BABIES AND TODDLERS FOR MEN

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From Newborn to Nursery

Mark Woods

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To Sarah, Stan and little Louis, with all my love

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About the author

Mark Woods has covered national and international stories for the UK's premier news agency, the Press Association; helped to bring a multimillion pound TV company to its knees and is now a writer for the charity Comic Relief.

He lives in south west London with his wife Sarah and sons Stanley and Louis.

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Introduction

Let's not beat about the bush: being a father is the best, most important, most profound thing you'll ever do during your time on the planet.

Yes – you might be a big achiever at work, you might be a formidable competitor on the sports field, or you may even consider yourself pretty special when it comes to sudoku.

Laudable and impressive achievements one and all.

But when it comes to making a difference, to leaving your mark during your relatively brief sojourn on our green and pleasant planet, there can be only one show in town. That's your responsibility to – and influence on – the little people you help to bring into being.

As befits something of such magnitude and gravitas, fatherhood comes with a complete working set of highs and lows, triumphs and tragedies, and moments of illumination and despair.

You see, being a father is many things, but anticlimactic isn't one of them.

You can feel intense irritation and impatience before breakfast, frustration and despondency by lunch and an acute sense that you need to earn 37 times more than you do now just after tea.

Threading through all this high emotion will be a sense of fatigue which would be impressive in its tenacity, if it didn't make you feel so utterly wretched.

After the passionate intensity of the conception, the taut anticipation of the pregnancy and the all-round gobsmackingness of the birth, you'd think that with the hard work over you and your partner could settle down to bringing up junior in an idyllic domestic setting.

But even before we join the dad club we are well aware that's garbage.

We've heard the rowing parents in Sainsbury's; we've seen the new dads at work, dragging themselves in like the living dead with a tie on. We've even endured meals while our friends, our once placid and composed friends, have conducted a frantic debate over a nappy full of green poo.

All that and much more will happen to you too – guaranteed.

But it's the things you weren't expecting about parenthood that really take your breath away. Your moments of joy, pride and unbridled love for your little boy or girl go completely unnoticed by the outside world, because they take place in the very deepest part of your chest.

My eldest son saw me coming down the stairs one morning wearing the same blue checked shirt I've been trying to pass off as 'smart' for almost a decade. He looked up and said 'You look nice, Daddy' before skipping off into the kitchen on the hunt for more Marmite on toast.

It doesn't sound much, I know, but it did me all ends up, just like it did the last time he said it. That's not because I knew he'd probably have the last of the Marmite. It's because the minute he and every other

child on the planet is born they have their parents in such an emotional half-nelson that at any moment they can render you emotionally incapacitated in quite spectacular fashion.

And that is what's at the heart of all that's great about being a parent in general and a father in particular. No matter how busy, how stressed, or how uptight you might be, you can't fail to have your emotions yanked to the surface at regular intervals. Your child will remind you that you're not only well and truly alive, but that a part of you is alive in someone else now, too.

It's not always lovely, fluffy, gooey emotion that's invoked. When your new-born baby gets her first cold you'll be gripped by a fear the like of which you've yet to experience. She'll snuffle and snort her way through the night, seeming to struggle for each breath.

When your toddler almost wanders out of your momentarily open front door, you will scream like a big girl's blouse before running after them at light speed. Then you will also play the moment over in your head a million times later that night, envisaging the horrors that could have occurred had they taken a few steps more.

Then, when you refuse a request to build the fourth den of the day because you have to check your BlackBerry, you can *taste* the guilt in the roof of your mouth.

And if you lose sight of your little one in a park or shop, even for no more than a second, you will feel every single organ in your body forming orderly queues and preparing to evacuate using both your major orifices.

It's like being possessed.

In a good way.

They don't know or care – they are just kids, playing and being and doing. The only time they will truly know is when they have children of their own and the whole thing will start all over again.

