

BIRTH LIFE MAN

PASCAL
ROTTEVEEL

A FIELD GUIDE FOR FUTURE FATHERS

FOREWORD

Traditionally, to do things like 'a man' would mean to do something in an overly assertively masculine way. Great if you need to protect your family from an aggressive predator with nothing but a club, but there's no need for assertive masculinity when you're in line for some mediocre beverage at the hospital coffee machine. This book aims to slightly redefine what doing something like a man means in the context of impending parenthood. Because, when people are expecting, the conversation is often about motherhood, fatherhood, or parenthood. Rarely is it about partnership. And as you might have guessed, the word 'man' in the title, actually means partner—any partner. But 'Like a Man' just sounded better.

This book is intended for future fathers or non-birthing partners that, like me, think they have a more active, supportive role to play in the delivery of their child than many millennia-old stereotypical gender roles tell you.

In the preparation of that role, I found that many books intended for fathers were very tacky, stereotypical, patriarchal, and not practical enough. So, I figured to write a field guide that is short, snappy, and easily navigable to make being a true parenting partner just a little bit easier.

I sourced my information from books, research, pregnancy classes, family tips, and practical experience, and had it fact-checked by experienced and certified midwives Doriët van Gaalen-Roeleveld and Maxime Welie. Both are awesome.

Doriët is both a mom and a midwife and over the course of her career has seen a lot of different perspectives toward the profession. Having worked in hospital and obstetric practices and having given birth to two beautiful daughters herself, Doriët brought a point of view that I couldn't have done without.

Maxime Welie is an Amsterdam-based midwife who always dreamt of being a doctor but during her studies in the UK and Ghana found her passion for midwifery. Having seen birth in different cultures, she contributed knowledge of great value for creating a book that resonates around the world. She told me that one of the things she has learned from being in people's homes, bedrooms, and delivery rooms is that birth has a way to strip away the trivial and shallow and shows that we all have more in common than we think.

INTRODUCTION

I'm not a gynaecologist,
I'm not a doctor,
I'm not a nurse,
I'm not an assistant,
I'm not an obstetrician,
I'm not a doula,
I'm not a midwife,
I'm not a woman,

Technically you could argue whether or not I'm even a father. At the moment of writing this introduction we have five more weeks to go, three if he's in a hurry. So, I'm definitely not an expert, not even an expert by experience.

I created this book in part to soothe my feelings of unpreparedness, despite all the books and courses. Some sort of idea of support, a life-raft filled with all the things I'm doomed to forget as soon as her water breaks. This also explains its pocket size, or actually its back-pocket size. This book perfectly fits your back pocket, which means it won't get in the way whenever you're being deployed as a human birthing stool or painkiller.

See this book as a beacon of hope whenever you find yourself lost, knee-deep in a birthing-pool with all your clothes still on. Although I'm Dutch, I've packed this book with universal tips, reminders, and summaries, bound by an easy navigation system. So, you should be able to find answers at the turn of a page. I even left some space for your own suggestions or reminders; after all, no baby-delivery is the same.

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WELL BEGUN, HALF DONE

The importance of the first 1000 days

Tessa Roseboom, Scientist and Professor of Early Development and Health at the University of Amsterdam, spent 25 years researching how the early environment in which humans grow and develop affects later development and health throughout life. Her findings changed my perspective on pregnancy and early life completely. She captured her research in a book which at this point is only in Dutch, but is a must read if you ask me. The research, though, is in English and is but a Google search away. In a nutshell it proves that, starting at fertilisation, the first 1000 days of a human's life greatly impact their health over the course of their lifetime. She found that what a mother eats during her pregnancy is of far greater influence on the lifespan of a child, than what a child eats after birth. Which means a healthy diet during pregnancy will set your child up for a longer, healthier, and wealthier life.¹

