



Key Couple Transition Issues in Becoming Parents

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Couples need to deal effectively with stresses that occur in the transition to parenthood. A variety of coping strategies can help couples who face stresses that come with a new child.

Dealing effectively with stresses that occur in a couple's transition to parenthood is important. Why? It helps couples maintain a healthy couple relationship and it facilitates better parenting.

If parents can overcome differences and work together, they are much more able to respond positively to the challenges of raising a child and provide a nurturing atmosphere. This publication explores helpful resources and coping strategies for couples in the transition to parenthood.

Five key concerns that parents may encounter in the transition to parenthood are:

- Division of labor in housework and child care
- Money worries
- Relationship difficulties
- Career and work issues
- Social activities

1. Division of labor in housework and child care

A key question that new parents ask each other about housework and child care is: *Who does what?* Finding agreement and mutual satisfaction in this area is vital to overcoming these new challenges. Because infants and toddlers must be cared for every hour of the day, this is a continuous issue that parents encounter and becomes very stressful if parents do not agree on who does what in providing care. This issue often leads to more conflict and disagreement than any other. While parents do expect a baby to create more work, one mother suggested the reality is like the difference between "watching a tornado on TV and having one actually blow the roof off your house."

Helpful Coping Strategies

A key strategy for managing this transition as a couple is identifying and discussing your expectations about who will do what tasks and why. Each person carries ideas about who should be responsible

for certain child-care or household tasks – women, men or a mix of both. These are **gender expectations**. Yours might be traditional, egalitarian (sharing responsibilities equally) or transitional (who's responsible while the baby is young). Think through your expectations and compare them with your partner, then search for common ground.

Try the following approaches:

- **Make a list of specific child-care and housework tasks** (laundry, feeding the child, putting the child to sleep, getting up at night, changing diapers, making meals, etc.). Discuss how each of you feels about doing each of these tasks. Decide who will be responsible for certain things and then support each other.
- **Talk about why you have certain expectations about who will do certain tasks in caring for the child or cleaning at home.** Did your parents do it the way you expect it to be done? Do you prefer certain tasks to others? Explore your expectations with each other and be willing to make changes and compromise.
- **Focus on giving support to each other and making your child's life safe and positive.** Avoid keeping score of who does what around the house.
- Men often tend to judge their own contribution to family tasks by comparing what they do to their fathers or other male role models. Women often tend to judge men's contribution to family tasks by comparison to themselves. **Discuss how each of you judges the other person's contribution and work to understand each other's point of view.**

- **Ask each other these specific questions and discuss them:**

- Are housework and child-care tasks shared so as to be somewhat fair?
- Does each person feel that the division of tasks is fair? If not, this leads to conflict.
- What are your expectations for another's contribution?
- Do you express appreciation for each other's efforts to make a contribution?
- Have you discussed your expectations about household work and child-care responsibilities as a couple?

2. Money worries

Children cost money. Providing for family financial needs often is a concern of new parents. Who will be the main source of income? Will both parents work? What about the cost of child care? These and other questions need attention. Men may become more focused on making ends meet during this time, while women may become more focused on using money to enhance the baby's well-being.

Helpful Coping Strategies

A key strategy for dealing with money concerns is working to understand each other's patterns in thinking about and using money and managing any differences in a healthy way.

A child's arrival naturally brings differences in values and ideas to the surface. A key is not to let these differences come to be seen as glaring deficiencies in the parents' relationship. **Try the following approaches:**

- **Explore any differences you have about how to spend and manage money.** Be honest and supportive of each other.

- **Seek ways to bridge differences about money and begin to focus on creating a shared sense of family.** Discuss options with a financial counselor or take classes on budgeting and money management.

- **Create a specific family budget and add in the new costs associated with having a child.** Be specific. Make plans about how to cover new expenses and adjust to the financial aspects of raising a child.

- Though financial priorities may differ, healthy conflict management can help parents work through differences and maintain common ground. Avoid discussing money matters when you are tired, highly stressed or ill. **Set up a time to talk about money concerns and focus on solutions.**

3. Relationship difficulties

No marriage or couple relationship goes unaffected by a child's birth or arrival. Couples often may feel less connected to one another for a time. Fatigue, diverging activities and the need for mutual support contribute to this feeling. Having less time for one another and having physical and sexual affection decline significantly are typical. Each person must reserve some time for the other and make efforts to be understanding and supportive of the other's needs. Scheduling time as a couple just to talk, share feelings, express support or get away for some personal time is very important.

Helpful Coping Strategies

A key strategy for working through relationship difficulties is to understand what changes are coming to your life as a result of having a child and to adapt to those changes to grow in your relationship.

