

2007

# Child birth: don't forget the fathers

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## Publication Details

Williamson, MJ, Child birth: don't forget the fathers, *Campus News*, 10(2), 2007, 2-2.

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## **Abstract**

Fathers are often forgotten when a new baby comes into a family. But men face many challenges in the early months of fatherhood as they come to terms with their new or expanded role. And they need more support. UOW Senior Lecturer and Master of Science (Midwifery) Co-ordinator Moira Williamson and colleagues Professor Carol McVeigh from Massey University (NZ) and Mercy Baafi, Midwifery Manager (Education) at Wollongong Hospital, researched the impact of parenthood with 128 new fathers. MOIRA WILLIAMSON prepared this Opinion column, based on their research.

## **Keywords**

t, don, fathers, forget, child, birth

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Life Sciences | Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Our recent study of fathers' adaption to parenthood, which looked at men becoming fathers for the first time or adding to their existing families, showed just how stressful the whole experience can be on men and on families in general.

There is very little paid paternity leave in Australia and even paid maternity leave is limited. This is placing pressure on families and it is time for governments to invest in families and provide more forms of paid maternal and paternal leave to assist new parents. This would in turn decrease stress levels for both mothers and fathers.

While it is well recognised and documented that the adjustment to parenthood for women can be a time of great change and in some cases great stress, there has been little available evidence on the impact of parenthood on men.

Our study was exploratory in design and looked at the functional status of fathers at six weeks, three months and six months after birth. The study focused on the fathers' involvement and activities related to household responsibilities, baby care, child care, work, study, personal care (such as exercise) and socialisation. From the researchers' perspectives, the results of the study very much mirrored the results of studies that have investigated women's adaptation to parenthood.

The majority of fathers were overjoyed with becoming fathers for the first or subsequent time even with the changes that occur with the birth of a first child or subsequent children.

All fathers expressed their desire to have more time with their partner and newborn. However, often they were juggling their employment commitments with increased workloads within their homes. Fathers commented that their paid employment gave them limited time with their new babies and some felt that they missed out on providing care for their baby, such as bathing. In some cases their paid employment hours had increased with some fathers taking on second jobs to help with the household financial commitments while their partner was on unpaid maternity leave. These fathers were concerned about their inability to spend more time as a family unit.

Some of the fathers also indicated that breastfeeding limited their involvement with their new baby. As breastfeeding is so important for the well-being of the baby and the mother, it is perhaps paramount that new fathers are educated about the benefits of breast feeding and provided with other ways of feeling close to their newborn, such as settling the baby and being more involved in play time and recreational activities such as taking the baby for a walk. Health professionals need to be aware of the fathers' desire to be actively involved in the caring and bonding with their newborn.

Some fathers identified that their educational activities such as completing tertiary education had changed since the birth of the baby. This was due to their desire or need to help with the new baby or other children. Some fathers commented that they were too

tired from disturbed sleep to concentrate on other activities.

However for the majority, leisure activities such as playing sport did not decrease. Other leisure activities such as outings changed, with first-time fathers finding that socialising occurred more frequently with other families rather than outings to restaurants or the movies. It is easier (and more affordable) for families to socialise together rather than to find babysitters.

The fathers also commented on sexuality. Not surprisingly their sexual relationships with their partners altered during the pregnancy and following the birth. However, it was obvious to the researchers that the fathers had received little information about the impact of pregnancy and birth on sexual relationships. We have since published a paper on this aspect which may assist health professionals to include this information in their antenatal care and in parenting education sessions.

The study identified that as family size increased, men's satisfaction with fatherhood decreased. Their level of household activity also decreased. This could be due to the increasing pressure placed on them to be the main economic support for the household and in response they have increased their paid employment. On the other hand it may be less stressful for them to be involved in more work-related activities than home activities. Further research is required in this area.

The six-month survey analysis has revealed that fathers, regardless of the number of children they had, were less involved with household duties and child care. This is supported by other studies and indicates that women may be increasing their workloads in the home and in some cases in paid employment. This places more challenges on the home front as both mothers and fathers juggle their work and home commitments and relationship with each other.

However, our study did show that most men were extremely satisfied with their roles as fathers and enjoyed their involvement with their new baby. **CN**

## Crime fighters tap into CTCP's expertise

The University of Wollongong's Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention (CTCP) is playing a key role in the Australian Government's efforts to build transnational crime fighting capacity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fifteen AusAID scholarship-holders from Pakistan, China, Cambodia, The Philippines, Fiji, Vietnam and the Cook Islands are among the 55 students from 14 countries in this year's intake for CTCP's Masters degrees and Graduate Certificates in Transnational Crime Prevention. There are also 17 Australian students, many of whom are Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers.

The students include police and law enforcement officers, anti-terrorism and intelligence chiefs, judiciary officials and bureaucrats. The scholarships are part of a \$3 million commitment Foreign Minister Alexander Downer made in 2006 to provide 60 AusAID scholarships at CTCP over the next three years.

A number of the other international students have been sponsored by the AFP to undertake the courses, which teach skills to fight transnational crime such as narcotics production and trafficking, firearms and people trafficking, smuggling, fraud, corruption, money laundering,

internet crime, paedophile activity, natural resources poaching and illegal shipment of hazardous waste.

CTCP Director Associate Professor Doug MacKinnon said the government's commitment to the program was all about building crime fighting capacity in countries in South-east Asia and the Pacific.

"This is a unique degree and it is gratifying to see the government supporting it so strongly, through the provision of AusAID scholarships and AFP support for law enforcement officers from overseas, and by sending a large contingent of AFP officers as well," Professor MacKinnon said. **CN**