

The Value-Added DAD

How to be your wife's greatest asset during labor and delivery



BY ● SANDRA HUME

Even though today it's customary for fathers to be involved in childbirth, birth stories are littered with the casualties of men who didn't rise to the occasion—when push came to shove.

Elissa Stein learned this the hard way. During her first birth, her husband did little more than snap photos. Later, packing up to leave the hospital, she looked over to see the nurses serving

him breakfast in bed. "Here I was, just given birth, packing up our stuff—and he's being waited on," recalls the New York City mom of two. "It didn't even cross his mind that there might be something wrong with this." And the pictures? Forget it. "It was like something out of *National Geographic*. Going to pick them up was the most embarrassing experience of my life."

“Childbirth can be difficult for men because they don’t have a defined role,” says Erika Clayton, R.N., clinical coordinator for labor and delivery at Vassar Brothers Hospital in Poughkeepsie, NY. Observing her husband, Stein came to the same conclusion. For her second pregnancy she took matters into her own hands and crafted a handbook with specific rules for him to follow. It worked. “I felt like I had some say in the whole thing, and he didn’t have to hide behind the camera because he knew he had jobs to do.” That handbook proved so successful that the couple eventually published a version of it as a book for expectant dads called *Don’t Just Stand There: How to Be Helpful, Chued-In, Supportive, Engaged, Meaningful, and Relevant in the Delivery Room*.

If you don’t want your partner to become the butt of jokes between you and your girlfriends for years to come, hand this magazine to him right now.

PLAN AHEAD

Preparing for birth isn’t just about packing the hospital bag. “Guys focus too much on what to bring and too little on what to do and say,” says Stein’s husband, Jon Lichtenstein. “This is a typical guy thing—solve the technical problems and everything will be OK.” Although bringing the right stuff is critical, he says, what’s more important is what you actually do with that stuff.

Take food, for instance. Labor can be really long, and both of you will be ravenous.



strength too. Pack some energy bars or your favorite snack, but nothing too smelly, for obvious reasons.

Then there’s the birth plan. Discussing choices in advance will help you address a lot of what-ifs and advocate for your wife, who may not be in a position to speak up for herself. Will she want pain medication? How does she feel about the possibility of



Secretly arrange to have your house professionally cleaned while you’re gone.

Ask her what she wants to eat—particularly after the baby’s born, when she can eat anything she wants—in case hospital cuisine doesn’t cut it. Once you find out what’s medically appropriate, come armed with pre-birth snacks and take-out menus from local restaurants as well as plenty of change for the vending machines. And don’t forget about yourself—you have to keep up your

a C-section? Will she breastfeed? Although you may not be able to follow every aspect of your birth plan, knowing what you’ve decided will help in fielding the inevitable curve balls.

Keep in mind that you may change rooms multiple times. Consider using a checklist to make sure all your personal items make it from room to room.

“I’m the one giving birth—I’ll watch the *Price Is Right* and *Oprah* if I want to!”

CREATE THE MOOD

Here’s where packing the right stuff comes into play. The hospital may be “home” for a while, so be thoughtful about the atmosphere you create. Consider bringing her favorite pillow, as well as personal comfort items such as a treasured photo or scented candle.

Ask her how she might want to pass the time during labor. What reading material should you bring? How about music? Burn CDs of her favorite songs or load the iPod so she isn’t unwittingly subjected to whatever’s being piped through the hospital’s sound system. And don’t forget the batteries or power cords. Annmarie McLaughlin, mother of three from Bayside, NY, still shudders at being forced to listen to “Sexual Healing” at the height of her first labor. And even if your partner chooses music that you wouldn’t download for free, don’t complain. Which brings us to...

IT’S ABOUT HER

“Check your ego at the door,” Lichtenstein advises. “This is her show.” She’s the boss, so that means no, you can’t sneak out to check the game score, and you can’t check email or call your stockbroker. If she’s sitting on the birth ball to help her through contractions, stand behind her and massage her neck. She’d like a shower? Get in with her (bring a bathing suit so you don’t startle the nurses). And for the love of God, leave the remote alone. When Melissa McCready of Kingsport, TN, spied her husband trying to commandeer the remote, “I nipped that in the bud. I’m the one giving birth—I’ll watch the *Price Is Right* and *Oprah* if I want to!”



No idea what to say? Try “You’re doing great,” “You’re my hero,” or “You are so beautiful.”

But you don’t have to be Super Dad. Clayton says the most successful delivery-room fathers are the ones who are simply present—and whatever that means in the moment is OK, even just placing a cool washcloth on her forehead. McLaughlin’s nicest memories involve simply hanging out with her husband between contractions while she sucked on ice chips and lollipops. If you’re not Cyrano, don’t stress



Get Busy!

