



First-time parents' prenatal needs for early parenthood preparation-A systematic review and meta-synthesis of qualitative literature



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ABSTRACT

Objective: contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the specific needs of first-time parents specifically for early parenthood.

Method: the databases PubMed, MEDLINE, PSYCINFO, CINAHL, EMBASE, Family Studies Abstracts, and Web of Science, were searched using search terms: *prenatal, antenatal, preparation, education, parents, parenthood*. The meta-synthesis included 12 articles representing 12 studies. The meta-ethnographic approach of Nobilt and Hare was used in the meta-synthesis.

Synthesis and Findings: first-time expectant and new parents reflect a need for antenatal education to actively include male partners pre- and postnatal. Participants wished for early and realistic information about parenting skills, and to have the opportunity to seek support and help from health professionals when need arose especially during the early postnatal period. Another element was the need to learn both from peers and other new parents coming as guest speakers. Participants wished to have been well informed ahead of time, about the possible changes in their conjugal relationship and the related coping strategies.

Key conclusions: equal emphasis should be placed both during the prenatal and postnatal periods in antenatal education classes.

Implications for practice: interventions aiming at enhancing positive transitions to parenthood could be introduced early during the postnatal period. Parenthood education classes could adopt adult learning strategies that are participatory, and experiential in nature.

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Introduction

Prenatal education classes are meant to adequately prepare expectant and new parents during the transition to parenthood, on elements of the pregnancy itself, labor and childbirth, and general skills on parenting (Nolan, 1997a; Renkert and Nutbeam, 2001; Ahlden et al., 2012). However, the content of most prenatal education classes leaves parents with much to be desired (Nolan, 1997a). Most of the time spent during prenatal classes focuses on educating the expectant parents on processes of labor and childbirth, whereas scanty or no information is given about parenting skills. Elements of self-confidence, emotional health of the expectant parents, parenting skills, and the couple relationship are among the many aspects left untouched during antenatal classes (Renkert and Nutbeam, 2001). When asked in retrospect, parents report being more satisfied with preparations for childbirth, and feel far less empowered with regards to preparations for the early parenthood period (Nolan, 1997b; Nelson, 2003). This among many other factors, have led to an increasing need reflected by first-time expectant and new parents especially for practical elements about the early postnatal period.

Background

The transition to parenthood has attained a number of definitions and has been extended from the traditional definition of “the period beginning with a pregnancy and ending with a few months after birth”, to “the beginning of the transition with the couple’s decision to become pregnant and its termination when the child is between two and three years old” (Goldberg, 1988; Wright and Leahy, 1994, as cited by Polomeno, 2006, p.35). It is described as one of the most challenging transitions in life when major changes occur within the lives of expectant and new parents (Polomeno, 2006; Pinquart and Teubert, 2010).

The family undergoes a natural cycle of disorganization and reorganization, in an effort to achieve a desirable level of equilibrium (Meleis et al., 2000; Polomeno, 2014). The couple relationship during this transition is most fragile, as they have to learn to adapt to the physical, psychological, emotional, and relational changes that occur. This transition could either enhance the couple relationship or in the worst cases could lead to divorce (Cowan et al., 1985; Polomeno, 2000, 2014). Meleis et al. (2000) points out that there are a number of factors that either enhance or inhibit any kind of transitions. One such factor is preparation and knowledge; where ample time for preparation positively enhances the transition experience. Likewise, acquiring knowledge about what is yet to come and being equipped with coping strategies serves as a positive enhancer of the transition (Meleis et al., 2000).

Literature review

There have been a number of interventions focusing on various issues including psycho-social aspects of the couple relationship, to see exactly what the needs of expectant and new parents are, during the transition to parenthood. Family foundations, a preventive intervention that focusses to help couples transition to parenthood showed among many other factors, that marriage is

one of the strong predictors for the couple to remain engaged and greatly benefit from such interventions (Brown et al., 2012). A randomized controlled trial of an antenatal education program called NEWBORN in Denmark that integrated couple relationship topics as part of the intervention reported that 84% of the participants appreciated having to learn about communication skills and changes in the relationship pre- and postnatal (Axelsen et al., 2014). In a meta-analysis by Pinquart and Teubert (2010) on controlled couple-focused interventions, it was reported that the interventions had very small effects on couple communication, psychological well-being, and couple adjustments to parenthood. Stronger effects were reported if the interventions included more than five sessions of antenatal and postnatal aspects.

Svensson et al. (2009) reports of a randomized-controlled trial in Australia, of a new antenatal education program called ‘Having a Baby’ with increased parenting content as compared to the regular antenatal education. Results showed that the perceived maternal self-efficacy and perceived parenting knowledge of women in the intervention group was much higher as compared to those in the control group (Svensson et al., 2009). These findings are also supported by Ahlden et al. (2012) where the specific needs of expectant and new parents centered on being adequately prepared for parenthood and to feel confident and secure of taking care of their infant.

This, however, was not the case seen in a randomized controlled multicenter trial of two models of antenatal education in Sweden. Findings indicated that despite having been exposed to equal amounts of childbirth and parenthood education classes, satisfaction levels of the participants were low, as compared to those who were exposed to childbirth education with psychoprophylaxis (Bergström et al., 2011). Similarly, participation in childbirth and parenthood education classes did not seem to have an effect on first-time mother’s parenting skills (Fabian et al., 2005).

Other interventions have focused on meeting the needs of expectant parents by means of adopting sentiments from the CenteringPregnancy®-a form of group-based antenatal care introduced by Rising in 1994 in the United States of America (USA). It incorporates three aspects of care: education, health assessment, and supportive care (Rising, 1998; Bloomfield and Rising, 2013). In a study of four clinics in Sweden that offered group-based antenatal care, results showed that participants felt their needs for childbirth preparations were met, whereas their needs pertaining to parenthood were still unfulfilled (Andersson et al., 2012).

Results from a Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting program reported significant increases in mindfulness and positive affect, as well decreases in depression and pregnancy anxiety and negative affect (Duncan, 2010). Also, participants appreciated the benefits of using mindfulness both during the perinatal and early parenting periods (Duncan and Bardacke, 2010). Meanwhile, a Cochrane Library review of antenatal parent education classes concluded that despite the variety of ways in which antenatal education classes are delivered, evidence is still lacking on which is the best method to meet the needs of expectant parents (Gagnon and Sandall, 2007). The purpose of this review is therefore to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the specific needs of first-time parents specifically for early parenthood, and also to highlight preferred learning strategies suggested by first-time parents. The review was guided by the research question: To

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