You might not be bitten by this virulent bug straight away, mind you. It may take a little while for evolution to do its thing and turn you into a protector, a provider and a nurturer. But once you are, you are in for life, so you might as well throw yourself at it and enjoy it. You'll *never* feel as important, as worthwhile and as uplifted.

Helping you enjoy your newly found fatherhood is essentially what this book, in its own small way, is trying to do.

There are peaks and troughs aplenty awaiting you over the next few years. Through a combination of research, personal experience (also known as 'mistakes') and speaking to a whole army of new dads I hope to arm you with a decent smattering of information and intelligence on what to expect and what to do when it happens.

The first chapter looks at the time your new little family will spend in hospital before coming home. From then on, each section focusses on a period in your child's life, from the moment she's born to her third birthday.

Sprinkled throughout will be words of wisdom, wonderment and woeful cock-ups from dads who have been there before and lived to tell the tale.

The fact that you are interested enough to read this book means that you want to be a dad who takes an active role in the upbringing of your children. This is a decision that will reward you hugely in the years to come. It can help you to become more empathetic, emotionally literate and even-handed, as you learn from your offspring as much as they learn from you.

Fatherhood can also expose your weaknesses and the more unattractive sides to your personality, and it will certainly tax you physically and mentally in ways you'd not dreamed possible.

That's why we will keep a close eye on how you might be feeling at different stages too, how you're changing as a person and how to begin to get your head around it all.

Not everything that happens in the first three years of your child's life is covered here. But rest assured that the big, juicy, major milestones are all there to for you to read about in one go – or return to when the time is right.

Talking of timing, small children don't give one fig for it. If something is meant to happen in your child's development at a certain time, you and your partner will come to anticipate it, and may get more than a touch vexed if it's late.

'She's not got any teeth yet, why hasn't she got any teeth yet? Next door's baby has teeth, all the babies in the NCT group have teeth, I'm sure mum said I had teeth by now – TEEEEEEEETTTTTHHHH.'

That kind of thing.

So please don't take the timings in this book as a cast iron barometer of exactly when something should sprout or move or change because, unfortunately, uniformity and clockwatching aren't on your tot's agenda whatsoever.

If you are worried about anything to do with your child, seek medical advice as soon as you can. You'll generally find that the entire medical profession display a sense of urgency and focus where treating infants is concerned – in sharp contrast to the nine-hour wait in A&E you are used to after you've stood on the rake again.

There's just one more thing to say before we dive headlong into the first three months – as well as you and your baby or toddler, there's another character in this story and a mightily important one it is too.

Mum, is indeed the word.

Watching the woman you know intimately become a mother before your eyes is in turn a wondrous and disquieting thing. The unbreakable bond they can build with their new baby, the primeval intuition they often discover and the sense of selflessness they demonstrate day after day are humbling phenomena to witness.

These new skills don't come easily (and in some rare cases don't come at all). With more and more women putting burgeoning careers on hold to become mothers, the culture shock alone can take a real toll.

Being a father nowadays is as much about supporting your partner as it is about focussing on your child. So throughout this book you'll come across as much about how your partner is faring as you will about how you are. You'll find a progress report at the end of each chapter that assesses where you and your baby are at during that stage, and what your partner might be experiencing, too.

It's also worth remembering that while supermum is indeed super and while most childcare books are rightly written with her in mind, your often overlooked instincts and nurturing skills are massively important and powerful too.

Study after study has shown that the more involved a father is with his children's upbringing the happier, more stable and even more successful those youngsters become in adolescence and adulthood. Even something as seemingly minor as a father regularly taking part in their children's bathtime has been shown to have a marked impact on emotional health by the time the children reach their teenage years.

No pressure, but you have a huge part to play. To help you on your way, this is a book you can read, refer to and quote in an annoying way during the numerous debates you'll soon be having about how best to bring up your young offspring.

So, let's get cracking.

