

A variety of topics can become a concern for one partner or the other in a couple relationship and the primary issues for each person may differ. In an educational setting, facilitating an understanding of each partner's concerns and developing mutual awareness and sensitivity is helpful to coping with the transition to parenthood as a couple. Research that examines the transition to parenthood for married couples has identified some of the top issues of concern for both men and women (Belsky and Kelly 1995; Cowan and Cowan 1999).

For men, top transition issues tend to include the following:

- Financially providing for the family
- Lack of sleep and tiredness
- Increased chores and housework
- Intrusive in-laws
- Loss of free time for self and social activities
- Decline in spouse's sexual interest
- Couple disagreements about roles

For women, some of the top transition concerns tend to include the following::

- Lack of sleep and tiredness
- Changes in body figure
- Personal doubts and parental competence or skills
- Increased chores and housework
- Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety
- Individual stress about roles and responsibilities
- Change in work situation

It is important for couples to make time and discuss the particular issues of concern to them and seek ways to be supportive of each other in coping with the transition from partners to parents.

Key Transition Issues For Couples

Why is dealing effectively with the stresses of transition to parenthood important to good parenting and healthy couple relationships? **If parents are able to overcome their differences and work together, they are much more able to respond positively to the challenges of raising a child and provide a nurturing atmosphere.**

The Penn State Child and Family Development Project, a longitudinal study of the transition to parenthood by Dr. Jay Belsky, offers key insights regarding how marriage or couple relationships are affected when partners become parents (Belsky and Kelly 1995). This research suggests five critical areas of concern that couples experience in becoming parents. A brief review of each issue and suggested tips for coping are provided here.

Who Does What? Dividing Housework and Child Care

Who will change diapers and who will fold laundry and who will put the baby to bed? A key question new parents ask each other about housework and child care is: Who does what? Working toward agreement and mutual satisfaction in this area is important for overcoming the relationship or parenting challenges that follow a child's birth. Children require almost constant attention in the first months after birth, and this continual need can become very stressful if parents do not agree on who does what in providing care. Couples are often not prepared for the amount of work and attention a new child requires. One mother suggested the difference is like "watching a tornado on TV and having one actually blow the roof off your house".

Suggested tips for Coping

- Couples should identify and discuss their expectations of who will do needed tasks and why. Each partner in a couple relationship carries ideas about who should be responsible for certain child care or household tasks – women, men, or a mix of both. These ideas are typically based on gender expectations which might be traditional, egalitarian (sharing things equally), or transitional (who's responsible for such expectations such as whether parents did it a certain way or if one person prefers certain tasks to others).
- Have couples 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, etc.). Discuss how each person feels about doing each of these tasks. Decide who will be responsible for certain things and how to support each other.
- Men often tend to judge their own contribution to family tasks by comparing what they do compared to their fathers or other male role models. Women often judge men's contribution to family tasks by comparison to themselves. Explore how each person judges the other's contribution and work to understand different points of view.
- Discuss specific questions, such as: Are housework and child care tasks shared so as to be somewhat fair? Does each person feel the division of tasks is fair? What do you expect for the other's contribution? Do you express appreciation for the other person's efforts to make a contribution?

Worries About Money

Children cost money. Providing for a family's financial needs is often a concern for new parents. Who will be the main source of income? Will both parents work? Men often focus on making ends meet after a child's birth, while women focus on using money to enhance the baby's well-being. Bringing together different styles of money management can become an issue for new parents. For example, one partner might see a night out together as needed time together while a spouse might feel the money could be better spent on diapers or other needs. A key is not to let these differences be seen as glaring deficiencies in the relationship a couple shares.

Suggested tips for Coping

- Couples need to take steps to understand each other's patterns in thinking about and using money. They can be helped to explore differences about how to spend and manage money, especially once a child is born.
- It can be helpful for couples to discuss options with a financial counsellor or take classes on budgeting and money management. This allows them to seek ways to bridge differences about money and begin to focus on creating a shared sense of commitment to family well-being, rather than pulling in different directions.
- Alleviating money pressures is enhanced by creating a specific family budget and adding in the new costs associated with having a child. Such a budget needs to be specific. Couples should make plans about how to cover new expenses and also develop long-term plans for meeting the financial aspects of raising a child.

Relationship Difficulties

Couples are often surprised by the challenges that can arise in a relationship after a child's birth, and no marriage or partnership goes unaffected by this transition. It is not unusual for couples to feel less connected to each other for a period of time. Energy is diverted to caring for a baby's needs and so personal fatigue, diverging activities, and less time for mutual support contribute to this feeling. This sense of emotional distance happens because couples also have less time for one another and often decline in their expressions of physical and sexual affection. Each partner must reserve some time for the other and make efforts to be understanding and supportive of the other's needs.

Suggested tips for Coping

- It is helpful for couples to identify what changes are coming to their life as a result of having a child and what adjustments must occur. An important fact parents must face is that a child changes the marital or couple relationship. The relationship still can be very meaningful but usually is not the same as before a child. Discussing these changes helps couples to adjust their expectations for each other and the relationship.
- Daily time as a couple for discussion and reconnecting emotionally is vital. This is best accomplished through setting a regular time of at least fifteen to twenty minutes a day to connect and talk with each other.
- Mothers may spend so much time and attention on a new child that little is left over for others, while men may become overly focused on work or their own needs. Does each partner still feel that they are important and a priority to the other person? Couples should evaluate their feelings daily, take the “emotional temperature” of the relationship, and discern if either partner feels distant or disengaged rather than comfortable and connected with each other.
- Women appreciate a father's caring involvement with a child, and men may at times need to become more emotionally and physically involved in caring for the new child. Explore practical ways that fathers can connect through play, rocking the child, feeding, or just providing support to mom.



Balancing Career and Work Issues

Today almost 70% of mothers with children under the age of six work in part- or full-time employment. This means greater sharing of parental roles. It also can raise questions of who puts career desires or involvement on hold when a baby is born. Who picks up a child from the child care centre? Who makes arrangements to see the doctor? Which partner can create a more flexible work schedule? Planning and communication can help couples in negotiating career and work issues together.

Suggested tips for Coping

- As a couple, both before and following a child's birth, men and women should be encouraged to spend time discussing and planning for the family's future. They should discuss who will work and why, explore options related to work and begin planning for future needs and adjustments.
- Encourage couples to focus on the effort to work as a team in raising a family rather than each person simply pursuing his or her own personal goals. Parents have individual goals, needs and desires, but family goals must come first after a child's birth. Shared family goals help to overcome concerns in this area. It means moving from “you or me” to “we”.

Social Activities

Want to go shopping? Too tired. Can you go to dinner on Friday night? No, need to take the baby for pictures. When a baby is born, couples often spend much less time in recreational activities such as going to movies, eating out at restaurants, or seeing friends. New parents worry about leaving a child with someone else and so may not go out at all. Mothers at home with a child may feel isolated and cut off, wishing for an adult conversation. Social activities often change with the birth of a child, and partners need to take time adjusting and discussing how to handle such changes.

Suggested tips for Coping

- How does each person feel about the changes in social life that may occur with a child's birth? Communicating regularly about how to handle shifts in social life can aid in avoiding frustrating or hard feelings.
- Couples should continue communicating with others they care about and find meaningful ways of social interaction. Family members, friends, and others are often willing to visit in a couple's home, share a babysitter, or help in other ways to keep a couple connected.
- Couples should also seek opportunities to "get out" that may include walks, picnics, or even just at home movies or time reserved for each other. Communication should also include topics other than baby needs.