

PM article 2

‘Have you been to antenatal classes?’ Insights into midwife-father communication from an ethnographic study

Summary

This is the second of a three-part series drawing on an ethnographic study of midwife-father communications during labour and birth¹. Fathers frequently report feeling unprepared for birth, even when they have attended antenatal classes. This article explores the ‘routine’ question that midwives posed to fathers, concerning attendance at antenatal classes. Midwives appeared to gauge fathers’ ‘preparedness’ via this question about antenatal classes as the ‘officially sanctioned’ route to childbirth preparation. In contrast, post-birth interviews captured the diverse ways in which fathers prepared for the unfamiliar world of childbirth. We suggest how midwives may use these findings to facilitate fathers’ orientation to childbirth.

Introduction

This article draws on the findings of a recent ethnographic exploration of midwife-father communication during childbirth¹. Eleven couples participated in the study; they were expecting their first baby (4 couples), 2nd baby (4 couples), 3rd baby (2 couples) and 5th baby (1 couple). All were booked for midwife-led care. Data were collected via 72 hours of direct observation (range two – 13.5 hours for each couple) plus post-birth interviews with parents and midwives, activities undertaken by the primary researcher (DG). Pseudonyms are used throughout. More details about the study’s methodology are given in the previous article in this series, published in *The Practising Midwife* in December 2022.

A question observed to be commonly posed by midwives during labour was: ‘Have you been to antenatal classes?’ (ANCs). Midwives were noted to ask this question on 10 occasions during the 11 births observed. The one exception, when the question was not mentioned, was at the homebirth of a fifth baby. It was one of the few ‘standard’ questions which midwives addressed to both parents, the other common one being the existence of a ‘birth plan’ The third ‘commonly-asked’

question was directed at the father and concerned whether he wished to cut the umbilical cord; explored in detail in the third article in this trilogy.

Post-birth interviews with parents revealed that all had prepared in a range of ways for childbirth, including specific preparations made by the father. These were not elicited by the midwives' posing of a 'closed' question about ANC attendance, or the conversations that followed. Ethnographic observation also revealed that when the midwife opened the question out and enquired about other preparations the couple had made, for example by accessing websites or reading a book, useful information was shared by the parents which helped the midwife support them towards the birth they hoped for.

Fathers and antenatal classes

Antenatal classes were established in the UK during the 1930s, initially provided by private organisations and then through the NHS. Originally known as 'mothercraft', their name denoted their focus, as being for mothers and about baby care.

The establishment of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) in 1956 coincided with the time when fathers' involvement was gradually increasing. It represented the beginning of the lay childbirth education movement, which has since proliferated. From the early 1960s, the NCT lobbied for fathers' involvement throughout the childbirth continuum and from this time, fathers were encouraged to attend NCT classes. The establishment of NCT couples' courses in the 1970s influenced the later provision of such classes within the NHS.

By the 1990s, 'couples' courses' were recommended as NHS 'best practice' (Deane-Gray, 1997). ANCs are currently provided by the NHS in some areas; however, the global pandemic reduced these services and not all have been reinstated. The NCT (as it is now known) and a range of other private providers also offer ANCs.

The UK collation of national statistics regarding women's attendance at ANCs started as recently as 2019, when the Care Quality Commission's Maternity Survey³ included a question about women's attendance at NHS classes; 30% of women responded in the affirmative. However, partners' involvement is not yet recorded. Accurate data on fathers' attendance at ANCs are therefore not available. In this

study, which was conducted two years pre-pandemic, three of the 11 fathers had attended ANCs. These three couples, all expecting their 1st babies, had participated in NCT, hypnobirthing and an [unspecified] online course respectively. None had participated in NHS classes.

[Question 1]

In the UK, most fathers attend their babies' births, however, research indicates that even when fathers have accessed antenatal classes, they may not feel prepared for childbirth^{4,5}. There is a clear emphasis in many ANCs on the father or partner's role as 'advocate' for the woman, ensuring that her wishes are conveyed to the midwife⁵. He is encouraged to negotiate over decisions and choices regarding care in accordance with women's wishes. This study's observations found that fathers tended to wait quietly to be addressed by the midwife, rather than initiating conversation or asking questions. It also found that, particularly for first-time fathers, the intensity of labour and unfamiliarity of the hospital environment were unexpected. The father may therefore have felt unable to fulfil these roles of advocacy and negotiation, which may lead to feelings of helplessness.

In asking the question about a father's attendance at ANCs, the midwife appeared to seek to establish his level of knowledge as signifying his 'preparedness' for labour. However, midwives' expectations that classes afford adequate preparation for the realities of labour may be misplaced^{4,5}. In assessing how effectively attendance at ANCs translated into support for his partner, one midwife expressed surprise that a father who had attended NCT classes appeared unable to initiate practical support (e.g. back massage):

I was *aware* that he had the *knowledge*, but he didn't know how to *put* that knowledge into action...

