

Letting him go so he can stay close

By Joan-e Rapine, CCE, CD

When I had my first child, in a hospital, I expected my husband to be with me the whole time. I needed him there to support me and to "protect" me from the hospital. It had never occurred to me to ask him what he wanted to do. Having the father at the birth was the unquestioned norm at the time. After all, if he wasn't going to be with me, who would? The concept of a doula was unknown to me and I was scared of being left alone.

After the birth he looked like a train had crashed into him. He also seemed withdrawn and distant. I couldn't understand what happened; I thought that experiencing the birth with me would bring us closer.

As we prepared for our next birth, almost six years later, I asked him what was our first birth like for him. He did not care at all for his role as my only support person. The pressure was more than he felt he was able to endure. He worried about me and felt the need to protect me against unwanted and unnecessary medical interventions. He said he didn't know if he had another birth in him.

With a home birth ahead of us, I knew I would have plenty of support between the two midwives and their apprentice. I knew that I would be safe and loved and supported above and beyond. I felt that I could easily do this without him, but felt very sad at the thought of him not wanting to be there. Nevertheless, I gave him permission to do whatever he felt he wanted to do during the birth, preparing myself for the possibility of him choosing not to be present. I told him that I would like to have him there, mostly because I wanted him to experience a peaceful birth to remedy the one we experienced the first time around. I also wanted to share the birth of our second child with him, but knew that wanting to be there had to come from him.

When labor began he wouldn't leave my side. He only left me to adjust the video camera. I had expected him to leave the house or wait outside, which is what I thought he wanted. I think he thought that's what he wanted. But throughout the whole birth he was right there by my side, loving me and completely giving himself to me.

Having permission to do what he wanted to do and having no expectations of him allowed him the freedom to experience the birth as a dad, and not as a guard. Knowing that I was safe and truly OK with him not being there freed him to be a part of the birth on his terms. After this birth he seemed more loving and our relationship, as a couple, has grown stronger.

Men are different from women and tend to experience emotional events differently. Not wanting to disappoint their wives/partners, they may try to fulfill all that's expected of them, which may be nearly impossible for some. We went from one extreme, of not allowing the father into the birthing room, to the other, of expecting him to be an active participant. Perhaps the time has come to find the middle, where we demand and expect less, and open ourselves to something new.

A stronger relationship does not come from forcing the father to be present at the birth, but from open communication and freedom of choice. This can only come from a place of acceptance and love – the foundation of a positive birth experience and of healthy family living.