I’ve no vision of what type of father I want to be . . . I just want to be there.  
(James)

Transition to first-time fatherhood involves men embarking on uncertain personal journeys which are characterised by less clear trajectories than for women becoming mothers. This in part results from their physical bodies outwardly remaining unchanged through the antenatal period and so the signals and markers of pregnancy which shape women’s transition, and others’ responses, are absent. The term ‘expectant mother’ is instantly recognisable and conjures up visual images associated with pregnant female bodies but ‘expectant father’ is more obscure and clear images and associations are not readily evoked by these words. This confusion can symbolise men’s own experiences of the antenatal period as they prepare to become fathers: both seeking ways to demonstrate ‘appropriate’ support and engagement and also feeling detached and at times excluded. In this chapter – and the three which follow – the empirical data are prioritized as the focus turns to men’s own accounts of transition to first-time fatherhood. The themes identified here will be traced through subsequent chapters so that the interplay and fluidity of gender, discourses, agency and structure can be followed through transition. Using the categories employed in the empirical chapters in the earlier motherhood book (Miller, 2005) this chapter will examine the ways in which men’s experiences of anticipation and associated behaviours are narrated and organised around the interrelated categories of preparing appropriately, anticipating the birth, shifting selves, and being a father and fatherhood. A further category focusing on men ‘fitting’ fathering in to working lives and ‘being there’ has been added in order to reflect the ways in which paid work outside the home figured in men’s accounts. Whilst the chapter is arranged in this way in order to facilitate comparisons between the
earlier study (and reflects the use of a very similar interview sched-
ule) it should also be noted that the amount and kinds of data which
emerged around these themes vary significantly – and not surprisingly –
between the men’s and women’s accounts as they look ahead to new
fatherhood and motherhood. Importantly, then, in this and the fol-
lowing chapters we see the different ways in which this group of
men reflexively position, perform and narrate their transition to first-
time fatherhood in what is highly gendered and, initially, unfamiliar
terrain.1

In chapters 1 and 2 it was noted that a discourse of involved father-
hood is now more discernible in contemporary Western societies along-
side more sensitive understandings of masculinities and changing dis-
courses of gender equality and rights (Vuori, 2009; Plantin et al.,
2003). It was also recognised that discourses can provide powerful
societal visions of how things should be and this is clearly echoed
across the men’s anticipatory fatherhood narratives. But how things
should be for men anticipating and preparing for fatherhood in this
study can be seen to be largely mediated by others and in particular
through and in relation to wives or partners. For example, the men are
often prompted by their wives/partners about what to do and what to
read. They follow the unfolding pregnancy through prompts provided
by others (‘she has tried to involve me in as much as possible. I’ve read
the magazines, read the books, watched the DVDs’). Antenatally, the
men are also involved in performing appropriate preparation in terms
of attending scans (‘I’ve seen the baby through the scans, so I’m pretty
involved in the day to day’) and antenatal classes (‘I’ve made time to
go to all the actual antenatal classes’). In addition, other friends who
are already fathers, together with their own fathers (even where they
may have been absent), feature in the men’s anticipatory accounts (‘he
always had the time for you, so I’d like to replicate that’). The tendency
for men to construct their embryonic ‘paternal identity’ in relation to,
rather than independent of, the child’s mother has been noted by others
in research on fathering (Pleck and Levine, 2002). But it is interesting
to note that this seeking of a paternal identity can commence as soon
as the antenatal period begins to unfold, as ‘ways in’ are sought (‘I’m
trying to find ways to get in and share it and things like that’). The data

1 All the participants have been given pseudonyms and any other significant
identifying features have been changed to protect their anonymity.
also reveal that men can experience feelings of ‘disconnection’, ‘detachment’, ‘denial’ and ‘jealousy’ but at the same time position themselves as willing to learn the skills (from wives/partners and other experts) necessary to be a good, involved father. Interestingly, in contrast to women there is no expectation at this stage that these capacities might be innate. Indeed, the men take comfort from their own assumptions about their wives’/partners’ capacities to instinctively know how to mother (‘I’ve seen the way she is with children anyway so for me it’s very reassuring’).

In all sorts of ways the men’s accounts of transition to fatherhood are underpinned by and through gendered behaviours and biological assumptions of what fathers and mothers (naturally) do – and how these can be articulated. Yet new fatherhood is also envisioned as an opportunity to ‘be there’ for their child(ren) in emotionally and practically involved ways that are qualitatively different to their own experiences of being fathered. A major thread running across the antenatal accounts concerns ‘fitting’ fathering and work together in ways they acknowledge their own fathers’ generation were not able (or willing) to do. Once again drawing upon recognisable elements of contemporary ‘good fatherhood’ discourse the men talk about ‘sharing care’, ‘caring’, ‘supporting’, ‘hoping to reduce work hours’ and striking ‘a decent balance’ between being involved in caring and the demands of paid work. ‘Being there’ and reconciling family life and work is something that for these men appears attainable through the promise and apparent possibilities of flexible working arrangements which are initially signalled by 2 weeks’ statutory paternity leave. Other shifts – including greater sensitivity to the fluidities of gendered selves (and so understandings of masculinities) and identities – have also provided a context of possibilities around fathering not so apparent in previous generations. But even as the categories ‘fatherhood’ and ‘motherhood’ are more readily recognised to be fluid and contingent, making possible, in theory at least, new ways of organising caring responsibilities, deeply inscribed gendered expectations and practices remain and can be easily (‘naturally’) invoked.

Preparing appropriately

As noted earlier, men do not carry the outwardly visible signs of bodily change which signals pregnancy in women. At some level they are onlookers who can express feelings of personal change (‘I feel
older, people probably don’t think I act any differently but I certainly feel...the responsibility’) as a result of the pregnancy but who in other circumstances could deny their involvement (or have it denied) and walk away. This indistinct relationship leads those who are positively anticipating fatherhood (albeit sometimes after the ‘shock’ of the news) to demonstrate and express their own appropriate preparation and involvement in ways that make it visible. As well as displaying clear ideas of what constitutes a ‘good father’ in their interviews the men are also strident in describing what constitutes a ‘bad father’. Key amongst the attributes of a ‘bad father’ are ‘not being there’, ‘not being involved’ and ‘being absent’. In the antenatal interviews the men work hard to position and present themselves as preparing appropriately as fathers who will ‘be there’ and who are doing the right things (Draper, 2002a). But this remains a less clearly defined anticipatory period in which it is also easy to forget about the pregnancy. Whilst there are societal expectations that women will engage with a range of antenatal services and ‘experts’ during their pregnancy, men are expected to attend the birth and, where work permits, attend scans and perhaps a preparation class or two. From the outset the different messages conveyed through the practices and associated responsibilities surrounding pregnancy in the antenatal period begin to mark out societal expectations – and so constructions – of what fathers and mothers do.

