babies. This is a relatively new idea, as 40 years ago only about 10% of men were actually in the birthing room, and this was seen as quite unusual. These days about 95% of men are in the birthing room, by their partner's side every step of the way, and some blokes are even in the birthing pool catching their own babies! In our one generation, the expectations put on the father-to-be have changed dramatically. I believe we owe it to both these lads and their partners, to ensure they're well prepared for the big day. How can we really prepare these Dads-to-be to have a hands on, active and positive role in one of the biggest days of their lives?

Many men report that antenatal classes offered through hospitals, do little to prepare them for their role at birth. I have seen this firsthand as a doula (professional birth attendant) for couples in the birthing room. These poor blokes are seriously overwhelmed; they're not sure where to stand, or sit, when to speak, what to say, what they can touch and what's out of bounds. Sometimes the behaviour of their partner, along with the sights, sounds and smells of labour can catch many men by surprise! All this within a hospital setting, with its

policies and staff shift changes, can leave many men feeling a little daunted and helpless. Here are some of my top tips for men heading into the birth suite:

1. GET INVOLVED

Start early. Together, attend antenatal checkups, research your options of care and places of birth, and attend an active birthing workshop. Work on a birth plan

Five tips for expectant blokes:

1. Get Involved

2. Mind your Tongue

3. Avoid the Interrogation

4. Be Present

5. Birth is not a Social Event

together, ask questions, read, watch, learn from what your partner offers you, share the experience and the decisions together. Talk to other Dads about the positives of birth (not just the usual unhelpful horror stories) and get good at fielding judgmental comments from others about your personal preferences around birth. Step up and value your role

in your baby's birth, as you can support your partner physically and emotionally like no midwife or obstetrician can. Be your partner's (and your baby's) advocate in labour by communicating effectively with your caregivers and discussing all the options along the way

2. MIND YOUR TONGUE

Too much talking is very distracting for a woman in labour, and talking during a contraction is one of the biggest no-no's there is. As a woman moves deeper into her labour, she will need to concentrate very hard through each of her contractions and hearing unnecessary chatter or gibberish around her will not help! If you choose to open your mouth, ensure only positive, supportive and constructive words pass your lips at the appropriate times. Remember to keep the chitter-chatter down with the midwife or doctor too.

3. AVOID THE INTERROGATION

Don't ask a woman in labour too many questions. This can pull her out of her primal birthing brain and can disrupt the flow of labour. e.g. 'Did you call your mother? Where's the camera? Do you want a drink, an epidural, a sick bag? Do you want me to massage your back, call the midwife, get more pillows, get some lip balm? Are you hungry?' Sit quietly and closely to her, tune in to her mood, her body and her needs, and



you'll be able to answer these yourself without cross-examining her.

4. BE PRESENT

By this, I mean really be there, not just in the room but by providing your full presence and attention to your partner. No phone-calls, texts, Facebook updates, reading books, newspapers, watching TV, or (gasp) checking and replying to emails. You may think she won't see or notice if you do any of these things, but I can assure you she will sense it and will also never forget it. The world can wait.

5. BIRTH IS NOT A SOCIAL EVENT

Often the very best environment for a woman to labour and birth in is one that is private, dimly lit, quiet and safe. Often she will feel most at ease and uninhibited when the people around

her are those she trusts, and who are patient and respectful. She does not need an audience or a cheer squad! So avoid letting all the family, in-laws and friends know she is in labour - some will invite themselves to the hospital and gather in the waiting room! To avoid any performance anxiety placed on your partner and the well-meaning calls and messages wanting updates, consider keeping the news to yourselves. The first few hours after the baby is born should also be undisturbed and private. Its a time for mother, father and baby to bond, establish breastfeeding, and spend precious time meeting each other. THIS is your family now, protect it.

As Lucy Perry, birth attendant and author of *Cheers to Childbirth: A Dad's guide to childbirth support* says in her book, "Your involved presence has the potential to enhance the relationship

you have with your partner. You think you love her now? Wait until she delivers your baby. You'll love her in a whole new way that includes admiration, a new kind of respect and an enormous amount of gratitude for what she has done for you and what she's been through in the process."

For more invaluable tips on preparing for birth, expectant fathers can attend *Beer + Bubs: childbirth education for men at the pub* (www.beerandbubs.com.au). These classes are run in all major cities of Australia in their natural habitat: the local pub. The session focuses on the support person's role and allows men the opportunity to meet other men in the same boat and to ask questions that he might be nervous to ask in front of his partner.

Photos: Anne Higgs Photography