Midwife Sally interview

[Question 2]

Antenatal classes – the 'officially sanctioned' preparation route

The midwife's routine question, 'Have you been to antenatal classes?', appeared to invite a 'yes / no' response, which was then recorded in the mother's records. This documentation suggests that classes are seen as the 'officially sanctioned' route to

childbirth preparation. As illustrated above, a level of knowledge or competence may be expected of a father who had participated in classes. Conversely, a father who responds 'No' may then perceive that the question carries judgement and feel anxious that they are inadequately prepared for what lies ahead. Fathers' body language expressed concern and uncertainty as they replied in the negative. Furthermore, this routine question did not capture the range of ways in which the couple or father had prepared and which were revealed in the course of the research.

What the study found about fathers' preparations

Parents' comments during post-birth interviews revealed that all couples in the study had done some pre-birth planning which related to their commitment to the father's attendance. This ranged from making plans for the care of other children, to undertaking activities focussed specifically on the birth itself. In different ways, all the couples were preparing for labour together and seeking to work out what the father's roles might be.

Lay sources of support

Couples accessed 'lay' sources of knowledge, information and support to help fathers prepare for birth. They drew on a range of resources, including media such as books and websites. Some couples, at the woman's instigation, watched *One Born Every Minute*⁷ together by way of preparation; others accessed YouTube clips. These media were used to help the couples explore how they envisaged the father's roles in labour. Watching other fathers' responses in labour enabled these fathers to formulate ideas about how they might navigate their own way through childbirth. This helped to habituate the father to this unfamiliar world; through observing others, he was able to start shaping and planning his own role during labour:

...pre-birth we were watching *One Born Every Minute*, which...is very accurate, it's like a fly-on-the-wall...you see how different *partners* interact, how different women and different men *deal* with...the enormity of what's going on...

Parents' interview, Will, 2nd baby

Some books and private antenatal classes prepared fathers to adopt specific roles in labour, for example as advocate for the woman in challenging midwives' actions (which was rejected by one father as potentially too adversarial) or as 'labour coach'. One couple had written a birth plan together, which highlighted the roles they hoped the father would play, based on attending hypnobirthing classes; each midwife who was involved in care discussed and affirmed this with the couple.

Four couples invited female family members or friends to be with them during labour. They expressed that these women's own experiences of childbirth equipped them to offer practical and psychological support. They were seen as a valuable source of 'lay knowledge'. This is illustrated by the following explanation of why one couple, Dawn and Jack, had invited 'additional companions' to be present during labour:

And with Laura [Dawn's sister], she's had kids. My Mandy [Jack's sister], she's had kids, and Stacey's 'ad quite a lotta kids [Stacey has had seven and is step-mum to five] so - there isn't nothing really that they don't know...

Parents' interview Jack, 1st baby

During interview, this father explained that these family members would provide him with the knowledge and information he needed, as labour unfolded, perhaps replacing the need to learn about birth in the more formal setting of ANCs.

Three fathers gave examples of preparing through learning from other fathers. For example, as part of planning for the birth of their babies at home, two couples attended a homebirth support group at the local maternity unit. Facilitated by a parent member of the service user forum, it was attended by parents – fathers as well as mothers – whose babies had been born at home. Hearing the experiences of other parents reassured the fathers, increased their confidence and gave them ideas for the roles they could play.

In the second example, one father, Ben, had gone out for a drink with a friend, specifically to ask his advice on how best to stay calm during labour. Tips he received included taking a book to read, to instil and convey a sense of calm and normality. Ben adopted this, while acknowledging it in the post-birth interview as an unconventional tool for coping with the labour-situation. Through this action, he was perceived by the midwife as being 'uninvolved' whereas this has been an intentional approach, agreed by the couple. An open-ended question about the ways in which a

couple have prepared for labour could elicit a broad range of responses and inform the midwife of more idiosyncratic strategies than ANC attendance.

Past experience of birth

The seven fathers who had older children drew on their experiences during these babies' births in preparing for and navigating the 'current' labour. Fathers highlighted in particular the impact of their first experience of childbirth and their sense of stepping into the unknown:

...the first time round...it's a new environment, you don't know what to *expect*, you don't know what's *normal* and what isn't normal. ...you just don't know! What to expect at all. You...just have to get through it.

Parents' interview Mick, 3rd baby

Fathers' accounts of their first birth experience resonated with feelings of disorientation, confusion and stoical endurance, combined with helplessness at witnessing the person you love *'in an extreme amount of pain...and there is nothing you can do about it! All you can do is sit and watch'* (Parents' interview Graham, 2nd baby). These recollections prepared fathers in this study for the realities of subsequent labours.

Fathers approaching a second birth

Fathers' expectations of the birth of their second baby were, understandably, based on experiences of the first. However, for each of the four couples having their second baby, the labour took a different course, compared to the first. Fathers were once again surprised, and in some instances shocked, by events during labour. Three of the second labours were much quicker than the first, resulting in less time for the father to orientate himself to what was happening. This experience was described as being - at the time - more intense and 'scarier'. After the birth, such feelings were supplanted by relief at the benefits of a shorter labour.

Fathers were able to use some elements of their first experience to comprehend and interpret events during the second labour; this brought some reassurance. However, it is important to highlight that the midwives involved in caring for the multiparous women tended to assume that the fathers would have gathered experience during the first labour which would enable them to prepare for and navigate the second. In

the event, fathers were perhaps not as prepared for the second labour as either they or the midwives expected.