In the study all but two of the pregnancies are described as ‘planned’. But responses to the news of impending fatherhood still draw expressions of contradictory emotions including ‘shock’, ‘massively shocked’, ‘happiness’, ‘fear’, ‘excitement’ and being ‘quietly elated’ as the enormity of the news is assimilated. As Joe describes:

The first thing I felt was just nerves, just, like, really nervous first of all, my heart started racing and it was sort of nerves and I just thought ‘Jesus’. So, yes, just really nervous, scared, happy but mainly nerves really, that it hit home that I’m going to be a dad because even though we were trying and obviously it’s great news but nerves was the first thing...I think like it just hit home, because we had talked obviously about wanting kids, but just the responsibility of it really. So I think, yeah, the responsibility and it’s going to be, like, a child that I’m going to raise and obviously have a massive impact on its life...and it’s just the responsibility, I thought ‘oh my goodness’. I was just sort of, like, 5 minutes of sort of the classic pacing around and Jane was, like, ‘are you okay?’ and I was, like, ‘yeah, I’m fine don’t worry’. It was, like, ‘bang’, loads to take in really.
Interestingly ‘responsibility’ is immediately associated with the news of impending fatherhood. Here responsibility is understood as a commitment that will involve having a ‘massive impact’ on a child’s life in ways that appear to be more than just economic but emotional too. Whilst the other fathers respond in similar ways, Gareth speaks of his ‘shock’, ‘horror’ and ‘excitement’ at the news of an unplanned pregnancy:

Shock, horror, excitement, yeah, loads actually. Shock and horror was obviously the first one because there was absolutely no planning it whatsoever, zero planning. In fact it couldn’t have come at a worse time to be perfectly honest but, yeah, so it was all that as well... but no, as time has gone on it’s probably, yeah, it’s a good thing.

But what is interesting here is that Gareth ends by asserting that ‘as time has gone on’ he sees the pregnancy as ‘a good thing’, clearly drawing upon a recognisable strand of discourse (in a pronatalist society) which acknowledges the unborn child (especially in couple relationships) as a wanted child. With the news of the pregnancy and their impending fatherhood the participants set about demonstrating their commitment and involvement in the pregnancy (and so to the unborn child) – especially to their wives/partners – whilst also feeling at times ‘detachment’. The men, then, position themselves as willing learners in this arena where they are free from assumptions that they should possess pre-existent paternal instincts or knowledge. As Stephen says:

I mean it’s such a new world for me. I know that, you know, if I go to the antenatal classes I’ll be in good hands and they’re going to teach me whatever there is to learn.

For all the men, preparation for fatherhood involves accessing information from ‘books’, ‘DVDs’, ‘TV’, ‘attendance at scans’, the ‘internet’, talking to friends who are already fathers and attendance at (some) antenatal preparation classes. All the participants talk about gleaning information from these sources – to a greater or lesser extent (‘I’ve flicked through books’). Dean talks of the ‘appropriate’ information sources he and his wife have accessed:

I mean, we’ve done the appropriate reading, subscribed to the appropriate magazines and asked the doctor when we think there’s something we need to know.
In the following extract Ben talks about his preparations:

We were thinking of going to this active birth type [class] but we brought a book instead, it was cheaper. There has been a massive pile of books that we have made our way through. That is quite good because you realise that... I don't know, it is quite empowering for the bloke to read the books about that stuff. You don't really know what is going on and what is going to happen so it is quite good to have an idea... have a sense of what is just happening at all the stages.

But he adds later:

You can imagine without having had that involvement with the scans or reading about you can almost put it to the back of your mind, you don’t know anything about what is going on.

Although the participants talk of a range of sources of information they either know about or have accessed, they also acknowledge their wife’s or partner’s role in either orchestrating this and/or being disappointed at the level of their engagement. As Ben and Chris acknowledge:

I suppose [my wife] bought books. She has been reading books all the way through and, you know, ‘look, that is what it looks like’, ‘look at the pictures’ sort of thing and... when we went to the ante-natal classes I didn’t feel huge sort of drive to read books... but I just thought it was really interesting. (Ben)

I've not been that good to be honest with you, I've been kind of leaving it to Susan a little bit, she's read hundreds of books and I've just been sort of, generally just talking to people I know who have been through the experience. I mean, I have read small amounts but nothing that much. (Chris)

Joe, too, recognises that he may not be doing all that his wife would wish:

I think she would probably really, really like it if I sort of went out and sort of read loads and loads of stuff and watched the baby channel, I know she would really like that but I just, it’s not really me.

But for Joe this is ‘not really me’, it does not coincide with his sense of self. William, too, says that his knowledge about ‘newborn stuff’ is ‘partial’ in comparison to his wife’s:
Sophie has done all the talking to other people who’ve had kids, she’s found out what’s required, what the list of newborn stuff is that we need and I haven’t really got involved in that . . . I could have made up a list which would have been so not comprehensive. It would have been such a partial list, you know, obvious stuff like a pram and a cot I would have got . . . but muslin cloths would have passed me by. How do I know about muslin cloths?

Men negotiating the antenatal period position themselves in different ways which simultaneously demonstrate ‘appropriate’ preparation and detachment and uncertainty: as men, they are not expected to know this ‘stuff’. But their narratives also reveal greater involvement in this antenatal period than their own fathers’ and earlier generations of fathers’ involvement. One public demonstration of involvement is through attendance at antenatal preparation classes and the men’s experiences of these vary. Exceptionally James, whose wife is from Eastern Europe, says he has no knowledge of these:

I’ve not heard about them . . . not read up on them, not searched them out and to be honest with you I’m not really too worried . . . I sound awful . . . If you want advice there’s, you know, my brother . . . you know, we’re surrounded by babies next door and all down the street.

But James also recognises that not knowing about these may ‘sound bad’ and points to other sources of ‘advice’ he has around him. All the other fathers have either attended or intend to go along to some form of preparation class. Gareth has been to his first antenatal class on the day we meet for his first interview and he describes what has been covered in the class:

It was basically the normal birth, the normal labour and the normal birth, the preceding events. Time scales of when this should happen and that should happen – well, as normal as you can get with things like that – and the general progression of labour really and you should expect this, you should expect that and birth plans, know your rights . . . It was just lots of to-ing and fro-ing really. The three guys, there were about fifteen women and three guys, there were three guys, thank goodness, not that any of us said anything, the whole time we just sat there open mouthed. A few things came up, what was the thing that made me . . . ? Oh, it was ‘the showing’ and if it’s black or green or this, that and the other and you’re, like, oh my goodness, I really don’t want to know about this! I guess that’s all part and parcel of it.
Gareth’s relief that ‘three guys’ had also attended the class along with the ‘fifteen women’ is palpable. So too is his sense of being out of place and privy to things he did not want to hear or know about – but also accepting that this is ‘part and parcel of it’. Stephen also talks of attending classes:

I’ve made time to go to all the actual antenatal classes and scans and things like that. I mean, just sharing that time together makes you feel involved anyway and it just sort of reinforces what’s there.

