

## **The dimensions of the transition to parenthood in fathers after assisted reproductive technology**

*Francesca Agostini<sup>1</sup>, Marcella Paterlini<sup>2</sup>, Erica Neri<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

<sup>2</sup>Department of Obstetrics and Pediatrics, AUSL-IRCCS, Reggio Emilia, Italy

### **Abstract**

Perinatal transition represents a major life transition period for future parents for the activation of the caregiving system and the development of early parenting skills. This transition may be influenced by specific contexts of parenthood, such as infertility and the need to undergo Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART), which are known as highly stressful events. Nevertheless, literature on parenthood after ART has focused on mothers and less on fathers' experience. This study aimed to investigate the transition to parenthood in fathers after ART treatments, analysing the quality of both parental mental representations and father-infant interactive styles according to modality of conception (ART vs Spontaneous Conception, SC).

Forty-two fathers (17 ART, 25 SC) and their partners were recruited at Santa Maria Nuova Hospital (Reggio Emilia, Italy) during the antenatal period. The quality of parental representations was assessed at 32 gestational weeks and 3 months after childbirth, by the Semantic Differential of the IRMAG. Father-infant interactive patterns were also evaluated after birth during 5 minute-free interactions, coded by the CARE-Index.

Results showed similar mental representations between ART and SC fathers in individual (Child, Self-as-man, Partner) and parental (Self-as-parent, Own parent) characteristics. Nevertheless, ART fathers showed higher scores in Emotional Tendencies, suggesting a more intense involvement in the parenting role.

Father-infant interactions showed a similar level of sensitivity between ART and SC fathers and infants were cooperative in both groups. Anyway, considering the influence of the type of ART, infants whose fathers underwent ICSI procedure showed to be more passive.

Findings suggest the need to further investigate paternal experience during transition to parenthood after ART, to improve the understanding of fathers' difficulties and resources in developing their parental role and possibly to target specific parenting support.