

Give dads a chance

When Anna Machin discovered how little is known about fatherhood, she decided to change that



COLIN KITCHEN

THE birth of Anna Machin's first child didn't go to plan. "Unfortunately, I suffered a haemorrhage, and it was a bit touch and go for a time," she recalls. Her newborn daughter was shuttled off for specialist care, while Machin herself, who had passed out, received emergency attention. "I didn't really see anything, whereas my poor husband, who was in the room, saw everything – blood flowing everywhere, about 30 members of staff rushing around, alarms going off... it was very, very dramatic."

Afterwards, Machin was offered support and counselling. But no such offer was extended to her shaken husband. "And, actually, he was the one who needed it," she says. This was evident when, even a year later, he was unable to talk about the birth, or even think about it, without crying.

Overlooking fathers in this way is harmful to these men and their families, says Machin, who is an anthropologist at the University of Oxford. "It struck me as unfair," she says.

Close relationships, between parents and children, lovers or friends, are Machin's specialist subject. So back at work after her daughter's birth, her thoughts turned to new fathers. Like any academic, she began by digging through the research.

Yet while there was plenty to be found on mothers, Machin was amazed to find barely any research on fatherhood. The little there was seemed to focus on the negative impact of teenage or absent fathers. "There was nothing, absolutely nothing, about your average, standard dad who is around – divorced or not – who still sees his children and invests in them."

In fact, there was virtually no recognition of fatherhood as something that affected men, let alone their families. "We thought men just floated through these experiences, and that becoming a father was not a biological phenomenon at all," says Machin. "You could read things 10 years ago that literally denied that a father had any input into their child's development. That's not only a sadness for a father, but it's a sadness for the family and the child, because we

need to understand this important figure.”

Machin set out to put things right. She launched a study following soon-to-be fathers from about three months before birth until their child was 6 months old. Her plan was to change the mostly negative narrative on fatherhood, and shift focus onto the hugely positive role a father can have. She had no problem recruiting dads: “They were so grateful that someone was trying to understand this amazing life change.”

That’s partly because fathers’ roles have been changing. With both parents often going to work, parenting is becoming more of a joint enterprise. And where once a female relative might have been around to help a new mother, today couples often live far from extended families. “Dad is actually the one who has to catch the baby, essentially,” Machin says.

Ten years on, we now know that men undergo significant biological changes with fatherhood. And although much of the research so far has looked at heterosexual, nuclear families, it seems many of the findings apply to anyone in a father role.

Getting hormonal

Surprisingly, some of the changes can happen before a baby is even born. Men who live with their pregnant partners seem to sync up with them hormonally – and can start to experience hikes of the “love hormone” oxytocin just as their partners do. “It seems to have something to do with bonding the couple closely so that they’re ready,” Machin says.

Then, once the baby arrives, a man can expect his testosterone levels to nosedive. This change is permanent. “It might go up a little bit but it will never, ever return to where it was before he became a father,” says Machin. That’s explained by evolution, she says. We are one of only a handful of species with involved fathers, and the only ape. In other words, human dads are something of an evolutionary quirk. The fall in testosterone helps a man fulfil this new role.

Testosterone motivates a man to have as many sexual relationships as possible, Machin says. “When you become a father, your child needs you to stick around for their successful development, so that high level of testosterone is not such a great thing to have.” And the drop happens to all dads, whether they stick around or not.

For our ancestors, the father role would probably have focused on the physical survival of the offspring. Today, fathers seem to hold unique importance in contributing

DADDY DOWNSIDES

At some point during pregnancy or after giving birth, between 10 and 20 per cent of women will develop depression. Less well known is that around 10 per cent of fathers can be affected too, says Anna Machin.

“It is a major problem, and we’re still trying to understand it,” she says, but the condition is under-acknowledged in men. “There are still no independent diagnostic tools for depression in fathers, and there need to be.” Symptoms in men differ from those in women, and include more anxiety and aggression. Also, Machin says, men tend to withdraw from the family and self-medicate with drugs and alcohol to a greater extent. “We know this because it is a constant theme across the now-quite-numerous studies that have recorded perinatal depression in men.”

Until recently, the prevailing theory was that, because men don’t experience the hormonal changes that women do, they couldn’t develop depression, says Machin. But men are affected by other hormonal changes. A man’s testosterone level drops once he becomes a father, for example. “Testosterone is a protector against depression, so if you have a particularly big drop when you become a dad, then you are at risk,” says Machin.

A man’s well-being can be affected before his baby is born, too. Take, for example, Couvade syndrome, sometimes called sympathetic pregnancy. It is a mysterious set of ailments sometimes experienced by male partners of pregnant women. “Men who have it seem to be experiencing some sort of reaction to their partner’s pregnancy,” says Machin. “It’s generally being very tired, possibly putting on weight and having digestive issues. Bizarrely, toothache is one of the symptoms, and you get a lot of headaches and things like that.”

What really interests Machin as an anthropologist is that Couvade syndrome seems to appear only in industrialised countries. No one yet knows exactly what causes it, but she believes it is the result of fathers having a diminished role in such societies (see main story).

It is crucial that dads are recognised as being vulnerable to health problems, and that they are offered support through the pregnancy and beyond, says Machin. That’s all the more important given that fathers have an impact on their child’s development. “I think if we were more inclusive and placed more value on the fathers in our society, you would see less Couvade and poor mental health in fathers.”

Recognition of a father’s role helps the development of the child



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