

# Supporting diverse fathers

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## What do dads want?

Fathers, like mothers, are a very diverse group, whose communication needs, styles and preferences may vary according to a range of factors, including their age, socio-economic circumstances, education level, English language ability, working patterns, ethnic and cultural background, and any disabilities.

Most fathers you meet will be focused on making sure their partner gets the support she needs, rather than on asking for help themselves. But most will welcome being treated as a key player in their baby's arrival into the world: a supporter for their partner but also a parent in their own right.

Although they don't go through the same physical journey as women, the transition to fatherhood can be emotionally challenging for men. It makes them think in new ways about who they are, their domestic and other roles, their changing relationships, and their longer-term futures, and is a time when many men reflect on how they themselves were fathered.

Useful papers about fathers' experiences of support in the perinatal period include:

- Hodgson S, Painter J, Kilby L, Hirst J. (2021). [The Experiences of First-Time Fathers in Perinatal Services: Present but Invisible](#). *Healthcare* (Basel). 2021 Feb 3;9(2):161<sup>1</sup>
- Dayton, C. J., Buczkowski, R., Muzik, M., Goletz, J., Hicks, L., Walsh, T. B., & Bocknek, E. L. (2016). [Expectant Fathers' Beliefs and Expectations about Fathering as They Prepare to Parent a New Infant](#). *Social Work Research*, 40(4), 225–236
- Hodkinson, P., Das, R. (2021). [Repertoires of Illegitimacy](#). In: *New Fathers, Mental Health and Digital Communication*. Palgrave Pivot, Cham.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> doi: 10.3390/healthcare9020161

<sup>2</sup> [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66482-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66482-4_2)

Please also listen to our Engaging Dads podcasts 1, 2, 3 and 4 – and watch the short video recorded for us by Elliott Rae, founder of the Music Football Fatherhood website, sharing ideas about how maternity staff can best respond to dads. These are all available from the [Engaging Dads padlet](#).

## What can maternity staff do?

Recognising and valuing men's emotional journeys can help you do a really good job of engaging fathers.

In our Engaging Dads Father Pathway we've suggested some simple ways to 'bring fathers in' to your appointments with expectant mothers: inviting fathers to appointments, looking them in the eye, smiling at them and asking how they are, for example.

As a busy midwife, you won't have time to explore and meet all fathers' support needs yourself, but these simple approaches can make a big difference to how involved and supported fathers feel.

Asking how a father is feeling could also be an important first step towards identifying whether he might benefit from additional support and/or a referral to specialist services (for example around their mental health, smoking and drugs and alcohol), thus supporting maternal and infant outcomes.

Even one brief conversation might be enough to signpost fathers to information and support focused on helping them navigate their transition to fatherhood. We've suggested some useful resources you could explore and/or recommend below.

## Websites / online communities for fathers

- [Dadsnet](#)
- [Dad Info](#)
- [Music Football Fatherhood](#)
- [Dadvengers](#)
- [Dadlasoul](#)

## Virtual resources

[Baby Buddy](#) – an app with personalised daily information for fathers, written by the Fatherhood Institute.

Becoming Dad – a 68-page guide for fathers, written by the Fatherhood Institute in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation. [Available on our website]

[Digi-Dad](#) – an online e-learning platform for fathers, created by young fathers from the North East Young Dads and Lads project.

## Being inclusive

Below we highlight some ‘types’ of father who may face particular challenges and/or need targeted, additional support. In each case we have highlighted relevant briefings and resources, to help you shape your approach to such fathers.

### **Young fathers**

North East Young Dads and Lads works with young fathers in the north-east of England. It has developed this [film](#) where young dads reflect on their experiences in their own words, and this [toolkit](#) to help midwives and other practitioners ‘think dad’.

The Following Young Fathers project has produced a range of briefings and other resources, based on its research. Find out more [here](#).

### **Gay / bisexual / trans fathers**

Research suggests that fathers in these categories often experience stigma and report a lack of support in their journeys to fatherhood. Simple changes to the language you use, and openness to the variety of LGBTQ+ family structures, can help you be more inclusive.

For a review of evidence, and ideas for how to support such fathers, see:

- Davies, J. (2019). Double exclusion: How to engage with and support gay fathers. *International Journal of Birth and Prenatal Education*, Volume 7 Issue 1

- Stonewall's *Guide for Gay Dads* (2010) is no longer available on the organisation's website, but is available from the British Library [here](#)

### **Fathers with disabilities**

There is a lack of research about, and support for, fathers with disabilities. Here are some relevant papers to help you think about how to provide inclusive support:

- Powell, Robyn and Andrews, Erin and Ayers, Kara, [Becoming a Disabled Parent: Eliminating Access Barriers to Health Care Before, During, and after Pregnancy](#) (March 19, 2021). *96 Tulane Law Review* (2022)
- Brown HK, Tarasoff LA, Welsh K, Proulx L, and Lunskey Y. (2022) [Pregnancy and Postpartum Care: Resource for Parents with Disabilities](#). Ontario: Disability and Pregnancy Study and in collaboration with the Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health
- Kilkey, M. and H. Clarke (2010). "Disabled men and fathering: opportunities and constraints." *Community, Work & Family* 13 (2): 127-146

### **Fathers of colour**

Research suggests that Black fathers and fathers from other ethnically and/or culturally minoritized groups can find health services hostile and unwelcoming. Check out our Engaging Dads Black Fathers PDF for key points about Black fathers' experiences and the challenges they face, with references (available on our website's resources section, under 'recognising and supporting diverse fathers').

[Dope Black Dads](#) is an advocacy organisation working to raise awareness and counter negative stereotypes about black fathers.

There is a lack of research about, and targeted support for, British Asian fathers and fathers from other minority ethnic groups.

A 2009 paper by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explored parenting beliefs and practices among fathers from 29 'ordinary' two-parent families living in non-affluent neighbourhoods from four ethnic groups: White British, Black African, Black Caribbean and Pakistani. Overall, more

similarities than differences were found between the groups in fathers' behaviours, attitudes and aspirations, and the challenges they face. You can read the paper [here](#).

Acacia, a mental health support organisation, has produced multilingual resources and a list of useful links, to help professionals address perinatal mental health issues among black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds, which can be accessed [here](#), although there is nothing specifically targeted at fathers.