A lot of a baby's organs develop in the first 12 weeks, and how they do sets the stage for their entire lifetime. For example, the filtering units in your kidneys are formed in Week 30 and these are fixed. You won't be able to make any more units later on in life. If you're born with a low count of filtering units, you'll sooner run into kidney issues than if you'd be born with a great number of them. So, the way you'll be able to cope with kidney challenges at age 30, for example, is truly defined in the first 30 weeks. Tastebuds, food preferences, the ability to cope with stress, heart, or coronary diseases—all these, and many more features are set up in those 1000 days. Well begun is half done.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Read 'The First 1000 Days'. Although the book is only in Dutch at this point, the research isn't. Google 'Effects of Prenatal Exposure to the Dutch Famine on Adult Disease in Later Life: An overview'.²
- Watch her TED talk: A Healthier Future by Investing in the best Start in Life | Tessa Roseboom | TEDxAUCollege.³
- Support a healthy diet.
- Bring healthy food and snacks like nuts, veggies, fruits, and fish high in Omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury.
- Help her avoid junk food; however, this can be tricky with certain pregnancy craves.
- Help her avoid stress.
- Help her avoid harmful substances like cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, or any type of harmful food.

A PENNY
SAVED
A PENNY
EARNED

Babies cost money

The impending bill that comes with a pregnancy can leave many non-birthing partners with sweaty palms, so it's no surprise many start to worry about money or become more interested in making it. Cost can significantly differ based on the country where you're raising your child. In my case almost all cost of delivering a child is covered by my insurance and state. But it's always good to make sure you have some savings lined up should you be confronted with unexpected cost.

When it comes to the baby trousseau, you'll have plenty of options to be smart with your expenses. Some of the things that are branded essential aren't. For example, you can buy a co-sleeper. But because you will only use it six months, it can be more economic and sustainable to borrow, rent, or buy one second hand. For each of the big expenses there are alternatives. So, make sure you have a point of view on what you want to have brand new and what you don't, because a child will be expensive and all the expenses you can save will find a way to be spent elsewhere.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Decide on what crib you want brand new, second hand, or rented.
- Make an inventory of things that sit idle in the basements and attics of friends and families and learn what you could potentially utilise.
- Basic clothing like bodysuits or pyjamas can easily be bought second hand. They grow so fast that most of the things offered second hand have been worn very few times.
- Think about generating passive income; royalties through writing a book, music, podcasts, or invest in ETF's or stock, real estate, or any kind of intellectual property. Find investments that suit you.
- Read books on financial literacy.
- Start saving up and investing in the name of your child.

NURSERY

What is needed in a nursery

There are many things a non-birthing parent simply can't do, but the nursery is most definitely one with which you can lead the charge. However, you can silence that little panicky voice in the back of your head that keeps on shouting that you really need to start getting the nursery together, because for the first six months your baby will probably be sleeping in your bedroom. This differs per parent of course, but most of the time they'll be in a co-sleeper next to the bed so it's easy to comfort or breastfeed without having to get out of bed. The only reason you want to have the nursery ready before birth is that once your little one has arrived, you won't have the energy or time to fix it all. But relax, you have nine months to get this thing in order, which should be more than enough.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Treat the wall next to your nursery dresser with a water-repelling agent, so potential diaper stains come out of your wall with a simple wipe.
- Get a mobile (silicone) night light so whenever you're on your own and need to walk around the house, you don't have to wake up your baby with all the bright house lights. It's also a great light source when changing diapers at night and (depending on your light) can double as a fun light toy for your baby.
- Any drawer cabinet can work as a nursery dresser and might cost less and look better; just make sure it's wide enough.
- Get a nursery dresser with drawers so you don't have to fumble around with cabinets.
- Get drawer dividers and categorise by item. Everything you use most goes in the top drawer. Then work your way down in order of relevance.
- Avoid too much stuff on your dresser because your baby will get hold of it all.
- Get multiple change pad covers.
- Avoid things on the wall they can pull down or that can come down.

CAR SEAT

Navigating the car seat world

Having, in advance, a car seat is essential to any parent, even more so if your baby will be delivered in the hospital because most hospitals won't let you leave if you don't have a car seat. Even if you live within walking distance of a hospital, don't expect that your partner, baby, and you will be strolling back under a romantic moon. So, unless you're planning on living at the hospital until they're a teen, get a car seat. Besides being able to leave the hospital, there's another great perk; it reduces the risk of death for children under age one by 71%¹⁰ and reduces the risk of hospitalisation by 67% for children age four and under.¹¹ Nothing like the threat of death to convince you into a purchase.