But this in part results from him having ‘not felt involved’ – but excluded – during the middle part of the pregnancy:

There was a point sort of halfway through sort of the second trimester where I felt that I wasn’t involved at all, it was a very personal thing to Claire and that was quite horrible. Trying to find ways to get in and share it and things like that. But now we’ve had a few discussions about . . . and I feel totally part of it, it’s a shared thing between us . . . I think it’s since we’ve started getting the nursery ready that I’ve felt as if I can sort of contribute a lot more as well, go out and get things and build things like the cot and put all that sort of thing together. So, yeah, definitely through that respect I’m very involved.

What is also of interest here – and because it is replicated across many of the men’s accounts – is a sense of involvement brought about through the physical (and gendered) acts of building and preparation – for example, ‘getting the nursery ready’ – and this will be returned to later. Other expressions of involvement are manifested as the men talk about supporting their wife/partner which is seen as an important part of what they can do during this antenatal period. As Mike says, ‘I suppose my main job has been to support her emotionally.’

Frank, whose wife is expecting twins, also talks of providing support and understanding:

I haven’t missed a trick, I’ve been to everything . . . I’ve got to be as supportive as I can be, you know, I want to be as prepared as I can be, understand it from Gill’s side, what she’ll be going through, so I can support her as much as I can . . .

But he also recognises the limitations in what he is able to do:

I’ve tried to be involved as much as possible, but there’s only so much you can do, you know, you can fluff the pillows and make her comfortable,
you know, try and take on more round the house, but when it comes to, at the end of the day she’s carrying them, she’s going to have the aches and pains that go with it, and there’s nothing I can do about it, so I’m totally frustrated, but I can only do what you can do, sort of thing . . . but, er, yes, I’ve said a few times, ‘I just wish I could carry them for you so you could have a break from it . . . ’

Across the men’s accounts limitations on their involvement are recognised and in some cases these lead to feelings of frustration. As Nick observes:

But the emotional response of actually carrying the baby I don’t experience and I think that’s been hard for both of us, because she often talks about the feeling that she’s got and I can’t experience the feeling. I get frustrated and I think she gets frustrated that I don’t pay attention to the feelings.

The men also acknowledge that their lives have – so far – changed very little (if at all) when compared to their pregnant partner/wife. There may have been some minor changes in behaviours such as limiting ‘trips to the pub’ and ‘not drinking as much as I would have before’. But as Joe says, his life hasn’t really changed yet:

I think for me at the minute, obviously I know I’m going to have a child in 2 months but it hasn’t really probably hit home. My life probably hasn’t really changed in the last 7 months at all really . . . it hasn’t really changed a lot to what I was doing the year before, whereas with Jane obviously it has . . . and just carrying it inside of her, she’s obviously protective of [baby]. So her life has sort of changed. I think when the child is born . . . it’s going to be, I’m going to be a lot more in shock than what Jane will be, I think, because it sort of hasn’t really sort of hit home at the minute.

The men’s tentative forays into the paternal/parental arena are, then, largely mediated by their wife/partner with regard to information accessed and read and classes attended (Vuori, 2009). But one aspect of preparation which produces a tangible sense of their having an uncontested and recognisable role is the physical preparation of a room for the baby. Here, gendered acts more traditionally associated with ‘masculine’ traits of physical strength – ‘building’, ‘painting’, ‘decorating’, DIY and preparing the house and ‘having a hand in the
big stuff’ – are described in comfortable and familiar ways by the men. In the following extracts Nick, Chris and Mike describe these physical activities in preparing for the arrival of the baby:

It probably took a couple of months to really sink in . . . I was thrilled because I’d wanted kids for ages and I was desperate to start planning and telling people and buying things. Yes. The cot arrived today and I’ve just put the cot up in the nursery and now the nursery has got everything, whereas up to yesterday it was a room with lots of stuff in it, it’s now got everything in it. Yeah, it could be any time. (Nick)

I suppose I’ve been trying to prepare the house. We’ve been buying and building baby things . . . trying to get rid of our junk, we’ve got a lot of it and we’ve only got a little house . . . so just going through those sorts of things. (Chris)

I have been decorating and doing a lot more DIY. In the past it was ‘oh, dad, can I borrow your drill or whatever?’; he’s, like ‘oh leave it out and tell me where you want it and I’ll put it up’, that sort of thing. But now I think, no, I need to start taking stock of things like that, start putting up blinds and start painting and decorating and stuff like that. And now with the advent of junior then we can actually start painting the room in relevant colours and brightening the whole place up really and making it a nice homely environment for it to come to once it’s out of the hospital . . . over the last few months we’ve been buying bits and pieces and I’ve got a cot that I sort of lived in, so to speak, and I’ve just sanded it down and painted it and that kind of thing and you sort of sit there thinking, blimey, this is for our future. (Mike)

Physical, hands-on involvement in such activities is both familiar and demonstrates ‘appropriate’ preparation. It signals a sense of maturity (‘I need to start taking stock of things like that’) and the promise of an emotional, caring and protective relationship (‘making it a nice homely environment for it to come to’) and symbolises a future and connection to the unborn baby (‘blimey, this is for our future’). But the men’s activities also denote a masculine connection to the home, a place of physical things to be worked upon – ‘to build and rebuild’ – in contrast to it being a domestic and so, by association, a ‘maternal space’ (Doucet, 2006: 196). The men’s actions, then, of physical preparation denote attempts to find more recognisably masculine and so familiar ways into this domain.
Anticipating the birth

One of the main changes that is routinely used as evidence of men’s increased involvement in fatherhood is their attendance at the birth of their children (Dermott, 2003; Mander, 2004). The timing of the antenatal interviews in this study (at between 7 and 8 months into the pregnancy) meant that the expected date of delivery could be counted in days and weeks and all the participants spoke of their intention to be at the birth. Once again their involvement in this event would be as an onlooker, supporting their wife/partner through the physical act of giving birth. It is no surprise, then, that whilst in the motherhood study hopes, fears and plans for the birth were a dominant feature of the women’s antenatal narratives they are much less an aspect of the men’s narratives. The hospital is seen by most to be the ‘safest’ place to give birth – there are two home births contemplated and one that materialises. Like the women in the earlier motherhood study, the men also draw on a discourse of nature and birth as ‘natural’ – ‘I hope it will be natural’ (Chris), ‘we are going to try it as naturally as possible’ (Frank) – as well as acknowledging that they will ‘support anything she wants’ (Dean). The ways in which the men anticipate their role at the birth is as a ‘go-between’ as they act as an ‘interpreter’ between their wife/partner and the medical staff. It will be their job to make sure ‘birth plans’ are followed and health professionals are managed: but they also recognise this could be a tricky middle ground to occupy. As Ben observes, ‘You will have to get her through, and so . . . oh shit!’ Interactions with health professionals up to the point of the birth are, not surprisingly, much less frequent for the men than for their wives/partners and evoke mixed responses. From disdainful – ‘the midwife just talks nonsense: not read the medical notes’ (James) – to, more often, expressions of confidence in their expertise.

