

Partner's Role with Baby: Partner and Caregiver

"Let's see what surprise you have for me today."

Watching first-time father Ainsley Bailey change little Zoe's diaper, you might notice something a bit unusual: both dad and daughter actually seem to enjoy it.

"Ah, you've got Daddy's glasses."

And Zoe's mom, Shareen, enjoys that dad is on diaper duty.

"Ainsley is equal opportunity with the diaper. And that's really nice; because you don't know what's in there when you go into it."

It's a lot like parenting: you don't truly know what it's like until you get "into it." Having a newborn is a time filled with excitement and wonder, but often unease and uncertainty, as well, particularly for the partner.

"Partners are nervous in the beginning, that they are not going to be the best parents or they are not going to know how to be a parent. And I think that it is very important for the partner to know that their role is extremely important in the family relationship. That it's not just about mom and baby; but their role is an equal part as well."

The only thing a birth mom can do that a partner can't is breastfeed. That leaves a wide range of ways for the partner to care for their newborn.

"Holding the baby close, rocking the baby, just spending time with the baby is a way of nurturing the baby outside of feeding."

Key to the partner's role, especially in those first few weeks, is helping the birth mom get maximum rest. A good start: doing everyday tasks around the house.

"Cooking a meal; making sure that there is a meal available; doing the laundry, those are things that can be physically taxing after the delivery, standing on your feet for a long time. And that rest and recovery for the mom is probably one of the most important things that she can do in terms of getting back on her feet."

So, anything a partner can do to make the process easier is helpful.

"For breastfeeding, how I help support Shareen definitely would be: bring Zoe to her; because when she starts going off and crying, we ALL don't sleep. And after she would breastfeed, I would often try to burp her as well, then put her back down."

"Here's Mommy, super light."

Shareen and Ainsley say that sorting out their roles before Zoe was born has helped make things easier.

"We had a lot of conversations about what our schedule was going to look like or what we were going to try to make it look like. And try to figure out a who is going to do what at what time and allow both of us to get some rest, so that he could be functional at work, and so that I could get a bit of sleep at night."

At the same time, it's important to be flexible and open to roles changing when necessary.

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"It's fluid. It's not the same each day, and so being able to have those open conversations: 'I'm struggling. I need more help than normal,' or perhaps you see your partner having more on their plate, and you have the ability to take over a role that's not normally your own."

"Oh, you seem very excited."

Also, accept that you are going to do certain things differently and that doesn't mean one of you is "right" and one is "wrong."

"The thing that we do differently is the bedtime routine."

"I do what works for me. I rock her, or I often put her over my shoulder. She loves doing that, Zoe loves doing that. Regardless of which Shareen says, she loves doing that."

"We get to the same result even though we come from two different angles. And it's OK."

The take-home message for partners? Jump right in; do all you possibly can for baby and mom; and accept that you'll make mistakes.

"Remember to give yourself permission and remember to be forgiving. And that goes one on one between you and baby, but also as a new family. So, it's really important to do that so that way, you're not so worried about being perfect all the time because parenting isn't, it's not about being perfect."

"Teamwork makes the dream work, as they say, and it's the absolute truth. And before you know it, you'll have things down so easily that you'll say things and do things needed without actually having to say the words. It gets easier, it gets a whole lot easier."