Now that you're convinced, getting the right one is easier said than done. There are so many options available that it can be overwhelming finding the one for you. Size, weight, isofix or seatbelt, legroom, side impact protection—all important aspects of picking the right one. And although there are many things you can definitely get second hand, unless you know the exact history of a car seat because it belonged to a friend or relative, I'd strongly advise against getting it second hand. Like a motorcycle helmet, it's very difficult to see from the outside whether or not it has structural damage. So be sure, or get it brand new.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Make sure the car seat is certified.
- When buying a baby car seat with isofix, already take the follow-up, toddler child seat into consideration when choosing. Isofix base-plates aren't universal, so unless you want some extra cost, make sure you have an isofix that is compatible with multiple seats.
- The centre of the backseat is the safest place to install a car seat since the centre doesn't take direct impact.¹²
- If you don't have a middle seat, then the backseat behind the passenger seat is the second safest place in the car because this is the furthest away from the opposing traffic side, and unloading is easier.¹²
- Always install a baby car seat facing the rear. When children are older they can face the front.
- Make sure it has side impact protection. Cars don't have crumple zones to the sides, and with your kid sitting higher in the car, they're less protected by the steel in the car, making them more vulnerable in potential side collisions.
- Make sure it's easy to install, so there is little room for error.
- As soon as you have it, install it in your car, you don't want to figure this out when you should be driving to the hospital.

DAY CARE

Figuring out your support system

That pink cloud, beautiful as it can be, will eventually evaporate and when it does you want to make sure you have your support system for when you go back to work figured out. Whether one of you will stay at home and care for your little one, or if the grandparents, brother, sister, or cousin take a few days a week, or if you'll bring them to day care, you better start early with making plans. There will be a lot on both of your minds, and this is one you can check off your list early. Just one less thing to worry about when you're mastering parenthood.

Depending on where you live, day cares can have long waiting lists, so enquire in your area about the wait. In my case, we registered with three day cares at week 15, which was considered late. If your family pitches in, it's best to start that conversation early as well, so everyone can prepare for the new responsibility, nay... privilege, of caring for your newborn.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Devise a point of view on what you both think is important in the care of your child and make a plan accordingly. Think of food, stimulation/play, sleep, socialisation, exploration, and disciplining.

Family care

- Make clear arrangements and discuss your preferences. Think about rhythms, feeding styles, boundaries, or disciplinary styles.
- With family, discuss how you'll handle care cost.
- Put a reminder in your calendar once a month to bring a little appreciative gift. This will go a long way.
- Accept differences in caring styles as no one will do it like you would.

Day care

- When selecting day care, define questions based on your point of view to ask staff:
- Key questions:
 - + How long have you been in business?
 - + Are you licensed?
 - + What kind of accreditations do you have?
 - + What are the pick-up and drop-off times, and how flexible are these?
 - + What is your policy when a baby is ill?
 - + What meals are provided, and what do those consist of?
 - + Are diapers supplied and what kind? (Are they biodegradable? Do they accept cloth diapers?)
 - + How are the children grouped? Horizontal (mixed age) or vertical (by age)?
 - + How diverse is the staff/baby group?
 - + What is the child-to-staff ratio?
 - + Do you have a parent portal or app that shares live updates?
- Most day care chains will have multiple locations, and a hack to guarantee a spot is to let them know you're open to take any location in your area. Once you're registered with a location that maybe isn't the one you were hoping for, let them know you prefer another location and you'll be placed on the internal waiting list. Internal waiting lists have priority to the public ones.
- When you have the day care interview make sure to align with them on your baby's sleeping patterns, pacifier preferences, baby comforter, food.

BOND FROM THE BEGIN NING

BONDING

87

Connecting with your baby

As stated earlier, moms have an advantage when it comes to bonding with your child. So, once the baby is born it's important to get as many skin-on-skin moments as you can with your newborn, especially in the first few months. This is known as kangaroo care.²⁰ This practice has been proven to increase the health of the baby, especially premature ones, increases bonding with the parents, benefit breastfeeding, reduce symptoms of postpartum depressions, and even benefit the baby's social skills later in life.²¹ If your baby is delivered by C-section, this bonding is even more important for a non-birthing partner because it will stabilise the baby's heart rate and body temperature, make them cry less, and start their feeding behaviour earlier. It's also beneficial to you; studies have shown that non-birthing partners who took on Kangaroo care after a C-section suffered less from anxiety and depression and had better role attainment.²² So, take off that shirt whenever you can and kickback with your naked baby on your chest.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Create skin-on-skin moments after delivery.
- Take on skin-on-skin kangaroo care after a C-section.
- Sing a song—any song. If you want to bust out Ice Cube's 'It Was a Good Day', do it, in womb and out of womb.
- Cuddle, touch and stroke either of them whenever you can.
- Carry your baby around in a baby carrier.
- Read the little one books.
- Talk to them.

