F-F-F-F-Father. Why do you suppose we have such a hard time using that word in our parenting culture?

Almost three years ago I decided that the next phase of my career would be fatherhood education and support—specifically early fatherhood, from conception through the family’s first year together. I had worked in the field of birth over many years, but never so specialized. I was very excited, both for myself, as a way to make use of my experience and expertise, and as a contribution to our families. I realized that I could support men in awakening their fathering instincts, and thereby support mothers and babies as well.
I knew what my first step had to be in charting my course. I fired up the ol' PC, opened an Internet window and went to the tried and trusted sage of our time, Google. I had become aware over the previous five or so years that Google was our foremost social barometer. It will inform anyone probing its worldwide resources just what our culture thinks, and is doing, regarding any particular subject.

I typed into the search field, “fathers-to-be.” I intended to work with expectant dads, and this was the most commonly used term to identify them. But our modern, sophisticated and “know virtually everything about everything” resource, Google, thought I was mistaken. To my considerable illumination, it responded: “Do you mean mothers-to-be?” I have, on occasion, had this type of response from Google, but usually it was when I’d misspelled a word. Google detected I was wanting to reference parenting information, but its feedback was that expectant fathers had no place in our parenting culture.

There was a virtual black hole where the F word, father, should have been. In that instant I experienced elation—there was guaranteed work, because there was nothing being offered! That feeling was short-lived, however, and soon replaced by a deep longing to weep at the fact that fathers were so forgotten, so invisible. I quickly reserved the URL FathersToBe.org for what has become Fathers-To-Be International.

When my colleague, Elmer Postle, and I began Fathers-To-Be, we assumed our work would take the form of a two-day weekend workshop for expectant and new dads. Through considerable effort, and many hours of research and creativity, we designed a 14-hour curriculum. We then set about spreading the word. To my considerable surprise, no one was turning up. Zero. Because there was no social precedence for genderspecific education for dads, fathers did not know to be on the lookout for the offer, much less realize that there was value to be gained.

After much trying, our first class was two hours on a Saturday afternoon—offered, for free, through Karel Ironside, a father-friendly antenatal teacher and colleague in Brighton. After her Thursday-night couples antenatal class, she said, “Right, all you dads come right back here on Saturday afternoon for a Fathers-To-Be class.” Six guys turned up, and it was brilliant for all of us. We all learned, had great experiences, and got our “fathers feet” wet. It was also at this point, due to the effort involved, that I realized we needed to illuminate before we could educate, and so I began writing my Fathers-To-Be Handbook.
Over the days following the workshop, I held exit interviews with all of the expectant fathers. They unanimously reported being pleased. Most were also admittedly surprised at what they had experienced, and the effect of the reflections we stimulated. You see, we did not cover anatomy, physiology and medical information; conventional childbirth classes do that. Instead we spoke about our own experience as expectant and new fathers, and how we were fathered. We asked, “What was your father like? How were you fathered?” We also asked them to say their father’s name. One man told us he had never spoken his father’s name before. A moment of punctuated silence followed, as I recall.

Our approach is gender-specific, delivered in a room with men only, and stimulates fathers to awaken their natural, instinctive nurturing abilities. This can include prevailing over historical experiences from their own childhood. We also answer the question, “She’s having a baby. What am I supposed to be doing?”

There is a monumental paradox surrounding birth which goes largely unrevealed. During birth a woman is doing the most female, womanly thing any woman can, and yet she is using what is typically considered to be “masculine” energy. Birth is often very energetic and physically demanding. Fortunately, if she is not interfered with, she has significant hormonal resources to assist her in carrying out this “work.”

The father at birth, on the other hand, is at his best when he enters into a stillness, a quiet and reflective presence. He is best at birth when supporting the birthing mother with listening and calm—more archetypically female. Yet how is a man to achieve this, and be truly helpful to his loving partner, without proper preparation? How can he feel safe in this female world? Most fathers are not aware that they are going to have an emotional experience surrounding birth. The intensity of labor can encumber them significantly if they are unprepared, underinformed or not feeling safe and welcome. The moment of the birth itself, or the moment when they first hold their newborn, can open a floodgate for many fathers. Everyone does better if the father has the opportunity to prepare.

