

## “His” and “Hers” Transition Issues

The transition into parenthood brings common stresses; however, some of these stresses may be more significant or challenging to women while others are of more significance to men (Brotherson 2004). Women and men may develop different perceptions of what the transition means for each of them, their couple relationship, and the family. One educator and scholar has noted, “Couples making the transition to parenthood experience challenges that can threaten the quality and stability of their relationships and the love that they have for each other” (Polomeno 2006, 37-38).



Many years ago, sociologist Jessie Bernard introduced the concept of “his” and “hers” marriage, suggesting that marriage or couple relationships are often different for men and women relative to how they think about and experience the relationship (Bernard 1972). It can be useful to borrow this idea in an educational setting and explore whether there might be a “his” and “hers” experience in the transition to parenthood. For example, the author developed learning activities and content material for the first lesson module in an educational curriculum on parenting young children (i.e. Bright Beginnings: Understanding and Enhancing Your Young Child’s Growth and Development). Educational experience over several years in childbirth education and other educational settings with parents has confirmed that new parents are highly responsive to learning about “his” and “hers” transition issue and the impacts on their couple relationships. Below is an example of the Transition to Parenthood Quiz for Couples and its potential application with couples making this transition in their lives (Brotherson 2004). Work with your partner (or support person) and list your individual transition issues.

### The Transition to Parenthood Quiz for Couples

#### His Transition Issues - Top 5

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Her Transition Issues - Top 5

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### Transition Issues List

- Lack of sleep and tiredness
- Changing diapers
- Expensive baby clothes
- Financially providing for the family
- Lack of time for watching television
- Dissatisfaction with personal appearance
- Concern about spouse’s needs
- Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety
- Cost of child care
- Time together as a couple
- Loss of free time for self and social activities
- Change in work situation
- Overstimulation of child
- Anxiety about child illnesses
- Increased chores and housework
- Decline in sexual interest
- Nutritional needs of the child
- Personal doubts and parental competence of skills
- Recovery from labor and delivery
- Intrusive in-laws
- Marital communication
- Changes in body figure
- Financial preparation for child’s schooling
- Individual stress and roles and responsibilities
- Couple disagreements about roles
- Decisions about child care

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".