Building experience: third births and beyond

As fathers' experience of childbirth grew, their awareness of the unpredictability of childbirth was heightened, summed up by Hamid's partner Ayesha: '*...all three [labours] had different experiences. All kids have brought their own set [of] things we...didn't know about*' (Parents' interview, Ayesha, 3rd baby). Witnessing the pattern of a first and then a second labour had habituated fathers in this sample to both the sights and sounds of childbirth, the sequence of events plus the fact that there may be variations.

These fathers had accumulated valuable experience to help them make sense of what was happening. For example, they used knowledge gained during earlier labours to help the couple decide when it was time to go to hospital:

...now it's third time round...because- we'd been through it...I was more relaxed, I wasn't as on edge...as I was with the other two. 'Cos you've kinda been there...and done it, for me...I think I was calm – again, because it was the third time round.

Parents' interview, Mick, 3rd baby

Some 'multiparous' fathers expressed frustration that there was no opportunity to share with the midwife, knowledge they had accumulated about their partners' previous labours. For example, Graham said: 'I could've *told* them what was happening' (Parents' interview, Graham, 2nd baby), referring to an intense stage during Ashley's labour, when she was unable to communicate verbally. He felt that he could have usefully shared the knowledge he had gained during Ashley's first labour; rather, the midwife relied on the brief details recorded in the woman's maternity records. This raises interesting questions for midwives about the possible benefits and pitfalls of discussing previous labours with the father.

[Question 3]

Midwives' and fathers' perceptions of events

Midwives and fathers experience the world of childbirth very differently. Midwives are habituated to this world, gaining familiarity through education, exposure and practice. For the father, birth is a momentous, extra-ordinary experience. In post-birth interviews, this study recorded midwives' awareness of this. However, most did not appreciate that even during straightforward labour, fathers' unfamiliarity means that even the most 'routine' aspects of the experience can be distressing for the father even if there has been formal 'preparation':

...The other thing that I *vividly remember* is...*almost all* the way through, Jo's.... *breathing...was...y'know, exhaling in pain. And when she had the gas and air – it just made it sound **so horrible**. So like, sort of like... (demonstrates – a high, long exclamation of pain as breathes out) You know, but through a tube, so it sounded more like *metallic*...*

Parents' interview, Ricky, 1st baby

This study found that the midwife's familiarity with the landscape of birth, her calm manner and confidence as she fulfils her role, combined with explanations and information when offered, helped – in part - to orientate the father. By these means she taught the father about birth in practical ways that are very different from the theoretical preparation offered at antenatal classes.

Midwives did offer explanations and information to fathers and some invited questions, on occasion. However, most fathers appeared reluctant to ask questions of the midwife. They saw her priority as caring for their partner.

[Question 4]

How can midwives help fathers to learn 'on the job'?

The role of the midwife is highly complex. The presence in the birth environment of fathers and partners is a relatively recent development and means that the midwife's role has expanded beyond the historic definition of 'with woman'. Balancing the needs of the woman's partner with the midwife's core role of caring for the mother and baby places demands on her skills and ingenuity.

Fathers recognised midwives' skills in both assessing what is happening in the 'here and now' and using their experience to scan the road ahead and anticipate likely events and timescales:

I was *pretty sure* Shona [midwife] had already made her *mind* up a couple of minutes advance as to what was prob'bly gonna occur *next*...

Parents' interview, Graham

Fathers expressed a desire for midwives to share their assessment of what was happening during labour: to do more 'thinking out loud' about the events that they took for granted, but which were unfamiliar to fathers. This 'sharing' would help them to understand what was happening and so to navigate the unfamiliar landscape of childbirth.

[Question 5]

In summary, this article has sought to highlight the range of ways in which fathers prepare for childbirth. It highlights that a majority of fathers may not attend ANCs, and even those who have participated may feel unprepared. It suggests a shift away from emphasising ANCs as the 'officially sanctioned' approach to childbirth preparation. It highlights the potential for strengthening the role of the midwife as 'educator' for fathers during labour. We invite midwives to reflect on the ways in which they currently explore the preparations fathers have made. We highlight that for the father, childbirth is an 'extra-ordinary' experience. Through ongoing communication during labour, and judicious 'thinking out loud', the midwife can help him to acclimatise to the unfamiliar world of childbirth and learn 'on the job' in ways that will both support his partner and enhance his own experience.

Questions (all relate to fathers, other co-parents, partners and other birth companions)

Question 1: do you record statistics on the proportion of fathers attending ANCs in your area?

Question 2: what approaches could you use to learn about fathers' assessment of the value of ANCs, before and after the birth?

Question 3: is it appropriate to ask the father about the woman's previous births? If so, how would you frame the questions?

Question 4: how could you create opportunities to encourage fathers to ask questions during labour?

Question 5: some fathers express a desire for the midwife to 'think out loud' to normalise what is, for the father, an extra-ordinary experience. What benefits and pitfalls can you foresee in this approach?

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