5 Things Dad Can Do Before Leaving the Hospital

- **SEEK LACTATION HELP.** Breastfeeding is a learning process for both mom and baby. Even if it's going well, make sure your partner is seen multiple times by a lactation consultant, which most hospitals now provide. Her success with breastfeeding has a great deal to do with your support at this time.
- **TAKE PHOTOS.** Two musts: a picture of mom with baby and a “family” pose with the baby that includes mom, dad, and any siblings (ask the nurse to take it).
- **SPEARHEAD COMMUNICATIONS.** Someone has to alert the family, so build your phone tree or email distribution list well in advance. Jewell really appreciated when her husband “got up at the crack of dawn to go home and send out email updates”—and then came right back.
- **MANAGE VISITORS AND THE PHONE.** Everyone wants to see the baby and talk to mom, but your partner probably won't be up to socializing. Take your cues from her, then set time limits and screen her calls if you have to.
- **BE THE DAD.** Listen to the medical staff. Pay attention to instructions for umbilical cord or circumcision care and proper bathing techniques—take notes if you have to. Change all diapers. Hold the baby. The two of you will be parenting for a long time, so the more comfortable you are with it the better.



Place an order for her favorite flowers ahead of time and call them in when the baby is born.

about it. “You don’t need to be eloquent,” Stein says. “If you say something that she likes, just keep repeating it.”

You might start to feel inconsequential, or even bored. Get over it and give her your full attention for as long as it takes. This will help for later if you need to make split-second decisions when the pain is so bad that your only guide to what she wants will be the look on her face. And step away from the monitor, no matter how cool of a machine it is. “No mom wants to hear her husband saying, ‘Ooh baby, that’s gonna be a big one!’ with his eyes glued to the monitor,” Clayton says. “She’s all too aware of what’s going on.”

As she gets closer to giving birth, “Be the one she looks for when she cries out in pain, needs help, or looks for assurance that it will be OK,” Lichtenstein says. Guys aren’t naturally good at this, he adds, but verbal communication between hospital staff and

the two of you can be difficult. You have an edge over everyone else in the labor room: You know her.

“My husband was a master at reading my signals. He just sat by me, waiting for the next contraction to come and generally being supportive by taking the cues from me,” McLaughlin says.

ROLL WITH IT

Labor is unpredictable. An unmedicated, Bradley-trained birth can turn into a stalled labor where she demands an epidural. A routine, normal labor can take a left turn to an emergency C-section. Your partner will look to you as a barometer. “Fathers need to support their partners through whatever it takes,” Clayton says. “You need to go into the labor room with an open mind. Women don’t know what their body will need, or what’s going to

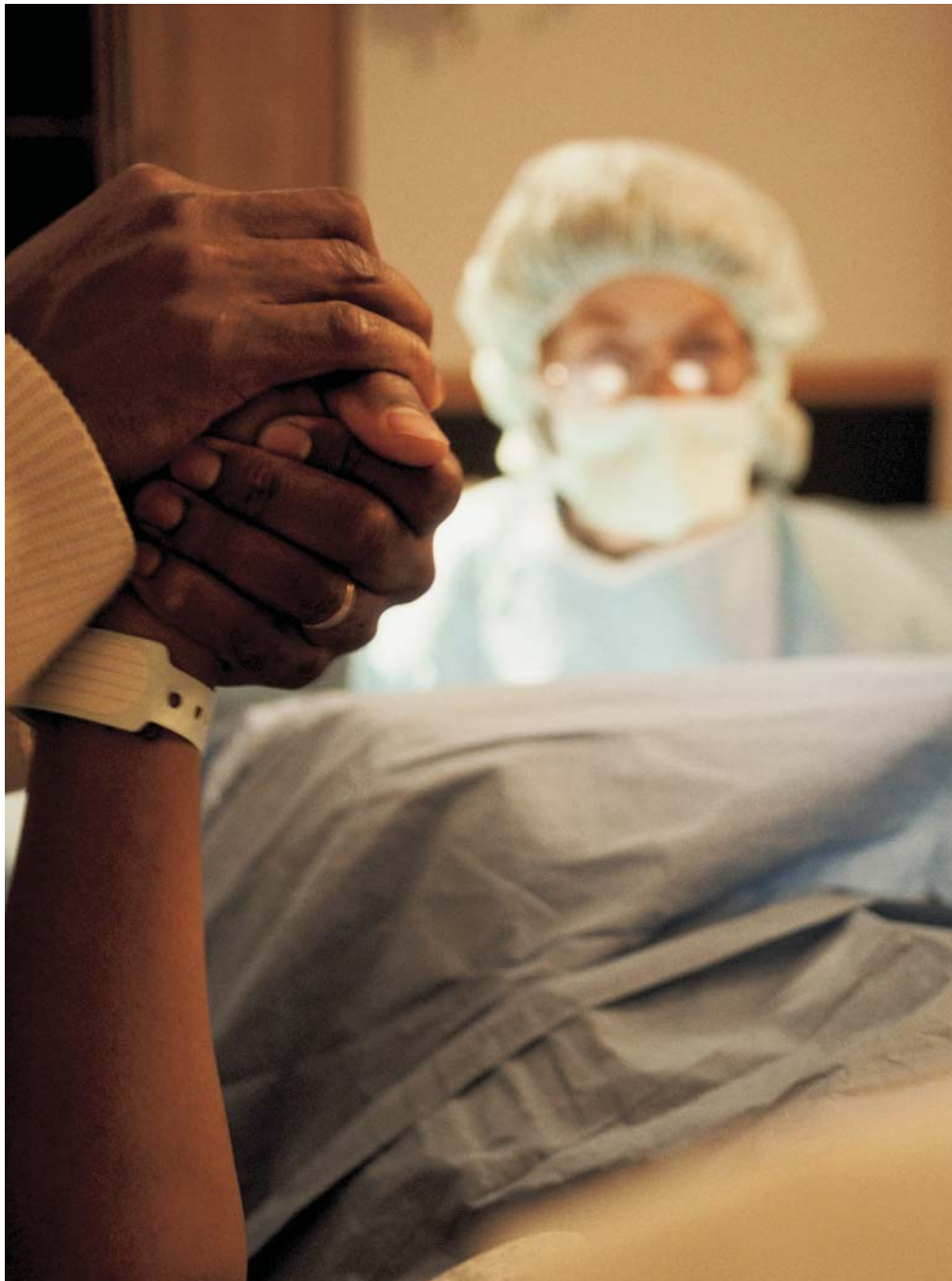
be best for the health of the baby.”