In the following extract Ian admits that he hasn’t yet given the birth ‘a lot of thought’:

I haven’t really given that one a lot of thought, but I assume I will be there. I don’t think I’ve heard of any other people recently who haven’t been there, I think that’s the presumption there is around. I think my wife will need me there really so I’ll be there.
Ian acknowledges the ‘presumption’ that now exists around men attending the birth and Graham confirms this ‘modern convention’. He also anticipates that it could be ‘pretty stressful’:

Yes, I think it’s a modern convention really, isn’t it, the father to be there at the birth and I think we always assumed that I would be. We have talked about my role and it was a key part of the class and reassuring and if necessary being a bit of an interpreter and standing up for Rebecca to the professionals on her behalf and that sort of thing. I imagine it’s going to be a pretty stressful experience because obviously she will go through a lot of pain and worry and I sort of have to go through it [laughs] precariously with her.

Stephen, too, is concerned about aspects of the birth but also reassured that they will be ‘in really good hands in the hospital’:

I’m not a big fan of all the blood and guts and the gore and all that sort of thing. But as it’s progressed, you know, I understand that it’s going to be some moments of that, there might not be but you just don’t know. But if things do go wrong I know we’re in really good hands in the hospital and they will only do what they need to do, they won’t do anything silly basically . . . I think you just accept it; I mean, she’s got to do all the work and I’m just there to support her and make her life easier if possible.

Others are worried about how they will manage the competing demands that they feel will be placed upon them as they ‘support’ their wives/partners during the birth. As Joe reflects,

She sort of says ‘if I ask for pain relief or whatever don’t . . . make sure they don’t give me this’ . . . So, really difficult because, like, she’s said ‘I don’t want it, so if I ask for it you’ve got to be really strict’ and I’m, like, ‘well, that’s fine, but at what point do I know whether . . . ’ You’ve got to take some responsibility yourself because I’m going to look really bad . . . so hopefully it won’t get to that point.

The men are drawn (by their wives and partners) into making plans for the birth and are expected to attend the now fairly routine prebirth visit to the hospital as part of their preparation. In the following extract Ben, in contrast to his wife, appears impressed at the available hospital facilities:

I didn’t quite know what to expect, I just, I mean, I think Hannah was quite freaked out by some of the equipment in the room but it didn’t seem that
overly medical to me and it certainly didn’t seem like a (hospital) theatre at all so it seemed all quite comfortable. You could turn the lights up and down and stuff.

The very different encounters with birth which men and women anticipate (and experience) are encapsulated in this extract. Whilst Ben’s wife is ‘quite freaked out by some of the equipment in the room’ he interprets it as ‘quite comfortable’ and seems impressed that ‘you could turn the lights up and down’. As well as visiting the hospital, preparation for the birth for most involves helping to write – or think about – the ‘birth plan’ which then becomes a shared resource for the birth. Again this is a distinct change from their perceptions of their own fathers’ involvement. In the following extract Gareth contemplates the production of a birth plan:

I mean, we’ve discussed it, I mean, we’ve got, we thought we better write a birth plan about a week ago, we thought we’re getting a bit close now. Now we’ve packed the bags and everything is ready to go. And we’ve discussed some funny things like music and lighting and all this palaver. She wants to have as natural a birth as possible, but then as I said to her ‘you’ve just got to tell me when you think it’s... obviously you are going to be quite vocal anyway, you will probably be screaming for something or other as and when you feel’. We are very kind of ‘just don’t put anything in stone’, because we’ve had friends who have said ‘oh, we are going to do it this way, that way’ and it’s completely gone out of the window as soon as they have maybe gone into hospital. We’ve just said we’ll go with it and you know there are certain things that we don’t want.

Dean, too, thinks that ‘putting things in stone’ could lead to disappointment and recognises that birth might ‘hurt’ and involve ‘pain’. He is forthright in his assessment of the birth process:

We think that having expectations is probably the worst way to go about it so [we] both think if it hurts, [my wife] should get something to stop it from hurting. I’m not one who believes in pain for the sake of pain and she doesn’t believe in pain for the sake of pain and as for people who have these birth plans and everything, we think they are crazy... I mean, I don’t think it’s beautiful or anything... God seems to have done a nasty trick in terms of design, there seems to be some design flaws in the whole... [so] I support anything she wants to do. I feel, like, the decisions on the actual process of birthing, aren’t mine, they’re hers.
But most important for the participants is what the birth promises: the arrival of their first child. The men look to the birth as providing a turning point: ‘a big sudden change’ (Sean) that will mark the beginning of their physical, ‘hands-on’ involvement with their children. As James says:

to be honest with you I’m expecting – as soon as you actually can see it, feel it, touch it that’s when I think the bonding starts but until then it’s – for the guy’s... I feel a bit disconnected to be honest to you.

The men talk of ‘looking forward to meeting, seeing, holding the baby’ (Nick), and being ‘glad when I can actually see it and hopefully they will say it is alright’ (Chris), but also of anxiously waiting for the birth to start. As Frank describes in the extract below, this has turned him into ‘a big cissy’:

I can’t concentrate at work, the phone rings and I am getting jittery with it, I’m quite a level-headed person, take everything in my stride, but I’m just a nervous wreck, I just can’t concentrate on things at work, it’s kind of... a little bit disconcerting that, you think ‘come on, you big cissy, just get on with it...’

What is interesting here is the effeminate language used by Frank (‘big cissy’) which conjures up negative masculine ideals to describe what he regards as inappropriate behaviour for the workplace where he is normally ‘quite a level-headed person’ and by implication in control of himself and less emotional. The birth and anticipation of the birth have implications, then, for how the men see their selves and their shifting identities as they move closer to being a father and it is to consideration of this that we now turn.

