

From Partners to Parents

Effects of a New Baby on the Marriage

by David L. Smoot, Ph.D.

The months of pregnancy are full of joyful anticipation for most couples. Similarly, seeing your new child for the first time and bringing him or her home are unforgettable moments in our lives. Many couples describe their marital relationship as improving as they fall more deeply in love with their spouse, work through any ambivalence or conflict, and communicate well as a team. However, by some estimates as many as half of all couples experience a decline in their marital satisfaction after the baby's birth. Mothers experience changes in their physical condition, emotions, energy, interests and attitudes. They are expected to not only be mothers but also wives, and often workers, too. Fathers go through many changes after the baby's birth as well. Although both parents experience change in their lives, evidence shows that men and women experience these changes differently. Contrary to popular belief, these differences in experiences and even some conflict can be beneficial to parents if they can discover ways to work through the following six issues:

Self vs. Team Orientation

- Couples who can surrender "me" goals and work together as a team on "we" goals experience more satisfaction after the baby arrives.
- Couples need to communicate with each other about their needs for support, help, time alone, etc.
- Parents need to talk together about their individual and couple roles and how these roles change after the baby arrives. Many husbands resent the fact that very little time is available for "couple time" after the baby is born. New mothers frequently feel torn between their roles as worker, wife and mother. Parents should work together to achieve a satisfactory balance.

Division of Labor

- Despite decades of egalitarian rhetoric, most couples still expect that the woman will (and in fact does) most of the house work and baby work, too. Couples should come to a common understanding about mutually satisfactory division of labor.
- It is often helpful for each parent to adopt a routine or responsibility for certain activities. For example, one may be responsible for feedings while the other parent may handle laundry and putting the baby down to bed.
- Parents must talk out concerns rather than harboring feelings of resentment about an unfair division of labor.

Handling Emotional Stress

- Both parents will undergo a high level of stress which comes with new parenthood. Couples should find ways to relieve stress such as take walks, exercise, relaxation, resume community activities such as church, etc.
- Couples should look for ways to find humor in their situation. They should “slow down” and take time to relish the changes in their new baby as he or she grows.
- Couples should be sure to participate in social activities. Isolation contributes to feelings of stress and tension.
- Couples should keep open the lines of communication with relatives, friends and neighbors.

Conflict Resolution

- All couples disagree on occasion. Couples should learn to handle disagreements without criticizing or tearing down each other.
- Couples should try to see the common ground between them (e.g., they both want to do what’s best for the child) when they disagree.
- Couples should maintain a pool of shared interests despite their diverging priorities as new parents.
- Couples with new children most often fight about division of labor, money, work, the marital relationship, or their social life.

Expectations

- All new parents expect change with the arrival of a new baby. However, mothers and fathers often expect different changes and never talk about their expectations.
- Both parents should realize that however good a marriage becomes post-baby, it will not be good in the same way as it was pre-baby.
- Parents should discuss the ways they expect their lives to change in terms of work, child care, contact with extended family, etc.

Communication

- Parents should strive to communicate with each other in a way that nurtures each other and the marriage rather than trying to criticize or hurt the partner.

- Parents should “seek first to understand before trying to be understood” as Steven Covey recommends. Listening to a partner and showing your understanding are often more important than solving a problem or getting in your own opinion.
- Parents must make time for each other even though so much time will be demanded by the baby, in-laws, bosses, etc. Parents may wish to develop a regular ritual for connecting with each other (e.g., over morning coffee) as soon as possible after bringing baby home.