



# The experience of fatherhood after the birth of a child at risk of disability – a qualitative analysis of paternal narratives

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## ABSTRACT

A focus of this qualitative study was on paternal experiences of parenting a baby at risk of developmental disability. A sample of 10 fathers of infants referred to the neurodevelopmental therapy in a day rehabilitation centers at two hospitals in Warsaw was recruited. In-depth interviews were conducted to discern unique meanings that fathers attribute to spending time with their baby in everyday life and during the rehabilitation.

## INTRODUCTION

Families of infants with disabilities or developmental delays face additional challenges in their everyday life [1]. Prolonged uncertainty regarding the diagnosis and prognosis can be important for the forming of parent-child relationship. Fathers' involvement in early infancy may be particularly beneficial for a young child at risk of disability [2], but little is known about men's experiences of fatherhood in these families[3].

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim was to gain insight into the experiences of fathers of infants at risk of developmental disability. An attempt was made to discern individual, unique meanings that fathers attributed to their experiences.

## METHOD

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 fathers of 4 to 12 month old infants were conducted and recorded with a digital voice recorder. The interviews covered issues including paternal perceptions of their child's disability, the role of therapy, potential impact for family relationships, perception of fatherhood, memories related to gestation period and a moment of birth, social support for the family in the process of rehabilitation of a child. A qualitative, thematic approach to data analysis was assumed. Transcriptions of interviews were analysed with ATLAS.ti 8.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

- [1] Benzie, K., Magill-Evans, J. (2015). Through the eyes of a new dad: experiences of first-time fathers of late-preterm infants. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, Volume 36, Issue 1, 78-87.
- [2] Cabrera, N., Shannon, J.D., & Tamis-LeMonda, C.S. (2007). Fathers' influence on their children's cognitive and emotional development: From toddlers to pre-K. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11(4), 208–213.
- [3] Underwood, L., Waldie, K. E., Peterson, E., D'Souza, S., Verbiest, M., McDaid, E., & Morton, S. (2017). Paternal Depression Symptoms During Pregnancy and After Childbirth Among Participants in the Growing Up in New Zealand Study. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 74(4), 360–410.

## MAIN RESULTS

Three major themes could be discerned on the basis of fathers' narratives.

1. Participants viewed fatherhood as an opportunity for personal growth and reflected on how their lives had changed since the arrival of their infant.

