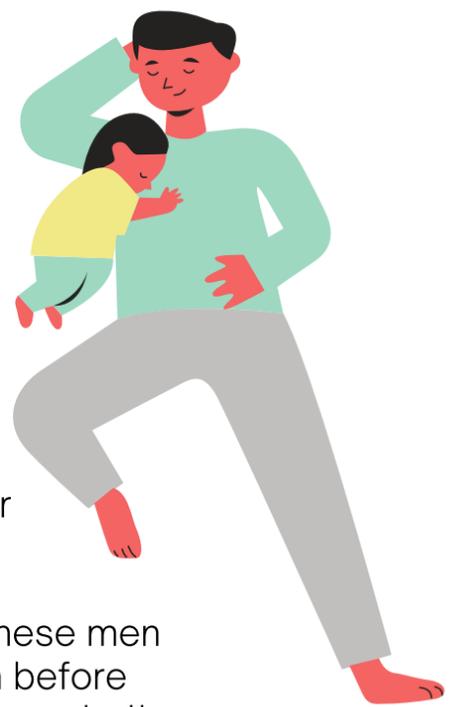


Becoming a dad through surrogacy



What is it like for a man in a heterosexual relationship to make the decision to create a family with the help of a surrogate? We spoke with ten men about their experiences of opting for surrogacy, their relationship with their surrogate, ways in which they bonded with their child, and how they adapted to becoming a father.



Here we share the key findings of what these men expressed they wished they had known before embarking on surrogacy, or what they want other men to potentially consider when entering a surrogacy arrangement.

* Find details about the study and the researchers at the end.

Bonding with the child – in utero

During a pregnancy, men may commonly bond with their child in utero by touching the pregnant belly and feeling for first movement. However, men becoming dads through surrogacy, commonly reported discomfort with touching their surrogate's belly, and so found different ways of bonding with their child



“I always felt uneasy about putting my hand on her belly to feel him kicking, it felt odd...It's quite a sensitive thing to do anyway to place your hand on somebody else's belly and I didn't have that kind of relationship with [our surrogate].”

“[Our surrogate] was pregnant with my child if you like, but I still wouldn't have felt entitled to that sort of intimacy with her.”



Not all men felt that they missed out in their experience of becoming dads by not touching the surrogate's belly. Some invented creative ways to bond with their child, such as using baby-bump headphones to play sounds and their voice to their unborn baby.

“We read them stories and talked to them a bit and we recorded a couple of, you know, songs and stories, and then [surrogate] played back the video to them at other times and said, oh that's your mum and dad speaking to you. So yes, that's how we bonded.”

Being involved

The majority of men wanted to be involved in the pregnancy and establish a good relationship with their surrogate, yet perceived the arrangement as “a very female process.” Some men expressed feeling unsure “how to be well involved and how to be properly involved.” Most men wanted to be more involved in the pregnancy than they were, because “where I have been involved it's been really good.” Their accounts showed three ways of being sidelined. Firstly, by their surrogates who sought a stronger relationship with their partner or wife, the intending mother; secondly by medical or counselling staff; thirdly, by themselves, by prioritising their partners needs to ensure she felt central to the pregnancy experience.



“I think she [our surrogate] wanted a strong relationship with my wife (...). It was very much her helping my wife rather than her helping us.”

“[There were occasions] when some of the nurses or clinics would actually sort of forget I was there or forget to bring me in to various appointments and so on (...). But once or twice, there was an occasion when I just thought, OK, well someone's not thinking here, there are two of us in this room, you know.”

“It is really important to me that my wife is front and centre (...) she was so, so, so distraught about not being able to have children, I was upset, but my wife was just so distraught about it. And this is just such a blessing so I wouldn't want to take away any of the attention from her.”

Sidelining themselves

Men further described how their self side-lining was driven by caution and concern for their partner's emotional well-being as they did not want to add to their worries, and their expectations to remain strong.

"[It was me] holding it together. And that's in a way, been my role and I haven't felt like I've had the room to not hold it together, and I'm no use to anybody, I'm no use as a support, if I'm not strong."

"As a man supporting his wife, I put a lot of my [concerns and anxieties following repeated rounds of failed fertility treatment] to one side because I thought and felt that (...) if she could do it, I will find a way to do it. Yes, you have loads of anxieties but (...) if I started talking about them I would just create anxiety in my wife and that's not what I wanted to do."



"I wish I had known"



There were many things men in our study agreed 'they wished they had known', and wanted other men embarking on surrogacy to be aware of, for example, not to shy away from seeking support and to speak with others about their experience.

"Talk to other people who have done it."

"Take as much help as you can guys, talk as much as you can!"

*I have got all these things that worry and scare the hell out of me. **I would say 'Support the dad!'** - 'Support everybody, but specifically dads.' If they have got their own counselling [men cope better]. You should be able to find [someone] relatively close to you and not too expensive either."*

There are different ways men can get support, such as (1) in individual sessions with a fertility counsellor to address their needs, (2) speaking to a counsellor outside 'the surrogacy world', (3) seeking a support group and (4) talking to peers or a trusted person. **There isn't one approach that suits all, take your time to find the best support for you.**

Why recognising your own needs is important

*"I think the main thing that I want all the other men to think about is that, no, actually for all the other people to think about, is that everybody asks the men how do you feel how do you cope with supporting your wife. And that's not the important question. **The important question is: How do you feel about supporting yourself? And as a father, as the male in this relationship, you are equally as important.** And you will actually have to fight harder to be valid, but you actually are as valid a person as anybody else."*



For more details, see our publication ["My emotions on the backseat." Heterosexually-partnered men's experiences of becoming fathers through surrogacy.](#) (2021). Available open access: <https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.v7i2.17567>

About the study

In 2019, we interviewed ten men who had become or were becoming fathers through gestational surrogacy. Our sample included altruistic and commercial surrogacy arrangements, with donor eggs and with the intending mother providing her own eggs. The majority had their surrogacy arrangements in their country of residence (UK and Australia), the others went overseas to the United States. Our interviews were open-ended, encouraging our participants to narrate their own experience.



About the researchers

Dr Christina Weis and Dr Wendy Norton are researchers at the Centre for Reproduction Research (De Montfort University). Before collaborating on this study, Christina researched surrogacy in Russia, focusing on surrogates' experiences, and Wendy researched the experiences of gay men becoming fathers through surrogacy in UK. Together we wanted to focus on men in heterosexual relationships to address the gap in knowledge and find out how come that 'men are sidelined'.



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Our gratitude to the men who participated in our study and shared their insights!

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Published September 2021