

1. 'It's Blue'

'Fatherhood is the best thing I ever did. It changes your perspective. You can write a book, you can make a movie, you can paint a painting, but having kids is really the most extraordinary thing I have taken on.'

Brad Pitt

If you type the phrase 'Am I ready?' into Google, the results are rather eyebrow-raising. For starters, 'Am I ready to have a dog?' is evidently much more popular than 'Am I ready to buy a house?', but in the list of frequently asked questions, the most interesting one for me comes in at number two. It's something you may well be musing right now, or perhaps you asked yourself this very question around nine months or so ago. Quite simply, 'Am I ready to have a baby?'

In short, no. Of course you're not. You don't find enough time to see all your family and friends now, so how on earth are you going to manage once you add a baby into the already chaotic mix that is your life? And that's before we even get on to how irresponsible you are. Have you got a mortgage yet? How many parenting manuals have you read? For your partner's sake, do you know your way around a breast pump? Come to think of it, you're too young to have a baby. Or too old. Finally, never mind *you* – is your wife or girlfriend really ready for the enormity of having her life

Diary of a Desperate Dad

and body utterly transformed by the arrival of a screaming, kicking, hungry newborn? Of *course* you're not ready.

The fact is, none of us is ever truly ready to father a child. You can do all the preparation you want but it still won't mean you've passed the mythical parenting test. Increasingly, people are delaying having children until later in life because they want to try to sort out every other area of their lives before a baby arrives on the scene. That makes sense a lot of the time, but we're fooling ourselves if we think we're going to eventually be able to tick the box that says 'Fully Prepared for Fatherhood'. You can offer to look after your friends' kids for the day or perhaps have your nieces or nephews to stay for the weekend, but that's worlds away from having a tiny, newborn son or daughter in your hands – and not being able to hand them back to someone else. Only when that little miracle makes his or her appearance will you finally be able to start putting all your parenting ideas into practice. However, that certainly doesn't mean it's futile to at least try to be prepared.

With all that in mind, here are my top four things you *can* do to help you get ready for the amazing experience of becoming a dad. And the first is perhaps the most important of all...

Resist the temptation to exhibit Boring Dad-to-Be Syndrome

Chances are, you've already met Boring Dad-to-Be. Before his partner was expecting a baby, his Facebook posts would be about great nights out with his friends, funny encounters on the bus or requests to sponsor him to go on a free holiday,

climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in aid of some spurious charity you've never heard of. Now, the sponsorship requests keep coming, but everything else is replaced by pictures of the scan, observations about birthing pools, photos of Mrs Boring Dad-to Be looking a bit more pregnant than she did last time and – worst of all – regular updates on how dilated she is during labour. (I genuinely once watched such an incident unfold, as it were, via Twitter. Goodness knows what the poor woman must have felt about the fact that her husband was sharing the news about what her vagina was doing with his followers – in 140 characters or less.)

The moment you discover your partner is pregnant might well be the most life-affirming, moving, tear-jerking time of your life – only to be surpassed by the day your child arrives into the world. It's something to rejoice in; but that doesn't mean you should now become one-dimensional. Plenty of your close friends and colleagues don't have children by choice, while others may want them desperately but not be able to have them. It's all too tempting to drone on about topics which may be the centre of your world, but which aren't even on the periphery of theirs.

In the whirlwind of excitement that accompanies the revelation that you're going to become a dad, the idea of parenthood can very easily become all-consuming. It's not uncommon for it to be all you and your partner end up talking about for days on end, but if it's also the sole topic of conversation with every other person in your life, there's a danger you'll end up testing their patience to the point where they avoid conversation with you, for fear that they won't be able to escape what is, essentially, a one-way discussion.

Diary of a Desperate Dad

It's worth pointing out that, although the arrival of a baby will definitely change your life in the most amazing way, you're not about to become a completely different person. Too many parenting books, especially those written for dads, seem to want to perpetuate the myth that the birth of a child will result in you having absolutely no social life whatsoever. That's just not true: long-term, it's perfectly possible to be a happy, caring parent who doesn't spend all their spare time cleaning up baby sick or sterilising a set of bottles. Invest in your friendships with those who don't have kids just as much as with those who do, because after the mad hiatus that follows the birth, chances are you and your partner will be incredibly grateful to still have people in your life who remember what makes you tick.

Of course, you'd hope your friends and family would be interested in your news and lots of them will want to know more about it as the due date approaches. Just make sure that, along the way, you don't forget to ask them about how they are too. And ultimately, you should never, ever, think it normal to discuss your partner's labia with them – especially via social media.

Don't be Anti-Natal

So, you're about to become a dad, and hopefully you've worked out already that much of your life is going to change. If you're in any way organised or responsible, you might have even started to read up on pregnancy and labour online. But don't let the internet act as a replacement for real, face-to-face ante-natal classes.

A few months before our son's birth, my wife and I nervously went along to our very first ante-natal session. I'm reliably informed by some of my friends that their ante-natal debut was akin to some kind of spa day, filled with lovely facilities, delicious snacks and perfectly manicured people, presided over by a zen-like, softly-spoken midwife. Maybe that's how it works in the private sector, but on the good old NHS we made do with a small room at the GP's surgery, a friendly but firm midwife and a packet of HobNobs to share around the group. Between those four walls, we encountered a real mixture of south London life, all of us united by the fact that, in a few months' time, we might well be bumping into each other in the same delivery suite.