Shifting selves

A discernible strand running through the narratives during the antenatal period involves the men envisioning themselves as fathers. This centres on their changing perceptions of a self now imagined as a father – being mature, having new responsibilities and interacting with the baby/child – and the affect of this on how they think about other areas of their lives and, most significantly, work. Once again it is noticeable that the men are less constrained in how they think about and present their selves in this period when compared to women
Making Sense of Fatherhood (Miller, 2005). Whereas women are concerned to present their changing pregnant selves in ways recognisably consistent with the ideal of the ‘good mother’, other possibilities exist for men. Not surprisingly, then, paid work is a dominant feature both in how men talk about their (changing) sense of self and in preparing for and doing fathering as it, too, is identifiable as a dimension of appropriate fatherhood. Interwoven across the narratives are recognisable, gendered patterns and associations between men’s lives and paid work, responsibilities and economic provision: but also more optimistic and different ways of ‘being there’. Most of the men speak of always thinking that at some point in their lives they will become a father. Confirmation of this news is greeted as having ‘kind of proved your virility’ and it being ‘part of the life plan’ (William) leading some to talk of feeling ‘quite grown up’ (Ben) and others of the need to ‘grow up’ (Joe) and ‘life becoming more serious’ (Dylan). In the following extracts Gareth reflects on the changes he has experienced in himself as he anticipates fatherhood:

I feel older, people probably don’t think I act any differently but I certainly feel, maybe that’s just the responsibility and the pressure and everything else, but I certainly feel, yeah… No, I definitely view myself differently now, I have to be a lot more patient. I haven’t been historically a very patient person, that is another thing I’ve had to work on as well, consciously on a minute by minute basis, you know, plenty of deep breaths. So just being able to deal with the stresses and the pressures.

He goes on to comment on what the most significant change has been:

My attitude to work really, I think. Apart from the realisation that I’m not going to have the social life that I had previously or the freedom, just the freedom of being able to go off and do whatever you want when you want. Yeah, my motivations at work, I’m kind of thinking, I’m thinking more long term now as opposed to next week, next month… So I think the fact that my attention and motivation have shifted now… So, yeah, it’s that shift between selfish short term to, yeah, long term I guess… Basically, yeah, and it’s a serious conscious effort because as I say, you know, yeah, I have travelled a lot of the world, I went to university, I’ve done all these single type things, so, yeah, to change what comes naturally is probably harder actually than most things, not being able to do what I want all the time.

Here Gareth speaks for many of the fathers as he reflects back and forth over how things have been and how they are changing. ‘Motivations at work’ have shifted and he talks of the ‘responsibility’ and ‘pressure’ he
has experienced whilst horizons move from short to long term. Implicit within the narrative is a curtailing of individual ‘freedom’, ‘single type things’ and ‘selfish’ spontaneity as he must now focus his attention on others. Joe, too, talks of having to change his behaviour:

Yeah, just like at the back of my mind I know that I’m going to be a dad and I do feel a little bit more responsible even though the baby is not born yet, if that makes sense. So even though the baby is not born I’m a little bit more worldly or wiser, I’ve got to be a bit more responsible and that sort of stuff and I can’t just stagger back [from the pus] at whatever time of night . . .

But he also wonders what other men do, trying to gauge how ‘normal’ his responses to anticipating fatherhood have been:

But I don’t know what most dads do, whether sort of most dads as soon as they find out, sort of change their life straightaway. It hasn’t really been like that to be honest, I don’t know if that’s normal or not?

Earlier Joe had confided:

Yeah, I’ve got to be honest, I don’t have many in-depth chats about the pregnancy with my friends – no.

Joe, like others in the study, alludes here to some of the differences between men’s and women’s experiences of the antenatal period. For Joe the pregnancy has not yet changed his life and it isn’t a major topic of conversation amongst his friends. He confides at the end of the interview that it has ‘been good to talk like this’, alluding to men not having the same opportunities as women to talk openly and at length about what might be seen as more emotional ‘women’s stuff’.

In the following extract Dylan, too, reflects on his need for ‘support’:

I am feeling a little bit unsupported so I have got to find extra support for [my wife] but I am not sure where it is coming from me for me. I suppose that is just me getting around to talking to people, to other dads but men don’t chatter as much . . . underlying this pride is sheer fear.

Here Dylan poignantly encapsulates feeling caught between providing support and feeling unsupported, wanting to find support through talking to other men – ‘but men don’t chatter as much’ – and wanting to present himself as a proud father-to-be but actually feeling ‘fear’. This extract lays bare how particular understandings of masculinity can shape men’s behaviour – they should be strong and proud as they anticipate fatherhood and it would imply weakness (being a ‘cissy’
as Frank said earlier) to admit to anything else. This contrasts with Gareth’s observations, as his friends who are already fathers phoned him in order to offer him the opportunity to chat:

[They were] saying, oh, I just want to say congratulations, if ever you want to chat and all this sort of stuff... It was almost more maternalistic than paternalistic.

Pregnancy, then, may be a confusing time for men, an in-between time where nothing physical is actually happening to them but they may feel a sense of change or that they should change and/or feel impending significant change in their lives. They are travelling through unknown territory as they prepare for fatherhood and the ways in which particular masculine selves are understood in this emotionally laden arena is sometimes contradictory and confusing. As Frank says:

all the talk is baby, everything is baby – we have two sets of friends, one’s just had their second, one their first, so everything is baby orientated, so I’m quite glad to escape every so often, and get off to watch rugby and just be a bloke for a couple of hours [laughs].

Just being ‘a bloke’ and engaging in an activity more clearly associated with men and masculine ways of being is much more familiar and less uncertain: here Frank can be his ‘normal’ self for a ‘couple of hours’. But implicit across Frank’s and other participants’ narratives is that life will change (‘massively’, ‘hugely’) once the baby is born. As Stephen says, ‘I’ve got to be responsible for somebody at the end of the day.’ This looming responsibility is dominant across the men’s narratives and is linked to refocusing ‘priorities’ in relation to work and home as the costs involved in providing are contemplated alongside feelings of ‘pride’ and a sense of achievement.

Anticipating fatherhood/being a father

As noted earlier, for comparative purposes the empirical chapters in this book largely follow those in the earlier companion study on motherhood (Miller, 2005). But it is noteworthy that this section on ‘anticipating fatherhood/being a father’ generated much more data than in the comparative study and so an additional section will follow. This will specifically focus upon another dominant strand in the men’s narratives: how men envisage ‘fitting fathering in’ and achieving a
‘work–life balance’. For women becoming mothers, (hopeful) anticipation of instincts and innate capacities influence their ideas of what mothering/motherhood will be like, but for men there are not the same storylines available, although they, too, talk in hopeful ways of their ‘instincts’ coming to the fore and ‘bonding’ once the baby is born – ‘hopefully all the instincts, urges and so on kick in’ (Dylan) and ‘just trying to bond’ (Mike). Yet again men are less constrained than women: they are not expected to be (naturally) knowledgeable in this reproductive domain. But they are clearly aware of societal visions (and have personal experiences) of what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fathers and corresponding constructions of masculinities and types of fatherhoods are implicit throughout their unfolding accounts.

The ‘enormity’ of becoming a father (‘it’s the biggest thing in the world having a baby’) is also recognised as being ‘for life’ (Joe). But the enormity of the event can be offset to some extent by assumptions that their wife/partner will ‘naturally’ know what to do, that a small thing like a baby (‘a little mite’) can’t be that much work and should be controllable. This is a common misperception and miscalculation between size and control which was shared by the women in the earlier motherhood study too. As William says:

I’m looking forward to that very early stage when it’s just a little mite and you can carry it and look after it very easily and it squeals and stuff but it’s not too demanding.