Fairly early on, we realized that supporting the fathers was only half of the job. We also needed to work with the wonderful and dedicated women: midwives, birth support professionals, doulas, lactation consultants and childbirth educators. Society allowed fathers into the birthing environment decades ago, but neglected to support the childbirth professionals to know how to integrate and welcome them. None had been provided with a class during their basic or continuing education called “Fathers 101: What to do with the elephant in the room.” We run study days for midwives, childbirth professionals and educators, with great success.
In order to advance this aspect of the Fathers-To-Be initiative, I began trolling through dozens, maybe hundreds, of websites on pregnancy, birth, midwifery and parenting. I collected brochures every chance I got. I read midwifery policy statements, health initiatives regarding maternity and hospital policies, and procedure statements and guidelines. I also followed birthing conferences, noting the topics being offered. There was one thing virtually all of them had in common. If the topic surrounding the early family time referred to a father at all, the word father was rarely used. Euphemisms like “parent,” “birth partner,” “family,” “the rest of the family,” “other family members,” etc., were used, but almost none identified the other half of the parenting equation by using the F word. Fathers were completely invisible and unacknowledged. This explained Google’s response. Google was right after all, in accurately reporting this cultural phenomenon. Research also shows that fathers do not tend to see or include themselves in a scenario if a “father” or “dad” is not explicitly named.

Fathers have been participating at birth for decades, so why are we not speaking about them and supporting them? Approximately 90 percent of fathers are at the births of their children. The fact is, for the majority of mothers, a significant key to her successful pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding depends on the quality of care she receives from the father.

In the last 30 years, the time fathers spend with their children on a daily basis has increased by 800 percent. Our children are the ultimate recipients of their parents’ actions and inactions, as well as those of society. Fathers’ participation in early family life has evolved, but our culture of support has not.

Our background as a patriarchal society could have a hand in this, also. Men have been in charge of so much that perhaps birth is a last stronghold for women, and they are reluctant, consciously or subconsciously, to let fathers in. Fathers are, after all, men. Women’s fears are understandable considering what the “male” model of dealing with birth has become. A patriarchal model is responsible for over-medicalized birth, which has drugged, controlled and interfered with birthing mothers for generations. Whether men were the only perpetrators or not, the system is patriarchal in nature. It has disempowered mothers, limiting their loving and creative potential during birth. As I wrote in the Fathers-To-Be Handbook, “Humanity cannot invent a drug that can work better than a mother’s body can manufacture, nor a knife that is sharper than her instinctual nature.”

One thing I have learned from the expectant fathers I have had the pleasure of working with is that they are fathers first, and men second. They are keen to engage with and support their partner and child in every way possible. Yet they have few role models to draw on and virtually no social precedence or gender-specific community support. Our children and our families’
futures are worth more than this. Aren’t they?

Divorce and separation rates are at an all-time high. If fathers are made to feel welcome, included and safe while the foundations of the family are being laid, it will have long-term implications for the family. Fathers will stay if they feel like they belong. The alternative—leaving—can look like emotional withdrawal, overwork, alcohol and drug use, infidelity and being absent in general. The almost inevitable outcome is divorce or separation. Fathers-To-Be supports expectant and new dads by reinforcing their relationship with themselves, their partners, their babies, and the health professionals caring for the family.

So go ahead—use the F word. Fathers are listening. Our children are listening. Say it loud and say it proud. Let’s have the courage to speak the word father, spell it out and include it on brochures and websites, hospital, maternity, parenting and children’s policies. The more we use it, the more everyone benefits—children, mothers, fathers, healthcare providers and society. Everyone. And the more fathers will feel included and welcome, taking up their role of raising their children with pride and confidence.