You live in exciting times my friend, and no matter how it may feel when you are pacing the landing with a screaming infant at 3.37am for the fourth night running, your child will grow up at an alarming rate. Before you know where you are you'll be wistfully reminiscing about babygrows and travel cots – OK, maybe not travel cots – but for now let's move bravely on to what happens immediately after your baby is born.

Don't worry; you're going to be great.

Housekeeping

Babies, as you no doubt know, come in two distinct types. Rather than using the hideous 'he/she' or the impersonal 'they' throughout this book in a bid to try and cover all bases I've decided to only use 'she'.

The reason for this is simple, I went with 'he' in my first book, *Pregnancy for Men*, and it only seems fair.

Also, while I've been annoyingly anal about checking and double checking my research and have also had the whole thing read and approved by consultant paediatrician Dr Jo Jones, this book isn't designed to take the place of professional medical opinion.

But you knew that anyway, didn't you?

Finally, a word on multiple births. Everything in *Babies and Toddlers for Men* is relevant to fathers of twins, triplets and more. But the chances are, if you are the father of multiples you won't have time to read a book for the next decade at least.

I take my hat, coat and odd socks off to all parents who rear more than one baby at a time. How you manage amazes the rest of us, and if this little book helps to make the task ahead of you even a smidgen easier I am very glad indeed.

YEAR 1

What happens in hospital?

This entire book could be taken up by your first three months of fatherhood.

In fact, this entire book could be taken up by your first three *days* of fatherhood, so powerful can the post-traumatic tidal wave be for all concerned.

You have your partner who, even if she has just performed the most straightforward birth ever recorded in human history, has still undergone physical and emotional upheaval on a quite massive scale.

Having come out the other side of the labour ward she isn't, as feels wholly appropriate, prescribed two weeks of recuperation on a beach, but rather handed a helpless and utterly dependent new-born baby to fathom out and keep alive.

Then there's the little one herself. Imagine for a moment, if you would, what that poor mite has just been through. She's just spent nine months lounging in the amniotic pool, her heavenly life occasionally punctuated by the odd somersault or thumb suck. Then she has, and there's no nice way of saying this, just been forced out of an unfeasibly small hole, or grabbed from above in the most undignified of fashions.

As if the method of her arrival into the world wasn't distressing enough, she's then faced with more bright lights, noise and prodding than her little mind could ever have dreamed existed.

And what about you?

You've tried to do your bit to make life easier through the pregnancy. You've desperately attempted to keep yourself together and be strong through the labour. Now the task in hand is to get to grips with fatherhood and help your new family settle in at home before you are yanked back to work after a few measly weeks.

So all in all, the three of you have had quite a time – and there's a lot you as the proud, excited, but perhaps somewhat daunted father will need to get involved with to make sure these first crucial few weeks and months are navigated as well as possible for your new family.

Before you can get started with family life at home, there will almost certainly be a little (or longer) spell in hospital for your partner and baby to negotiate.

Your part in the recovery

Around 97% of mothers in the UK give birth in hospital.[1] This section focusses on what you can expect to happen in the hours, days, or even in the thankfully rare cases where the baby needs special care, weeks before your new son or daughter can come home.

If your partner has given birth vaginally without complications, she could be back home together with your new baby within hours, at most a couple of days or so.

Given the dire call for beds in most NHS hospitals, the notion that your partner can get some rest and TLC before she is discharged to embark on motherhood is sadly often overridden by the pragmatic need for space.

Having said that, even if there were beds aplenty, your average postnatal ward isn't what you'd call relaxing. The combination of crying newborns, other new mums in turmoil and visiting relatives can combine to make a pretty hectic and unsettling environment and many new mothers can't wait to get home as soon as possible.

In many non-western cultures, once women are at home there often exists a 30 or 40-day 'confinement' – which sounds beastly and patriarchal until you realise that during that time most household activities are carried out by others so the mother and baby can recuperate.