But at the same time there are apprehensions too about doing fathering. In the following extract Frank, whose wife is expecting twins, expresses his concerns, which resonate with those of other participants:

and handling a small baby, as I say, you know, how did I get selected to be a father, what qualifications have I got to be a father? You know . . . And yet I’m going to be able to bring little things home from the hospital without supervision. That’s a big responsibility there. You know, you get selected to do your job on a skill base or your character – father, you can become a father quite easily, it’s frightening how easy it is . . . erm . . . it’s just the . . . you know, ‘Am I up to it? Will I be able to cope with it?’ I don’t know.

In other accounts there is a clear trajectory where an older baby is envisaged as more robust and less dependent. Nick, like some other men, talks about getting through the first ‘18 months’:

Most of what I’m looking forward to is actually when our baby hits 18 months or so. I feel far more anxious and nervous about the first
18 months. I want a baby who can start, who can hold their own head, and can crawl and start learning how to walk and stuff like that and those are the bits I’m looking forward to far more than sort of the helpless baby who’s so dependent on parents.

Dean, too, has his concerns about ‘the first two years of vomiting and sleepless nights’ and Sean says he is ‘not looking forward particularly to no sleep and everything being covered in vomit’. But irrespective of their various concerns about different aspects of fathering, the narratives the men produce as they anticipate being a father are optimistic and full of hope. Their sentiments are captured by Sean:

you know, it’s that fantastic bond and the positive things I have been told, kind of everything else becomes unimportant and it’s such a kind of fantastic feeling and the parent love thing, there’s kind of such a bond, such a love and I’m kind of looking forward to that.

One result of inviting men to think about being a father is that they – not surprisingly – reflect on their own experiences of being fathered. Across their narratives it is striking just how important their relationships with their biological and/or social father (stepfather) or other male relatives has been in shaping their own fathering intentions: just how important having a male figure in a life has been for these men. Even where a biological father has been absent this may still be significant in either shaping aspects of their own impending fathering and/or providing them with an opportunity to correct what they regard as previous (unhappy) family patterns. For some, loving relationships are maintained with both their absent biological father and their long-term stepfather. Some stepfathers have been ‘fantastic’ and some resident biological fathers more remote and in one case ‘austere’ and there are hopes that the birth of a grandchild may help repair difficult relationships. Uncles, brothers and male friends with children are also referred to as paternal influences. The increasing fluidity of family formations and corresponding relationships is apparent in the lives of those in this study. But this has not deflected them from wanting children or wanting to be fathers themselves or hoping to provide consistency and

---

2 This may well be a product of a sample who were self-selected.
3 Their mothers, too, were an influence on how they anticipated parenting (rather than fathering) but because this appeared to be assumed and taken for granted it was also largely implied rather than spoken.
to ‘be there’ for their children. Exploring the ways in which earlier
generations of men have influenced these participants’ ideas also pro-
vides an opportunity to begin to see generational shifts in relation to
constructions of contemporary fatherhood ideals and practices.

Nick thinks about his own relationship with his father and acknowl-
edges:

there are bits that I think are great and I’d like to do like that but there are
certain aspects that I strongly, strongly don’t want to be like.

For Chris, too, there are some aspects of his own father he would like
to reproduce but he also describes him in this way:

quite old fashioned in many of his views . . . ever since he’s left [his job] he’s
still quite old fashioned in some ways so I don’t think I would be like that.
Well, I hope I wouldn’t be like that, but there are lots of good sides to him.

Gareth says that his father, who left the family when he was 4 years old
and was ‘always letting us down’, has provided him with ‘a blueprint
of how not to do it’. His own impending fatherhood is anticipated as
an opportunity to ‘stop the chain of events’ as ‘the history in my family
isn’t particularly good’. But, even so, there are still aspects of what his
father did that he, too, would like to do:

like, whatever he was I would like to be the opposite, not the . . . because in
some ways he was very good, but, yeah, in a lot of ways, more emotionally,
I would like to be better emotionally than he was. I mean, he was great, I
mean, he took us on holiday and introduced us to sport and things . . . But,
again, I would just like to do more of the stuff, the stuff that he did do,
I’d just like to do more of it basically. And, again, just be there from the
emotional side of things because as I say . . . not having . . . it’s good to have
two parents around, I think.

According to Joe, when he was growing up his father ‘wasn’t a sort of
stereotypical good dad’:

When my mum and dad split up when I was sixteen, that is when I got really
close, that is when really probably my dad started to become a dad to me
really. Before then you just sort of take it for granted he’s your dad but I
never really spent quality time with him. Then my mum and dad split up
and then from then really, sort of, he made a massive effort, I saw him once
or twice a week and it was then, like, we did special things, whereas before
we didn’t really do that . . . I never had with my dad growing up, but over
the last ten years or so, my dad has been great to me and my brother... I love my dad to bits and we have a great relationship with him, he's one of my best friends.

In the following extract Sean contemplates impending fatherhood and reflects on his own situation:

I guess the natural thing is you always think about your own, but my dad left years ago and had no contact. The replacement for that was my stepfather and he’s just been fantastic, so... with my stepdad when I was growing up, he was, I had a very good relationship with him, but he was always working and it’s like going back to when my brother, who takes his day off a week [to do childcare] and I like that thought of having that time. It is just wanting to be involved, wanting to be there when they’re growing up, to see things.

Across all these and the other accounts the significance of men as figures in the participants’ lives is clear. Even where their own fathers or stepfathers have been absent, inconsistent or always working or just there, they have at some level and, in significant ways, influenced the men. Interestingly, when particular events are recalled these are almost always activity based – for example, holidays, sports events or just ‘quality time’ (Doucet, 2006). These activity-based forms of engagement illuminate gendered differences in how fathering and mothering practices have traditionally been divided and these differences recur across subsequent chapters. But the men in the study also talk of wanting to be more involved, emotionally and in hands-on ways, in their children’s lives than their fathers are in theirs. Every father in the study uses the words ‘being there’ to describe how they want to father. This resonates with more contemporary ideas of ‘caring masculinities’ (Johansson and Klinth, 2007) and more fluid constructions of gender and caring practices (Doucet, 2006; Dermott, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). All the men are very clear about what constitutes a ‘good father’ (‘a responsible person’, ‘family orientated’, ‘a provider’, ‘protecting them from the big, bad world’, ‘being able to help your child develop and teach them’, ‘being there for them whatever, whenever’, ‘consistent’, ‘responsible’, ‘supportive’, ‘approachable’, ‘provider of emotional as well as materialistic things’, ‘loving’ and ‘fun’) and a

4 In a small pilot study undertaken alongside this research four teenage fathers-to-be were interviewed and all also expressed their desire and intention of ‘being there’ as a dad.
Anticipating fatherhood

‘bad father’ (‘absent’, ‘inconsistent’ and ‘unreliable’). But how will their hopes and optimistic plans of involved fatherhood be accommodated into their working lives?

