

What to Expect When Expecting: The Transition to Parenthood

by Crissy Anderson, MSMFT

The transition to parenthood can be an exciting time for couples, full of anticipation and hope for the future. In preparing to become parents, couples often focus on childbirth and childrearing. Hospitals, bookstores, and the Internet offer extensive resources on childbirth, breastfeeding, and infant care. However, less attention is given to the couple's relationship, and the considerable changes *it* will experience when a child enters the family. Because the quality of the couple's relationship has a significant impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of the child (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005), education about the transition to parenthood can help couples better prepare themselves and their relationship for this major family transition.

Marital friendship can act as an important buffer for couples during times of stress and change, as occurs during the transition to parenthood. Shapiro, Gottman, and Carrere (2000) followed 130 newlywed couples over a period of six years and found that approximately 33% of new parents report relationship satisfaction at the same level or greater than existed before the birth of their

child. Similar results from other studies estimate that 18% of couples experience an actual increase in marital satisfaction when they become parents (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). To date, these studies have focused almost exclusively on the experience of heterosexual couples.

Factors associated with couples' continued relationship satisfaction after the birth of a child include planning the pregnancy (Cowan & Cowan, 2003), the expression of fondness and admiration by husbands to wives, and the continued awareness of one another and the relationship (Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000). In addition, one of the best predictors of relationship satisfaction after the birth of a child is the quality of the relationship before the child's birth (Gottman, Gottman, Pirak, Parthemer & the Relationship Research Institute, 2008).

Unfortunately, the same studies cited above also found that up to 67% of couples experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction after the birth of a child (Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000). Cowan and Cowan (2000) followed 96 couples over 10 years and found that the majority of couples experienced some relationship distress and a decrease in satisfaction after the transition to parenthood. Women in the study typically experienced a decline in relationship satisfaction earlier (within the first six months to a year of parenthood), and men within the second year of the child's life.

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The Family Institute at Northwestern University offers a variety of resources for couples transitioning to parenthood, including workshops, classes, groups and psychotherapy.

Both partners, and the couple's relationship, are affected when a couple becomes parents, and these changes are linked with decreases in relationship satisfaction. New mothers and fathers may experience changes in identity; physical changes such as sleep deprivation and loss of sexual interest; and increased risk of depression, especially for women. At the relationship level, couples often experience a decrease in communication, significant increases in conflict, and a shift into more traditional gender roles. Couples may also feel less available to one another, especially sexually and emotionally (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Gottman et al., 2008).

What factors predict which couples are at risk for experiencing a decrease in relationship satisfaction? Shapiro, Gottman, and Carrere (2000) found that a sense of chaos in couples' lives, husbands' negativity toward their wives, and husbands' disappointment in their marriages all predicted a decrease in marital satisfaction. Cowan and Cowan (2000) identified two key indicators of relationship dissatisfaction: relationship distance and conflict. Maintaining a sense of relationship "unity, or wholeness" (Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000, p. 67) seems to be very important. When couples lose this unity in the transition to parenthood, and also experience greater conflict, these two factors together tend to produce a decrease in marital satisfaction (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Couple Changes: A Closer Look

As mentioned previously, the birth of a child often causes parents to take on more traditional gender roles, even for couples who had an egalitarian relationship before the child's arrival. Despite couples' intentions (and efforts) to create a shared division of labor regarding housework and childcare, couples found this more challenging than expected (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). With respect to childcare, a variety of gender-based

attitudes and societal factors influenced the tendency to fall back into traditional gender roles. For example, the assumption that women are more competent new parents and should be responsible for child rearing; extended family responses to father involvement; and workplace constraints were all related to this common imbalance (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). An additional contributing factor was the “marital dance,” in which the interactions between partners around child care tend to discourage father involvement (e.g., with tasks such as breast feeding; Cowan & Cowan, 2000, p. 103).

One consequence of more traditional gender roles is fathers’ tendency to withdraw – particularly by working more and spending more time out of the house – and, as a result, becoming even less involved with household responsibilities and childrearing. Not only does this put a strain on the marital relationship but it can also minimize the father-child relationship, which is problematic because healthy father-child relationships have many important benefits. Fathers tend to engage in physical play with their children in a way that is different from mothers, and this in turn is predictive of children’s self-control and acceptance by school peers. Fathers who are emotionally available also help their children become more socially competent (Gottman et al., 2008).

Marital conflict also increases significantly after the birth of a child (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). While conflict is inevitable, certain behaviors during conflict are found to be particularly harmful to marital relationships and even predict divorce. These behaviors were identified by Gottman (1999) as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”: contempt, criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling (which occurs when one partner withdraws or “shuts down” in the midst of conflict, often due to significant physiological arousal). Shapiro and Gottman (2005) found this type

of hostile conflict is linked to emotional and psychological problems in children, while Cowan and Cowan (2000) found that increased conflict in the marital relationship led to less positive and effective parenting.

In periods of more frequent conflict, such as the transition to parenthood when stress may be high, it is particularly important for couples to avoid hostile conflict whenever possible. To do this, couples should identify their conflict behaviors that are particularly problematic and find alternative ways of communication.

Conclusion

When couples become parents, they experience changes at both the individual and relationship level. Although the majority of couples experience a decrease in marital satisfaction after the birth of a child, couples can learn to take care of their relationship during this transition (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). Several interventions have been found to be effective in this effort. For example, Gottman and Gottman developed a two-day psychoeducational workshop for expecting couples called Bringing Baby Home (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). This workshop focuses on topics such as father involvement, regulating stress and conflict, preserving intimacy, and emotional communication. Couples who participated in the workshop reported greater relationship satisfaction, less hostility, more involvement by fathers, and fewer postpartum depression symptoms in women than couples who did not (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). While research continues to investigate the effectiveness of this workshop and other interventions, current evidence suggests that seeking support can help couples protect themselves and their relationship during this transition in ways that will significantly benefit the whole family.

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