It's also interesting that many cultures overtly and deliberately celebrate *childbirth* rather than the birth of a baby. The mother's role, efforts and well-being are seen on a par with the joy of a new arrival.

While there's tea and sympathy for new mums in our culture, there's no doubting that the star of the show is the bundle of joy in the corner. In many ways, such is the medicalisation of labour it's easy to see how that subtle but important shift happened.

Being there as much as you can for this short but sometimes stressful stay in hospital is a must. Your partner is grappling with a whole world of immediate challenges, including establishing breastfeeding; trying to figure out just when she is meant to rest; wondering what the hell to do with the *Alien*-like umbilical cord stump; or, in many cases, just coming to terms with the reality of being a mother.

Night time can be especially tough and often lonely for your partner after you've been turfed out on your ear at 10pm or so. It's a good idea to keep your mobile on overnight in case she needs to talk. Arriving, cavalry-like, as soon as you're allowed back in the morning will go down well after a tough evening. If you also come armed with something you know

she'd love to eat for breakfast you will be a very popular chap indeed. While the NHS can and often does excel on the maternity care front, it's not in any danger of winning a raft of Michelin stars any time soon.

Your partner's postnatal check involves pulse, temperature and blood pressure readings. Her midwife will check that her womb is beginning to contract to its normal size and position. After that, your partner will be able to go home. As long as she has had her first post-birth wee, that is, just to check that all is well with the piping.

If your baby was born by caesarean section, your partner will often stay in hospital for between three to five days all being well. As we will see later, once you get home, you will play a vital role in aiding her recovery from the major surgery she has just endured.

The midwife will want to be sure your partner can walk, albeit gingerly, to the toilet and once there urinate without the need for a catheter, as well as keep food and drink down without vomiting.

Told you it was major surgery.

The baby needs checking out, too, and a paediatrician or a specially trained midwife will carry out a set of remarkably thorough newborn checks before you can take your new family home.

Baby's first check-up

Your baby will be given its first test at just one minute and then again at five minutes after the birth – and you thought setting exams for seven-year-olds was tough.

The Apgar test, devised by the eponymous Dr Virginia Apgar, has been standard practice since the 1950s. The midwife will watch your baby's colour, breathing, behaviour, activity and posture, and then score each of these five factors between zero and two.

A perfect 10 out of 10 is what every new parent wants to hear, but an eight or a nine is still great news. A score between five and seven means

your baby is in fair condition but may require some help with breathing. Your midwife may vigorously rub your baby's skin or give her some oxygen if this is the case.

Newborns who score under five are considered to be in poor condition and are often placed on a special unit, which looks a bit like a doner kebab grill, where heat, light and oxygen is on tap to help warm them up and aid breathing. A paediatrician will also be called to help with initial treatment and decide on the best course of action.

The Apgar score is then repeated for babies with low scores, until your baby is in a good and stable condition, or as we will see later, it's decided that treatment in a neonatal ward is a good idea.

Most babies score well, though, and the next job for the midwife is to weigh your baby and measure the circumference of her head. Seven and a half pounds (3.4kg) is seen as the average weight for a newborn these days, although all sorts of factors mean you could have either a petite little thing or a big bouncing bundle of joy that tips the scales above or below that.

This average birth weight has been creeping up for the past 30 years in the UK so that now your average baby boy comes in at 7lb 8oz and girls at 7lb 4oz. The number of babies born weighing more than 9lb 15oz has increased by 20% recently – so be prepared!

Head circumference is a key measurement medically speaking, but it isn't anywhere near as celebrated a birth dimension as weight, is it? If you fancy redressing that balance and sending a text to friends and family reading:

We are delighted to announce the arrival of a baby girl. Mother and daughter doing very well after a tough birth. Olivia Jane is perfect, beautiful and has a head circumference of 34cm.

Do let me know how it goes down.

Then there's the heel prick blood test, usually carried out sometime before your baby is one week old. Although only a tiny amount of