Like other participants, Nick thinks that fathering has changed significantly when he compares it to his own father’s generation and recognises that men are no longer just expected to be the ‘breadwinner’:

I think it’s changed hugely. I think there is far more emphasis on fathers to be involved, fathers to be a primary carer rather than a breadwinner, for fathers to actually understand what’s happening throughout the pregnancy. I think the advent of fathers’ support groups and stuff like that, the amount of textbooks that are for fathers or have a chapter for the father, I think it’s hugely, hugely different. I think when, I know when my mum was pregnant with me, my father’s role was to make sure that we had enough income to get whatever and to every now and then stamp down an authority.

Yet, interestingly, Nick goes on to talk about now having to provide for ‘a child’ – ‘there hasn’t been a need for us to provide for each other and now I have to provide for someone else, a child’ – using language more associated with traditional ideals of the breadwinner-as-provider fatherhood discourse. In contrast to previous generations the participants all talk of contemporary fatherhood as a wide-ranging amalgam of responsibilities which are emotional as well as physical and economic and in which fathers and mothers (sometimes equally) can share. In principle, then, these ways of organising caring for children are not so caught up in gendered assumptions and/or traditional divisions which have shaped patterns of working and home life. Indeed, all the participants use the terms ‘sharing’ and ‘caring’, and sometimes ‘sharing care’, ‘equally sharing’, ‘partnership’ and ‘teamwork’, to describe their involvement in caring for their child(ren): but what do they actually envisage when they draw upon this language and position themselves in this way?

Work–life balance: ‘Fitting fathering in’

A dominant theme woven through the participants’ narratives relates to paid work. The men are employed in occupations ranging from building, catering, farming and IT to teaching, the arts, office-based jobs, medicine and the armed forces. Three of the participants are
self-employed. The participants also live in households that are almost all dual earner. All the men anticipate being significantly involved in sharing caring for their unborn child(ren) but only three of the seventeen speak of actively making plans to change the number of days they work in order to achieve this. Most say they have flexibility in their working hours which they hope will mean they can accommodate sharing care. Mike, for example, speaks of his work being ‘quite flexible so I expect to be rolling my sleeves up’. Others speak optimistically of perhaps being able to work more flexibly, but for most their involvement will have to be fitted in around (inflexible) work commitments.

Joe is the only participant to say he would like to become the parent who stays at home:

I think I’ll find it really difficult first of all once the baby is born when I go back to work after 2 weeks, because I’m going to be at work all day and Jane is going to be at home, I think I’m going to feel that I’m missing out. If it’s up to me I would love to have the year at home with the baby and bring it up myself. But, yeah, I definitely want to make a massive . . . and, like I say, it would be nice if I could spend time with just me and the baby as well. It’s going to be really scary when Jane goes out for the first time and leaves us alone together . . . Obviously 95 per cent of the time it’s going to be us three but I do want to spend time with just me and the baby to take it round the park and that sort of stuff.

What is interesting in this extract is Joe’s desire to stay home for the first year alongside his acknowledgement that it will be ‘really scary’ when he is first left alone with the baby. Like several of the other participants he wants opportunities to spend time with the baby alone to do different activities. Later he talks again of his wish that he could be the parent who stays at home but implies his wife has a greater claim:

I sort of said I’d like to and she was sort of, like, ‘no, I’d like to’, so it was never really a massive discussion, it was always going to be that Jane was going to stay at home.

In three cases the wives were not in employment at the time of the pregnancy. This was as a result of recent immigration to the country, chronic illness and full-time study.
Nick also talks about the antenatal period enabling him to ‘prepare for that primary role’:

Yeah, I’ve enjoyed looking after [my wife] and I think there’s something about preparing for that primary care role... I think there’s something there about preparing myself for that primary care, that actually it’s going to be up to me to prepare a bottle or a meal or a feed or whatever for our child.

What is interesting here is what ‘primary role’ actually means. It is not that Nick anticipates taking primary responsibility for the baby once it arrives, as the term might imply, but rather primary responsibility is related to particular tasks – preparing ‘a bottle or a meal or a feed’. What emerges from the men’s accounts of anticipating caring and involvement is how differently responsibilities of caring for a child are constructed and understood in relation to fathers and mothers. Nick can only describe his caring involvement in the way he does in the extract above because his wife is already assumed to have primary responsibility, which then enables task- and activity-based – intermittent – caring practices. This style of caring is only possible when someone else is engaged in the all-encompassing, primary caring/thinking responsibility that one parent (or someone) must assume. Others, too, envisage their involvement in similar ways to Nick. In the following extract Graham, who intends to change his working days by working the same hours but across 4 days, ponders how the ‘childcare type stuff’ will work out:

But I think as far as other childcare type stuff like bathing and nappy changing we will probably share that which I think is a good thing. I imagine I’ll quite enjoy that, at least while it’s a novelty; once it becomes a bit of a chore [laughs]... And I think for the first few weeks I think we will try and share those evenly... when I go back to work [my wife] can do more of those sort of things and I’ll just do it on my one day a week when I’m at home and perhaps we can share it at the weekend. I don’t think we’ve quite tied the details up.

Again, tasks such as ‘bathing’ and ‘nappy changing’ are drawn upon as examples of ‘childcare type stuff’ and indeed they are important facets, but they do not conjure up an overarching sense of equally shared responsibility. Sharing a sense of responsibility is something that Ben grapples with in the following extract as he acknowledges a lack of things being ‘equal’:
Well, obviously it is not equal because at first Hannah is going to have to take responsibility for feeding if that all pans out well. There is a sort of sense of shared, a very shared or a quality of kind of share in that responsibility so I will expect to be up in the night as well and just being there for them both and hopefully doing my bit, doing whatever I can.

For others, fathering involvement is something that, following paternity leave, will take place during ‘evenings’, ‘nights’, ‘weekends’ and ‘holidays’. It will involve ‘assisting’, ‘supporting’ and ‘helping’ their wife/partner in ‘lots of tasks’. These include: ‘feeding’, ‘changing nappies’, ‘bathing’, ‘dressing’, ‘putting it to bed’ and ‘getting up in the night and seeing what’s wrong’. Whilst the men talk about sharing care and ‘home–life balance’, in reality their availability is limited by their (continued) work commitments. In practice, fathering will for most be ‘task’ and ‘activity’ focused and something to be ‘fitted in’. As Dylan says:

But right from the start I would like to negotiate work so that I have, you know, sort of a day off work a week to be a father and to do childcare and to be involved and I would really like to be able to maintain that throughout my working life if possible.