One important fact parents must face is that a child changes their relationships, especially marriage or couple relationships. These relationships still can be very meaningful but usually are not the same as before a child. Thus, parents often must adjust their expectations for each other and the relationship.

Try the following approaches:

- **Set a regular time each day to have personal time as a couple for discussion and re-connecting emotionally.** Also, find time each week to get out together as a couple and spend time together. Fifteen minutes a day can make a meaningful difference in your relationship.
- Mothers often may spend so much time and attention on a new child that little is left over for others. Do others feel they still are important and a priority? **Evaluate and make sure that each person feels included in the family circle.**
- Men may need to take more time to become emotionally involved with the care of the new child and the issues that involves. **Discuss practical ways that fathers can connect with the child through play, care of the child, feeding or providing support to mom.**
- A partner may feel his or her needs or the child's needs are ignored if a parent focuses too much on work or one's own needs. **Take five to 10 minutes a day to assess your "emotional temperature" and discern if you feel distant and disengaged or comfortable and connected with each other.**

4. Career and work issues

Today nearly 70 percent of mothers with children under the age of 6 work in part- or full-time employment. This pattern has led to higher expectations of parental role sharing and questions about who puts career desires on hold when a child comes to a family. Who picks up a child from the child-care center? Who makes arrangements to see the doctor? Who can create a more flexible schedule?

Helpful Coping Strategies

A number of approaches can help manage concerns about career or work issues after a child's arrival.

Try the following approaches:

- **As a couple, spend time discussing and planning for the family's future.** Discuss who will work and why, explore options related to work and begin planning for future adjustments.
- **Focus on the effort to work as a team rather than each person simply pursuing his or her own goals.** Parents have individual goals, desires and needs, but family goals must come first after a child joins the family. Identify family goals and work toward them together.
- **Creating a new family pattern that includes a child requires flexibility and a willingness to work together as a team.** It means moving from "you or me" to "we."

5. Social activities

Want to go shopping? Too tired. Can you go bowling on Friday night? No, we need to take the baby for pictures. Usually recreational activities, such as going to movies, eating out at restaurants or seeing friends, decline markedly after a child's birth or arrival. New parents worry about leaving a child with someone else and so may not go out at all. Mothers at home with the child may feel isolated and cut off, wishing for an adult conversation. Social activities in a couple's lives often change with the presence of a child, and so partners need to take time to adjust and discuss how they will handle such changes.

Helpful Coping Strategies

Couples need to take the time to think about their future as a couple and how their social activities may change after having a child.

Try the following approaches:

- **Communicate regularly about how to handle the shifts in your social life that may take place.** How does each person feel about the changes?
- **Continue to communicate with others you care about, including friends, family members and each other.**
- **Find opportunities to "get out" that may include walks, picnics, games or even just at-home movies or time reserved for each other.**
- **Plan to talk about other topics than the needs of the baby!** Keep communication open and share interests of what you'd like to do.

Recommended Resources – Books

- Belsky, J. & Kelly, J. (1995). *The Transition to Parenthood*. New York: Dell.
This book details the results of a landmark study of the transition to parenthood and how having a child affects family life. Very practical and insightful.
- Brott, A.A., & Ash, J. (2010). *The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips, and Advice for Dads-To-Be* (3rd ed.). New York: Abbeville Press.
Written by a respected author and scholar, this book offers practical and helpful advice for expectant fathers on becoming a new dad and making the most of parenthood.
- Cowan, C.P., & Cowan, P.A. (1999). *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*. New York: Routledge.
This book by two outstanding scholars is well-written, interesting and helpful for understanding the life changes that couples will experience when they have children and make the transition from partners to parents. Excellent resource.
- Gottman, J.G., and Gottman, J.S. (2008). *And Baby Makes Three*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
A practical, engaging and well-written book on maintaining a strong couple relationship when becoming parents. Based on credible research and proven relationship-building practices.

Recommended Resources – Organizations

- Contact your state or county health department for information on making the transition to parenthood, raising healthy children or working through concerns in the parenting process.
- *Text 4 Baby* is an educational initiative designed to assist expectant parents. Parents receive regular, personalized health information and tips via phone texts during the pregnancy and parenting process.
www.text4baby.org
- *What to Expect* has a variety of tools and educational resources to assist expectant parents and new parents in navigating the processes of pregnancy and parenthood.
www.whattoexpect.com

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- Roy, R.N., Schumm, W.R., and Britt, S.L. (2014). *Transition to parenthood*. New York: Springer.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu

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