



# 'It makes you feel like you are not alone': Expectant first-time mothers' experiences of social support within the social network, when preparing for childbirth and parenting



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## Introduction

Becoming a parent is one of the biggest transitions in a person's life [1]. A transition is an event that leads to some type of change in life, for example concerning identity or relationships. This event can be sudden but more often it is a process over time such as in childbearing [2]. A woman's transition to motherhood starts with her first pregnancy. Expectant first-time mothers can experience the transition to motherhood as overwhelming and chaotic, with mixed feelings [3,4]. Furthermore, the natural circumstances that expectant first-time mothers are about to experience as part of this transition to motherhood might make them especially vulnerable [4]. Therefore, their experience of this transition should be accompanied by opportunities to receive of support [5,6].

Support can be provided to expectant first-time mothers both by professionals (e.g. midwives) and social contacts (e.g. partner,

family, friends and colleagues); while these two sources of support are different, both are of value for the experience of childbearing [7–10]. The present study investigated social support, which is offered within one's social network and has been described as reciprocal and requiring working relationships to be effective [9–11]. In contrast, professional support is not reciprocal, is directly available and is limited to professional knowledge [12]. Acts of support can be either *emotional*, *appraisal*, *informative* or *instrumental*. *Emotional support* comprises empathy, love and trust, and it promotes a sense of safety and belonging. This type of support is crucial for a positive experience of support, which is essential if the support is to have a positive impact [9,13], such as buffering the negative effects of stress [14]. *Appraisal support* involves help with self-evaluation and promotes reassurance of the individual's ability and competence. *Informative support* is offering information to help solve an actual problem, and *instrumental support* (also referred to as *practical support*) is practical help with solving an actual problem [9,13].

In general, social support makes individuals feel like they are members of a group, in which they can share affection and aid

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[12,15]. Expectant mothers who receive satisfactory social support are at less risk of pre-term birth and are less affected by mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety, during pregnancy [16]. Furthermore, social support is considered to promote a more positive childbirth experience [6] and reduce the risk of postpartum depression [16]. Moreover, this kind of support tends to affect a range of other health outcomes for people besides expectant mothers, such as mental health, physical health, health habits and mortality risk [17,18]. This indicates that social support can serve as a protective barrier against the negative effects of mental and physical health issues, because it plays an important role in promoting health benefits. Research has also shown that promoting expectant mothers' well-being during the transition to motherhood safeguards the mental, physical and social health of babies [19,20].

Expectant mothers appear to be open to considering their lifestyle, making decisions about what kind of parent they wish to be and preparing for changes in their most important relationships. In fulfilling these objectives, professionals who come into contact with expectant mothers should provide opportunities for the latter to meet others who are going through the same life transition [10]. Professionals have been shown to play a valuable role in strengthening social support [12] for expectant mothers [21]. For professionals to take on this valuable role, it is essential that they understand expectant mothers' need for social support, their experiences of such support and its benefits. However, there is a lack of research on these aspects of social support. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore expectant first-time mothers' experiences of social support within the social network, when preparing for childbirth and parenting.

## Method

### Design and setting

To gain insight into expectant first-time mothers' experiences of social support within the social network, when preparing for childbirth and parenting, a qualitative design with interviews [22] was chosen. The study was carried out in a southwestern Swedish county consisting of urban, suburban and rural districts. The

county has approximately 280,000 inhabitants and a single hospital labour ward, where about 2600 births occur annually.

### Participants

The expectant first-time mothers were enrolled in the study by midwives in antenatal units during a prenatal assessment at gestational week 25. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) expectant first-time mothers with (2) singleton pregnancies; (3) the intention to give birth at the county hospital; and (4) the ability to understand and speak Swedish. In total, 40 expectant first-time mothers were asked to participate in the study, and 22 consented. In the end, 15 mothers, selected by strategic sampling, were included in the study. The strategic sampling was done to ensure maximum variation among the mothers in terms of age (20–37 years), place of residence (urban, suburban or rural district) and high school and/or university education. Both women in heterosexual and same-sex relationships were included in the study.

### Data collection

As stated above, the data were collected via interviews. Prior to commencing the interviews, the expectant mothers were provided with written information about the interviewer's profession (midwife/PhD student). The interviews were conducted during gestational weeks 36–38 and lasted 39–70 min. The interviews followed an interview guide comprising an open-ended question and follow-up questions. The open-ended question – *How have you prepared for childbirth and parenting?* – was aimed at allowing the expectant mothers to describe what type of social support within the social network they had received, in their preparation for childbirth and parenting. The follow-up questions were aimed at allowing the mothers to describe their experiences of the social support they had received. The questions included *Could you explain how you experienced it?* and *What has it meant for you in your preparation for childbirth and parenting?*

All interviews were conducted via telephone to increase the level of comfort as well as the possibility to participate, for the participants [23]. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed

**Table 1**  
Overview with examples of the analysis process [24].

Meaning units	Codes	Sub-categories	Generic categories	Main category
<i>It's been really important. Mainly for the feeling that we're in this together... that you are not alone, we are two in it... So, it has been great that X [name of partner] has participated in these things [different types of preparation for childbirth and parenting]... Yes, it's like a feeling of security, I guess... (W 13)</i>	Preparing with partner	Mutual preparation with partner	Mutual preparation with partner facilitated the feeling of a strengthened relationship	Social support can strengthen expectant first-time mothers' relationship with their partner and contribute to feelings of calm and security about childbirth and parenting
<i>It's clear that I'm not the only one to have a baby, but you can get feelings like that in the beginning... but when you meet these other expectant [first-time] parents, then... then it feels like you are not as much alone... (W 4)</i>	Meeting other expectant first-time parents	Sharing experiences with other expectant first-time parents facilitated feelings of recognition and belonging	Being able to share experiences with others was both strengthening and frightening	
<i>...because you get a lot [of different information] and have to mix it all together, how others [other expectant mothers or parents] have had it, and so on... it can become a lot of exaggerated facts. Because, sometimes, it can be a bit too overwhelming and then... it can be very difficult to absorb the information... especially when you are in my situation and are to give birth for the first time. (W 8)</i>	Large amount of information	Adequate amount of consistent information	Adequate information facilitated a feeling of understanding	

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