



YOU THE DADDY

Being a dad is a big responsibility, so Giles Alexander has written a manual to help dads navigate pregnancy, birth and the early years. *Christopher Kerr*, author of *Sorted's New Dad Diaries*, took the chance to compare notes.

The *New Mum's Guide to Being a Fabulous Mummy*: That's the title of the book I nearly bought for myself the morning I started to panic about the impending arrival of my first child. I didn't love the look of it to be honest. It was over a thousand pages and there were chapters about removing stretch marks after birth and dealing with hormonal changes, which at best didn't relate to my situation and at worst would have got me in trouble if I quoted any of it back to Mrs Kerr. But what choice did I have? There were no books on the shelves for dads.

Giles Alexander faced the same issue when he was expecting his first child Teddy (now 7). "I was so excited about the prospect of being a dad. I was researching everything I could about how to support my wife Rosie through pregnancy and the various development stages baby was going through. But most of that information came from blogs, websites and apps written by mums for mums. There was nothing for dads."

So, Giles started his own blog, anonymous at first, called 'You the Daddy'. "It gave me this freedom to talk about the pregnancy and what my wife and I were going through and my worries and fears and excitedness."

It wasn't long before the blog caught on with other expectant fathers, in part due to his 'Man's Guide to Baby Growth' which compares baby growth in pregnancy to things men can actually visualise. Think less chia seed and butternut squash and more pork pie and rugby ball (week

37). "That's when I knew that there was a real hunger for content from a dad's perspective".

That blog has now been turned into a book, also called *You the Daddy*, with the content no doubt refined by two further children, Hugh, 5 and Bonnie, 2. With my second child due in September (*New Dad Diary* spoiler), I thought now was a great time to ask Giles for some advice on some of the big new dad challenges, and share it with you.

CHALLENGE 1: BEING THE BEST BIRTH PARTNER YOU CAN BE

You will have seen the sitcom. The wife is exhausted and in agony as she navigates labour. She squeezes the husband's hand, and he comments: "Ow, that is so painful". Don't be that guy. Be the best birth partner you can be.

"As your due date edges closer, your partner will need your support more than ever," Giles says. "Her bump will be stretching her body to its limits, with baby rearranging her internal organs and kicking her in the ribs and bladder at every opportunity. She almost certainly won't be sleeping well. Her energy levels and mobility will be at an all-time low. Her general mood may be too. Just getting through her daily life will be a painful struggle; every task, a mountain to climb."

Husband, lay down your life. Your wife needs you. How you show up in this time is crucial. "This isn't the time to book a →



weekend away with your mates or to stay late at work every day. In those final days and weeks, the more available and attentive you can be towards your partner, the better it will be for everyone.”

The weight of this responsibility may be heavy, but try to enjoy it too. “It is important to stay positive. During the final stages everyone is tired and emotional. But once your baby arrives and looks into your eyes for the first time, all the challenges faced in the build-up will fade into significance.”

Giles is right. Nothing can prepare you for the moment you hold your newborn in your arms for the first time. Savour it, take it in, and tell your wife how amazing she was throughout the birth. She needs to hear that. She deserves to hear that.

CHALLENGE 2: NAVIGATING THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

“As you walk through your front door, babe in arms, don’t be surprised to feel a massive sense of relief, tinged with a healthy dose of fear,” Giles explains. “It is up to you and your partner to keep this little person alive and well. That comes with a lot of pressure.”

“Depression in new dads is twice that of the normal population”

But Giles is keen to point out that you need to savour this bit too: “Relax and enjoy the moment. Make a drink, have a seat, and recount the experience that you have both been through.”

Then kick into action. It’s time to be a super husband and dad. Your wife is going to need to recover from an exhausting and painful labour. For the first few weeks at least, you are going to need to dig deep and take care of things at home. Cook, clean, take your older kids out, do your share of the new baby’s nappy changing and feeding (if bottles are on the menu) and ultimately, do whatever it takes to make sure mum recovers.

But make sure you look after yourself too. “You’ll both almost certainly be exhausted and will need to get some rest, so as soon as your baby is napping, head straight to bed. Don’t worry if it’s the middle of the day. Just get some shut eye whilst you have the chance.”