AFTER

87

FIRST DAMAGE

The first time your kid gets hurt

Even the most careful parent will eventually find their kid in harm’s way. A nosedive off the couch, a clumsy bump to the head, or their slapping themselves in the face with a spoon—there is no way that you’ll be able to protect your child from all the bumps and bruises of life. It’s the cost of learning for both the baby and for yourself. You might be able to fend it off for a while, but sooner or later your kid will take some damage and I can assure you, your heart will be in your throat when they do. Their pain will be yours. Children are curious by nature but lack the experience to gauge the risk of their curiosity and often times miss the reflexes to fend off even the simplest of dangers like a swinging door. This is partly the reason why every day nearly two thousand children die as a result of a preventable injury.²³ Five of the most common unintentional injuries reported by the World Health Organization are road traffic injuries, falls, burns, drowning, and poisoning. So being vigilant and careful is good; being prepared for it is even better.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Take a first-aid course for infants and children.
- Never leave a baby unattended in high places, for example the dresser, couch, or bed.
- Use the appropriate rail height in their crib.
- Install an aero-sleep in between the sheet cover and the mattress; should the baby sleep on its belly they will still be able to breathe. (Make sure to check whether you can use an Aero-sleep product. Some shouldn’t be used early on because they can interfere with your baby’s nascent ability to regulate its own temperature.)
- Don’t put any objects in the baby’s crib.

- Install power socket covers on all sockets.
- Install baby gates near stairs.
- Never leave a baby unsupervised in the bathtub.

House

- Lower the heat on your central heating to below 50C.
- Keep the bathroom secured at all times.
- Remove hazards like sharp or pointy elements from your interior.
- Put locks on cabinets that hold chemicals such as dishwasher or laundry detergent pods, cleaning agents, industrial chemicals, or medications. Magnetic locks are very convenient for you and safe for your child.
- Keep window blind cords out of reach or replace them with cordless blinds.²⁴
- To eliminate choking hazards, test small objects using a toilet paper tube: if the object fits it is too small.
- Create a safe zone for a baby to play during chores, perhaps with a play fence.
- Keep windows guarded.
- Skip tablecloths.
- Don’t hold hot beverages while carrying your child and keep them out of reach when on the table.

Pets

- Never leave a child alone with a dog or cat, no matter how friendly.
- Don’t let your cat in the baby room. Cats can form a choking risk by sitting on their faces.
- Never let your child pet a dog without asking its owner.
- Don’t let your child play aggressive games with a dog, like tug-of-war or wrestling.

FIRST AID OVERVIEW

Be prepared. Book a first aid course.

1

SAFETY

Make sure you can provide first aid safely.

2

ASSESS

Assess the child, check if it is conscious and breathing. Try to understand what is wrong.

3

ALARM

If the child isn't conscious or has trouble breathing call emergency services. In doubt? Call.

4

ACT

Provide help. Check the airways. Secure breathing.

FIRST AID OVERVIEW

Be prepared. Book a first aid course.

A

AIRWAY

Make sure the airway is clear.

B

BREATHING

Once the airway is clear, confirm breathing. If necessary, provide rescue breathing.

C

CIRCULATION

If the child isn't breathing, go straight to chest compressions and rescue breathing.²⁵

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'Birth Like a Man' is a field guide for future fathers and non-birthing partners who happily play second fiddle in the musical production of 'our baby'. Although, as a partner, you won't have to push a small human through your own pelvis, there's definitely plenty of work to be done.

This pocket-sized book will enable you to become a more active and supportive partner during this exciting phase of your life rather than standing idly by. You'll find tips, summaries, reminders, and detailed insights that will help you support your partner through the process. Acting as your parenting and partner cheat sheet for everything from navigating diapers, day cares, and delivery to car seats, c-sections, sleep, and self-care, this book has got you covered.

Ignoring patriarchal notions of gender roles in parenting, 'Birth Like a Man' will help you become less of a patriarch, more of a partner, and above all, a lot more parent.

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