What is interesting here is the way in which Dylan talks about taking ‘a day off work a week to be a father’, suggesting that the identity ‘father’ is not all consuming or conflated in the ways it is understood in relation to women as mothers. For men, a sense of self as ‘worker’ remains important both personally and as a dominant strand of hegemonic masculinities (see chapter 2). It remains acceptable for men to talk of ‘fitting fathering in’ and for work to remain important: but this means it may also be difficult for men who want to assume the primary caring role and to stay at home as full-time carer. In practice, then, although the men position themselves as involved fathers and want to be ‘more involved in doing tasks that would have been associated with a female role’ (Mike), they are also caught up in deeply embedded gendered expectations and practices. Discourses of fatherhood also continue to assume men’s economic provision for their children and the fathers recognise this. As William says:

What I’m trying to say is when I’m around the house I think I’ll be quite sort of hands-on, but there’ll be lots of time because of my job that I won’t be around the house. I’ll be making the money to kind of look after them.
Graham, too, recognises that his involvement with his child will occur mostly outside his working hours in the evening:

Just having a little part of the family, you know, something in the house which you’re going to love and playing around with it and spending time, you know, quality in the evening.

All the men plan to take time off work following the birth. This is either through the 2 weeks’ statutory paternity leave and/or saved annual holiday and there is some discussion about whether employers really ‘believe in’ paternity leave and how work colleagues without children will view it. In some ways it is the knowledge that they will have this allotted time at home following the birth of the baby that seems to herald the possibility of a qualitatively different type of involvement when compared to previous generations. Some anticipate that returning to work will ‘be a hard separation’ (Nick). Frank says his ‘biggest fear’ is that he ‘will become too attached [because] I still need to provide’. But Gareth has been told by other fathers that he may feel differently:

But, then again, I think from the guys I’ve spoken to, I think I’m probably going to be glad to go back to work.

All the men expect to be the primary, economic provider for the family in the initial months/years. They talk about ‘flexible working’, ‘flexitime’, ‘work–home balance’, ‘getting the balance right’ and possibly changing jobs as work ‘priorities’ shift, and all are clearly aware that different opportunities are available to them through new policies and legislation (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). But they also recognise that this is untrodden terrain. For example, as Chris acknowledges:

I’m hoping to reduce my hours by one day and Susan is going to do the same and then the other 3 days I think it will have to go to nursery... hope so, yes, [employers] are supposed to be quite flexible... I don’t think there are any other men who do it so it will be interesting to see.

As noted in chapter 2, the very fact of introducing new policies – for example, in relation to a parent’s right to request flexible working – does not mean that it will be taken up.

The complexities and contemporary contradictions in and around ‘paternal’ and masculine-worker identities are discernible across the men’s narratives as they describe their working/caring intentions...
Making Sense of Fatherhood

(Vuori, 2009; Plantin et al., 2003). Reconciliation between work and home for the men involves at some level recognising what they feel to be acceptable to their own sense of self as involved father, worker, provider and so on. Graham captures this when he says:

The idea of flexible working is acceptable and I think the idea that if things crop up then managers are supportive about the idea of staff having to deal with domestic issues. But I suppose I’m thinking about, I suppose, more what I find acceptable in myself . . . at the end of the year you think about what you’ve achieved and not so much what the rest of the things I’ve had to put up with, because in a way that’s irrelevant to the work context.

The way in which Graham tentatively talks about himself at work illuminates several things. It demonstrates how important work is to him and implies that having to request ‘flexible working’ to deal with ‘domestic issues’ could affect what gets achieved in the ‘work context’. Implicit, also, is the sense that what is ‘achieved’ at work is different to what goes on in the home, and achieving at work (which requires commitment) is more highly prized (certainly in wider society). Graham’s view of paid work and the importance of the work context is not perhaps surprising given the multiple ways in which masculine (and so gendered) identities are continually conflated with work and economic production – and, as a father, economic provision. These particular, hegemonic constructions of worker identity as a prized dimension of masculinity and achievement sit at odds with constructions of more involved, emotional fatherhood that the men have also envisaged, which apparently herald new possibilities. Indeed, Nick inadvertently alludes to these alternative possibilities when asked how he thinks he will be involved in caring for his child:

At this stage I want a say in everything, I want to take the baby round [the supermarket] and do the weekly shop, I want to be doing the bath and staying at home so that Shelley can go out and all that. I want everything to be divided down the middle. How much of that is a fantasy and in 6 months’ time I might be very grateful that I’m the one who is going out to work.

Clearly, then, paid work continues to be perceived as a major responsibility for these men – and (potentially) a culturally acceptable, at some level, ‘escape route’. Work shapes the ways in which the men think about their selves, providing and caring for their children (and
wives/partners) and, not surprisingly, features in plans for their futures. As Stephen says, as he thinks about the future:

It means . . . it has quite a big financial sort of meaning for me. Definitely providing for the child and Claire and, you know, just doing things like saving for a big house, really, so that the child has got a nice sort of background for when it gets older and just being together.

There is a paradox, then, that providing for a family necessarily demands a commitment not just to work but to work longer and harder in order to provide and make provision for the future. For Stephen, this involves ‘a big house’, which is envisioned more than just materially but also as part of creating and providing a ‘nice sort of background’ for his as yet unborn child.

Conclusions

There are distinct threads running across the men’s anticipatory narratives explored in this chapter, which underscore their desire and intention to be significantly involved in their child’s life. Involvement is articulated through associations with a recognisable discourse of ‘good’ fatherhood which prioritises ‘being there’ in emotional and hands-on ways. But work and economic provision are also dominant threads both in the men’s narratives and in popular discourses of involved – and so ‘good’ – fatherhood. And it is apparent that men can weave together in different ways these potentially contradictory positions whilst women may feel much more constrained by the more morally inflected discourses which shape motherhood (see chapter 6). What emerges are the contingent, uneasy and confounding dimensions of fatherhood and motherhood as recognisable and fluid categories and potential experiences. The data suggest that some men may feel inhibited by the powerful gendered expectations which continue to position them as economic providers and ‘modified breadwinners’ (O’Brien, 2005) but at the same time anticipate, assume (and may welcome) this role.

Yet, in what other ways could the men think about and express ‘being there’? What other discourses could be drawn upon that would be culturally recognisable and acceptable as masculine displays of caring and emotion? The men’s reflections on generational shifts make
clearer and more visible how they understand contemporary responsibilities and the practices of fatherhood. It also implicitly signals a sense of a developing paternal identity, which in turn is informed by, but different to, their own experiences of being fathered. Whilst the men may voice some concerns in relation to caring for a new baby and may sanction themselves (‘I sound bad, don’t I?’ says Joe as he talks about the continued importance of football in his life) they do not encounter the same ‘policing’ of their intentions and preparations as women anticipating motherhood. At some level, just by envisioning being involved and ‘being there’ – regardless of the quality of the involvement or how it will be fitted in around work – men are seen to be conforming to the ideals of ‘good’ fatherhood and so preparing appropriately.