Having lived this experience three times,

Giles has a few more tips to make the best of those first few weeks: “Take parental leave if you can. Get out of the house for at least 30 minutes per day as a bit of exercise and fresh air will do you the world of good. Don’t be afraid to accept offers of help to give you time to rest and just spend time with baby.”

CHALLENGE 3: DEALING WITH SLEEP DEPRIVATION

Nobody has told me the exact day that my first child Thea, now 2, will sleep for 10 hours in a row, uninterrupted, for the rest of her life. Disappointingly for me, Giles was no different, but he did offer some consolation and some great tips to get through this season.

“You will be pleased to hear that you will sleep again! And there will be time in the not-too-distant future when your little one will learn how to sleep through the night

because they all do eventually. Hence why you don’t hear of any adults who wake up crying multiple times during the night!”

There is, however, no denying that the early months of parenthood are seriously tough. “No two babies are alike. The amount they sleep will depend on how old they are, whether they were born prematurely, their weight and how well they feed. When it comes to their sleeping patterns and routine, it can be something of a lottery. You may need to try a few different approaches before you find what works for your baby.”

Giles’s book contains some excellent tips on how to maximise the chances of a successful night’s sleep, and so instead I asked him how to deal with the seasons of sleep deprivation. “No book or parenting class can truly prepare you for the insane levels of bleary-eyed exhaustion we all experience during those first few weeks and months. It’s no coincidence that sleep deprivation is used as a form of torture, because that’s exactly what it feels like. Remember it is only temporary, even if it doesn’t feel that way! Get sleep when you can and try to take care of yourself the best you can”.

CHALLENGE 4: WORK/LIFE BALANCE

The most common question we get from expectant dads who read the *New Dad Diaries* is, “How can I be successful at home and work?” There is no easy answer to that question but Giles, who balances family life with a high-pressure job in financial public relations, has some hands-on experience in this regard.

“There is no doubt that being a working dad, trying to do it all, is very difficult. You need to know that you can still be a dedicated employee at work and have a successful career whilst being a present, hands-on dad.”

The key to getting that balance is being intentional wherever you are: “When you have got family time, focus on that. Don’t think about work or check your phone constantly or work late into the night to try and get ahead. Be present and enjoy the time you have with your family.”

There will of course be times when you have to work later or work more hours than are ideal but don’t let it become the norm. Companies that have a culture of ‘presenteeism’ are not good to work for.



Figure out what is important to you and build your time out around them. Yes, it is important to provide, but your children don’t need lots of presents. They just need your presence.

CHALLENGE 5: STAYING WELL

Depression in new dads is twice that of the normal population, and parental burnout impacts mums and dads more commonly than people think. It’s important to look out for the warnings: “Some signs include being exhausted all of the time, feeling down and depressed regularly, getting irritable, and falling into bad habits like cutting yourself out of social situations and eating ever-increasing amounts of junk food.”

If you are heading that way, don’t condemn yourself. Just make some adjustments: “There is a temptation for new parents to neglect themselves to meet all of the needs of the new baby. If you don’t look after yourself – and this applies to mum too – then you simply cannot be the parent you want to be. You will feel ill more regularly, you will put on more weight and you will feel tired and downhearted.”

Giles recommends that both you and mum create time and space to do the things that bring life to you. “You can look after baby whilst mum has some time to herself, and vice versa. See some friends, go for a run, go to the cinema, whatever refreshes you a bit. Just make sure it is a fair split between you and your partner, otherwise it will exhaust the person doing all the care and build up resentment between you.”

Seemingly small adjustments can also make a big difference: “Choose healthy foods over regular takeaways, get some movement into your day. Drinking plenty of water, having time outdoors and so on, can make a big difference to your parenting experience”.

If all else fails, and you are seriously struggling, don’t be afraid to ask for help. We aren’t always good at that as men but the brave go after solutions to mental/emotional health issues for the sake of themselves, their partners and their child(ren).

Being a dad is the most wonderful, exhausting, meaningful, challenging thing to be. Two years ago, there were more blogs and books on how to fix a car than there were to guide men through fatherhood. Thankfully, good men and dads like Giles are addressing that, and we will all be the better for it.

You the Daddy by Giles Alexander is available now, published by Summersdale Publishers.

