

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, looking down at a newborn baby he is holding. The baby is wearing a white onesie and is lying on its back. The man's hands are gently cradling the baby's head and body. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

»» A Dad's
GUIDE TO
Giving
Birth

Top tips from experts and regular guys like you who've been there.

BY STACY WHITMAN

Okay, guys: Suffice it to say that most of you will never know what it's like to have your belly stretch to the size of a large watermelon. You will never know what it's like to be karate chopped by a tiny being that's living inside of you. And you will likely never be faced with the incomprehensible task of pushing a football-sized object through your nether region. But that doesn't mean you can't play the important role of wingman in the birth of your baby.

Several decades ago, the typical American father-to-be sat in a waiting room, reading, pacing or smoking cigarettes, until the doctor announced, "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" Today, the vast majority of dads are present in the delivery room, not only to witness the birth but also to provide encouragement, comfort and hands-on support to their partner. Sound like a big job? It is—and one that can be intimidating to even the most confident first-time fathers. But with a little training and a level head, you can take on the challenge and perform like a pro.

Don't worry, we're not about to throw you into the game without any coaching. To help ease your nerves and ensure that all goes as smoothly as possible, we have assembled a team of experts—including a top childbirth educator and a bunch of experienced dads—and presented their insight and advice for you here.

Get Your Head in the Game

As the saying goes, knowledge is power. So in the months before your baby's due date, make an effort to learn as much as possible about the labor and delivery process, advises Cheryl Coleman, R.N., an ICEA-certified childbirth educator at Oklahoma State University Medical Center in Tulsa. Attend childbirth classes with your partner and read any pregnancy books that you can get your hands on. While a class or book can't prepare you for every possible situation, "it can give you an idea of what to expect and help you understand when and how to best support your partner," explains Jeff Lucia of Fallbrook, Calif., who was by his wife's side for the births of their three children.

As the big day approaches, sit down and talk to your partner about how she'd like to see things play out in the delivery room. Is there anything in particular she's worried about? What can you do to help make things easier or more comfortable? How does she feel about getting an epidural or some form of

pain relief? While she may not have all the answers, she may be able to clue you in to what's important to her, so you can be certain her wishes are followed.

At the same time, be sure to discuss any anxieties that you're experiencing as well. Like many expectant dads, you may be concerned that you won't know what to do, something will go wrong during the delivery, the baby won't be healthy or you won't be able to handle seeing your partner in pain. Or maybe you're scared to death of hospitals or get queasy at the sight of blood. Remember: There's nothing to be embarrassed about. So don't hold back! Just opening up about your fears should help alleviate them.

What if you're not entirely sure that you want to take on the job of birth coach, or you'd prefer not to participate in every single aspect of labor and delivery? Now's the time to speak up. "Not all dads feel comfortable providing full support and care," Coleman explains. "Sometimes they just want to be the hand-holder. That's fine as long as the mom isn't expecting more from him." So talk to each other about what your role will be to make sure that you're on the same page. One

good option might be to have a doula on hand to offer suggestions and act as a backup, allowing you to participate in the labor process at any level you choose at any given time.

Be a Team Player

Her water has broken or contractions have started. Now what? Whatever happens, it's important to stay calm, comforting and reassuring, advises Jason Keim of Vancouver, Wash., who coached his wife through the birth of their 9-month-old son. By keeping your cool and soothing her fears, you'll make it a more pleasant experience and you could help reduce the amount of pain she suffers both during childbirth and in the postpartum period, according to a recent study published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*. The study examined moms who had C-sections, but chances are the same would be true of a vaginal delivery.

During early labor, experts recommend using the power of distraction to help pass the time and minimize her discomfort.

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Try playing catch with a squishy ball, playing a trivia game, telling jokes and stories, watching movies, rubbing her back or feet, or going for walks. Use a digital watch to time her contractions, and if she's in pain, count or breathe along with her. Periodically ask if she needs anything, or try to read her signals and act accordingly. Note: Now is not the time to complain about your aching back or turn on the TV to check the score of the big game. "Support should be defined by what the mom-to-be wants and feels," Lucia says. "Sometimes just being there and listening is all that's necessary."