Kristin and Scott Jewell found their practiced back rubs and soothing phrases incompatible with the pain of Pitocin-induced contractions. Not only could Kristin not talk during the worst part of labor, she didn’t want to be touched. When she curled into a ball and covered her face with her hands, she was grateful that her husband knew her so well. “He realized I needed to be in my cave alone and knew better than to try and follow me in.”

As she heads to the stage of labor called “transition”—a very intense period where her body shifts to get ready to push the baby out—it’s important to be strong and supportive no matter what obscenities pass her lips, what outlandish demands she makes, or how close she comes to breaking your fingers when she squeezes. “During my labor I needed my husband both physically and mentally, and I wasn’t always able to ask nicely for it,” says Alison McLane, a mother



of three from California. Adds McLaughlin, “It’s nearly impossible to think straight when you’re in a lot of pain, so we need our husbands to do it for us.”



ADVOCATE FOR HER

Think of yourself as her labor-and-delivery offensive line—or her lawyer. She'll be pretty busy, so you'll be the one running most of the defense. Be prepared to be firm. If she doesn't want her mother-in-law in the delivery room, it's your job to make sure that doesn't happen. Advocate for if she'd rather not be hooked up to a mobility-limiting IV unless absolutely necessary. Again, you need to be her voice.

On a more serious note, health-related decisions often need to be made in the delivery room, sometimes quickly. This is where the "what if" discussions you've had previously will come in, as well as the attention you've paid thus far. Being able to read her signals will make it easier for you to fight for her, whether she wants to stick to her initial decisions or is changing her mind.

"There was a point when it looked like I was going to need a C-section, and I really didn't want one," McCready remembers. "My

Careful Now!

What you do and don't say during labor can save your life

- **Do not** mention your partner's bowel movement. Lie if you have to. She doesn't want to know.
- **Do not** say "Wow, this has been going on for 10 hours!"
- **Do not** imply—or even think—anything that suggests her pain is anything but excruciating.
- **Do** discreetly tell your partner if she looks particularly bad or has crazed bed-head. She'll want to know. She won't mind when you discreetly hand her a hairbrush. Warning: She may throw the brush at you once she's used it.

“ [My husband and I] just held hands and prayed that I would be able to do it on my own. And I did.”

husband kicked everyone out of our room and we just held hands and prayed that I would be able to do it on my own. And I did.”
And finally...

KEEP MOM FRONT AND CENTER

After being the center of attention for nine months, it can be a harsh adjustment to have all of that focus shifted to the baby, particularly after a long, painful, and exhausting experience like labor. Spend time with the baby, of course, but take advantage of the available help while you reconnect with your partner. “Scott ordered dinner from the cafeteria and sent the baby to the nursery for a bit, during a time when most babies were still in the room with their parents,” Jewell remembers. “He explained to the nurses, ‘His mother and I are having a date.’” Bonus points, guaranteed. **P**

Sandra Hume is a mother of two whose work also appears in *Parenting* and *Hallmark*. Whenever she's less than pleased with her husband, she reminds herself how the hospital staff voted him “Best Dad” after both of her children's births.