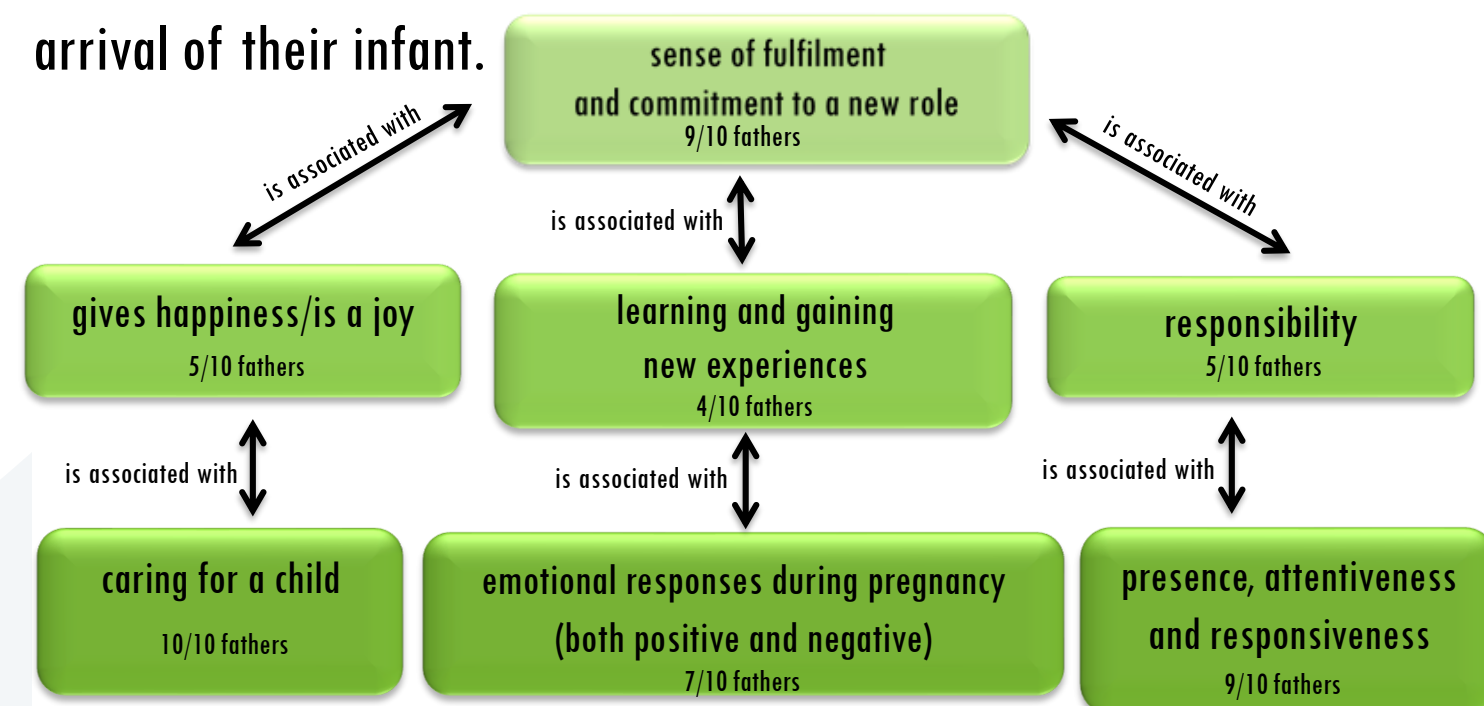


Chart 1. Fatherhood as an opportunity for personal growth

2. Fathers pointed to challenges related to combining job duties with participation in infant's therapy and rehabilitation.

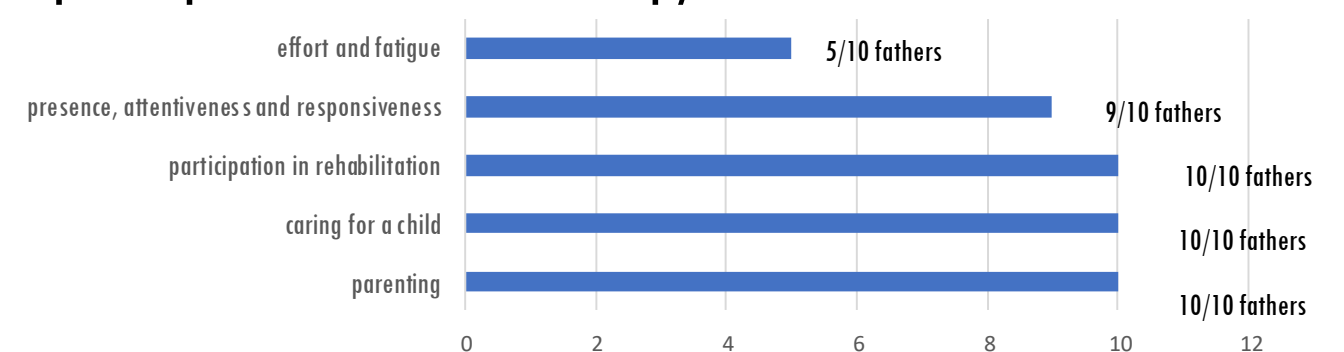


Chart 2. Number of fathers, who talked about various aspects of balancing home and work duties.

3. Fathers emphasised the importance of social support for the everyday functioning of their families.

*„It was nice to meet these people who were there too, right? Parents of children,... and talk to them. Everyone assured us that everything would be fine and it is fine. When new parents came, we also told them that all would go well and talk to them too ... That there was nothing to worry about. Obviously, the information that your baby will be waking up from a coma for some time is rather sad, isn't it? ... But really all these cases probably ended up, which we met, well... positively. We even keep in touch. I'm not saying that with everyone, but with some group; they were there at the same time.”*

Father of 12-month-old girl with 22q11.2 genetic deletion syndrome

*„I have a brilliant mother-in-law, who helps us a lot; and although rehabilitation, as rehabilitation, belonged mainly to my wife, I was, so to speak, on and off, sometimes in the evenings and on weekends, it was mainly Hannah who rehabilitated Sofie. On the other hand, technically, from the very beginning, when the children appeared, it was the in-laws, mainly the mother-in-law, who helped in such ... help, being, that we can sometimes do other things.”*

Father of 8-month-old girl with congenital muscle hypertonía

## CONCLUSIONS

The results can be discussed in terms of possible implications for the emergent fatherhood, father-child relationship and paternal mental health in the face of infant's developmental risk. Fathers of infants at risk in this study highly valued their involvement with their children and were striving to learn how to promote their child's growth and development in the best possible way.

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