Ante-natal classes are a fantastic opportunity to learn about what you're actually letting yourself in for. They're also guaranteed to provide you with some memories for life, whether by making friends with the people sitting next to you or having an embarrassing experience with a fake breast. In our case, it was the latter: during the session on breastfeeding, our midwife felt compelled to talk in some detail about exactly how the baby 'attaches to the teat' (after you've heard that phrase a couple of times, it may take a little while before you're able look at your partner's breasts in the same way again). One of the nuggets of information she shared was that 'often, even if the nipple is inverted, the baby can still attach'. Then, in an act of brazen forthrightness, she enquired as to whether any of the women present had inverted nipples, even asking them to raise a hand if so. Not surprisingly, all hands remained clasped and eye contact was resolutely avoided. Not to be put off, like a conjurer in

Diary of a Desperate Dad

a circus the midwife then pulled the cord underneath her plastic boob, causing the fake nipple to magically invert.

Encounters like that are certainly memorable, but the ante-natal classes were also a useful time to focus on exactly what we would be going through in the labour ward. And I say 'we' quite deliberately. It's blindingly obvious that giving birth is both traumatic and exhausting for the woman whose responsibility it is to bring a new life into the world, but I don't think it's unreasonable to acknowledge that it can be draining for men too. Two of my three children have been delivered in theatre, the first by emergency caesarian and the second through the use of forceps and a ventouse (a sort of massive plunger, which looks like it should belong next to a huge toilet). During my wife's first labour, we ended up going to hospital three different times and the whole process lasted for 48 hours. I was tired, worried and hyper-emotional, and could only stand by and watch as the woman I loved went through something completely alien to her. But one of the main comforts for both of us was that our ante-natal midwife had mentioned most of these things to us in advance. At the very least, this meant we knew that what was happening wasn't in any way unusual.

Presume your partner knows best

If ever there was a time to veer towards agreeing with your other half, the period leading up the birth of your child is surely it. One of my most obvious mistakes during my wife's first pregnancy was to question her cravings. When, at the height of summer, she requested a large chicken pie, a packet

of sausage rolls and a tin of Heinz tomato soup, I made the mistake of attempting to reason with her. I embarked on an explanation of the benefits of a more balanced diet and the importance of five fruit and veg a day for the sake of her and our unborn child. As I continued to question her sudden appetite for processed meat, she became increasingly puce with rage. Finally, at my ill-judged suggestion that perhaps she'd prefer a fresh smoothie and some grapes, she gave me one of 'those' looks (she's a teacher and can stare with the best of them) and spat through clenched teeth: 'I. JUST. NEED. SOME. PASTRY. Okay?'

I was so eager to make sure we were doing the right thing, I forgot to acknowledge that, ultimately, she knew best about her own pregnancy. All too often, couples coo 'WE'RE pregnant'; there's a nice sentiment there about this being something you're in together, but ultimately there's only one person carrying that baby – and if she says she needs a high-stodge ready-meal pie, she should not be challenged.

It's not just my own approach to my heavily pregnant wife that has sometimes been misguided, though. Prior to the birth of all three of our children, I've regularly been taken aback by how complete strangers reckon it's completely normal to invade her personal space. For some reason, certain people, especially female pensioners, seem to think it acceptable to approach a pregnant lady, slap their hand on her belly and declare to all within earshot that 'Oh yes, definitely a girl – you're carrying that one *very* low'. Inappropriate touching is suddenly deemed to be allowed, in a way that can be invasive and unwelcome. Be ready to remove your

Diary of a Desperate Dad

pregnant partner from such a situation at speed, or you may end up stuck between two very indignant women.

Reflecting back on the months leading up to the birth of my three children, I think it's fair to say that my most misguided moment of all came when I stupidly insisted on helping my wife with what, for the purposes of taste and decency, I shall simply refer to as 'the trim'. As your partner reaches the late stage of her pregnancy, she'll no longer have an unimpeded view of the area between her stomach and her toes. And if she's anything like my wife, she may well want to remain neatly trimmed – especially as any number of midwives and medics will be paying close attention to that part of her body in a matter of days. But take it from me: do not offer to assist with keeping everything neat and tidy down there. What's more, if you choose to ignore my sensible advice and put yourself forward for this task and she declines, you should just leave it at that. Under no circumstances should you insist on helping and leave her looking like she's been given a pubic haircut by a tipsy trainee hairdresser. Above all, you should certainly not end up sharing the tale at the pub later that evening (another indisputable demonstration of my inadequacies as a husband, which my wife still points out on a regular basis). Slightly delirious about the prospect of imminent fatherhood, I was chatting away to my friends about our experiences so far in the run-up to our first child's birth, and somehow found myself referring to my new-found topiary skills. In hindsight, this was never going to go down well at home, and to say that my mates were the model of *indiscretion* afterwards would be an extreme form of understatement.