

February 5, 2008

THE FEARS OF FATHERHOOD

All new parents worry, but some concerns are more typical of dads

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Section: Parenting

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Great Kills resident Adam Pollack admits he had reservations about how well he would be able to care for his daughter, Avani Lily, as a newborn.

"I was always good around kids, but I was never really around a baby for a long period of time. If I was to hold one of my friend's babies, it was easy because once the baby started to cry, I would just give the baby back to the parent," he said of his experiences before becoming a dad.

When Avani was born 11 months ago, Pollack felt overwhelmed.

"My wife and I felt like two new parents of a baby that didn't come with directions, and yet it's up to us to figure out what to do," Pollack recalled. "In the beginning, I was a very nervous and neurotic dad, and I know I drove my wife a bit crazy."

The prospect of becoming a new parent, whether you're a man or a woman, is likely to stir up apprehensive feelings.

The responsibilities associated with the 24/7 job are daunting and can cause any new mom or dad to stress and worry. However, men - who tend to have less experience with babies before becoming a parent than women - typically have a harder time adjusting and encounter specific fears.

"Many fathers feel out of place in this role and question if they even belong in the parenting role," said Dr. Erik Fisher, author of "The Art of Empowered Parenting: The Manual You Wish Your Kids Came With" (Ovation Books, October 2007).

"Classically, the 'softer side' of parenting and child care has not been the man's job," he said. "Most men probably don't remember their own dads changing diapers or feeding or singing to them."

Although men are far more hands-on with their Daddy duties than in previous generations, they still face lingering fears. Some worry how their newborns will impact their financial status, others about their relationships with their wives. Many simply question whether they'll be a "good" dad and be able to get their hands "dirty" changing

diapers and soothing a crying baby.

"My biggest fears revolved around how to take care of my daughter without either hurting her or worrying that I would be a bad father," said Josh Cohen, formerly of Oakwood, and now residing in Brooklyn with his wife and 1-month-old daughter, Hailey.

"I can vividly remember the first night she started crying and how I worried that she was in pain and tried to figure out how to care for her."

According to Dr. Fisher, fear is what causes some dads to feel they need to appear strong and stand back while their wives hold and rock their children.

"Men do not like to feel fear and failure, so they avoid the things that may result in feeling these emotions," he said, noting often they try to hide their anxiety with "machismo."

"But, it is not a sign of strength to avoid caring for your child," he said. "It takes more courage to admit to fear and insecurity, than it does to act like you don't feel it at all."

Men have often felt uncomfortable showing love in a demonstrative way, seeing it as a sign of weakness or vulnerability. However, to establish a secure bond with their kids, Dr. Fisher says new fathers can't be afraid to show their newborns love, even from the first days of their lives.

IN THE DELIVERY ROOM

While New Springville resident Andres Munoz initially experienced a bit of anxiety about being a new dad to his 2-month-old son, Lucas, it was tempered by the emotional and physical preparations he and his wife made prior to their newborn's arrival.

"We'd been married for 10 years, were stable financially and had enough time for our mindset to gradually adjust to the life-changing event that was about to occur," he said.

The main fear he said he had had to do with the labor and delivery process. "I wasn't sure what to expect and even though I wanted to help my wife in any way I could, I wasn't sure how to."

A lot of men have this particular fear, say Leslie Potenciano and Katherine Lewis, physician assistants in the obstetrics and gynecology department at Richmond University Medical Center. As co-owners of Ten Toes of Staten Island, a New Dorp-based company that provides comprehensive childbirth classes, the women help expectant fathers deal with their concerns.

"In our childbirth class, we've seen men that are so nervous about being a father, that they can't even be there for the wife as her coach," said Ms. Potenciano. "In some cases, these new fathers either can't bear to see their wives in pain and/or they can't handle the sight of blood."

She said the classes prove to be a big help.

"In my experience, coaches and fathers who participate in our prenatal class are calmer during the labor experience," Ms. Potenciano noted. "Once new dads feel a sense of control and understanding about the ultimately unknown territory of labor and delivery, they get a better handle on the idea of fatherhood."

Another class she recommends to help imbue new fathers with a sense of confidence is "What to Do Your First 24 Hours Home Alone," which provides both moms and dads with an opportunity to practice diapering, swaddling and bathing, on anatomically correct dolls.

Munoz credits the Ten! Toes' childbirth class as a real life-saver.

"When my wife eventually went into labor, we felt a lot more comfortable and relaxed because we knew what to expect and what to do."

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Many new fathers also struggle with financial fears.

Cohen says he was anxious about his fiscal future with a baby on board and subsequently the couple has put off a lot of things to make it work financially.

"We didn't buy a new car and we decided to rent a bigger apartment rather than buy a house or co-op, so we'd have a cushion for the unknown costs," he noted.

As an 11-month veteran of this "baby thing," Pollack admits having Avani has forced him and his wife, Nadia, to make changes to their finances.

"I wasn't sure if we were going to be able to make it financially, but you find ways to make adjustments to your life," said Pollack. "It was very scary at first, but you find ways to make it work."

For instance, the couple stopped! going out to dinner every weekend and started cutting coupons! . Instead of buying a new outfit or the latest gadget, they put that money away.

Pollack is also pretty honest about the toll having a newborn has had on his relationship with his wife.

"After the baby was born our relationship was a bit rocky," he admitted. "We weren't as close or as affectionate as we were before the baby was born, but as time went by, the more comfortable I became with the baby, the better our relationship became.

"Of course," he added, "we don't get as much alone time as we did before Avani was born, but we always find time to talk, laugh and, yes, even have sex with each other."

He said, "One benefit that we do have is that Nadia's mom is there for us when we just need to be alone with each other."

According to Dr. Fisher, every expectant or new dad needs to channel his inner power and remind himself he can do a good job.

"Know that you have the power in you to be a good parent and that you don't need to have all the answers,! " he said. After all, "infants don't know how to reject people; they just want to feel safe, loved and secure."

Mommy, Daddy, get prepared

Classes held at Ten Toes of Staten Island can help new parents plan for their baby's arrival.

What

Childbirth education classes, everything from "Breastfeeding 101" to "What to Do the First 24 Hours Home Alone."

Who

Leslie Potenciano and Katherine Lewis, physican assistants in the obstetrics and gynecology department at Richmond University Medical Center, teach the classes.

Where

322 New Dorp Lane.

Information

718-836-8637.

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Caption:

Andres Munoz holds his 2-month-old son, Lucas. The New Springville resident admitted one of his biggest fears concerning becoming a new parent was how he'd react in the delivery room.

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/HILTON FLORES

Adam Pollack kisses the hand of his 11-month-old daughter, Avani Lily, in their Great Kills home. "In the beginning, I was a very nervous and neurotic dad, and I know I drove my wife a bit crazy," Pollack admits.

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