Go With the Flow

Since it's impossible to predict how labor and delivery will unfold, you'll need to be flexible and ready to shift gears at any moment. "Going in, some dads want to be told exactly what to do and when and how to do it, and you just can't give that information," Coleman says. "The childbirth process is different for every single person." Lucia adds: "Have a game plan, but be prepared to adapt it, depending on how things go."

When you arrive at the hospital, introduce yourself to the staff and get to know their names. "Go in expecting that

you'll have to speak at some point, and do it in a polite, constructive, non-confrontational way," Lucia advises. "The hospital staff is in a position to help out, and you're not going to make friends if you act demanding or bossy." When you do need to make a request or voice a concern, do it out of earshot of your partner. "She has enough other things to focus on, so have the conversation in the hallway or somewhere that she doesn't have to be part of it," Lucia says. "Just knowing that you're handling things

SHOULD YOU SIT IT OUT *on the bench?*

While some of you wouldn't dream of missing your baby's birth, others may dread the thought of participating in the labor and delivery process. If you've already lost several pounds of sweat simply contemplating it, have a heart-to-heart with your partner. If you're acting restless or constantly finding excuses to duck out of the delivery room, it may be better for you to stay away and let her get someone else—such as her mother, her sister, a close friend or a doula—to help out. Keep in mind: Even if you don't serve as birth coach, there are lots of other ways that you can support your partner—including caring for her and the baby after the delivery and once you're home from the hospital.

six tips from the trenches» *Here, veteran birth coaches sound off:*

- » **“Check your watch.** As your partner’s due date approaches, make sure you have a good digital watch with a timer and light, so you can monitor her contractions, even in the middle of the night.” —Jason, Vancouver, Wash.
- » **“Bring snacks and water.** You’ll need nourishment for energy and to keep you thinking clearly—and you may not have time to run to the hospital cafeteria for a hot meal.” —Jeff, Fallbrook, Calif.
- » **“Say cheese!** Pack a camera or camcorder so you can capture your baby’s first moments on film.” —Buffalo, Hailey, Idaho
- » **“Hold her hand.** It sounds so simple, but a little physical contact can go a long way in easing her apprehension.” —Steve, Cleveland, Ohio
- » **“Don’t take things personally.** If your partner isn’t receptive to your back rub or snaps at you to stop talking, don’t get bent out of shape. Instead, try a different tactic or ask her what she needs.” —David, Portland, Ore.
- » **“Trust your gut.** Don’t worry that you won’t know what to do: When the time comes, your instincts will guide you.” —John, Bernardsville, N.J.



several more hours of labor left. “I left the decision completely up to her, but let her know that I supported her either way.”

Work Through the Pain

Remember: Everyone processes pain differently. So let your partner labor in her own way, whether it means not making a peep or screaming so loudly that she shatters a light bulb. “This is her work, and you need to let her work, even if you’re not entirely comfortable with it,” Coleman explains.

Seeing someone that you love in pain is bound to be unnerving. But as upsetting as it is, remember that “women have been having babies for thousands of years,” says Steve Hopkins of Cleveland, Ohio, who participated in the birth of his two sons. “She’ll get through it. And when you look back on it, it really is a short period of time.” Adds David Galluzo, the father of 1-year-old twins: “It’s really hard to watch your wife going through pain, but the end result is a good one.” So take a deep breath and focus on helping in any way you can, whether it’s by feeding her ice chips or simply holding her hand.

and she doesn’t have to worry can be extremely helpful.”

Taking charge is one thing—being overbearing is another. So walk a fine line between being supportive and pushy when it comes to your partner as well. Take it from Jason Keim. In the weeks leading up to his wife’s due date, she made it clear she wanted “a 100-percent natural birth.” But a few hours into labor, she was in agony. Rather than trying to talk her into getting an epidural, Jason simply reminded her that there was no shame in it and that she might have

And in those moments when you’re standing around feeling powerless, remember that your presence alone is incredibly helpful to your partner. “Even if you feel like you can’t do much to help, it’s comforting for her to have you in the room,” Coleman explains. In the end, she’ll really appreciate that you were there, and chances are, so will you. “Witnessing the physical birth was truly the most amazing thing I’ve ever done,” Galluzo says. “I wouldn’t have missed the experience for the world.” ■