

The Transition from Partners to Parents

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This publication is meant to help couples think about the transition issues they will experience or already may have experienced in becoming parents.

The transition to being a parent is one of the most significant life events that a person can experience. Few things change life like the birth of a child. Have you ever thought about the changes that you can anticipate with a baby's birth? Relationships? Your social life? Your emotional life? Finances? Housework? Time? Sleep?

Just as a mother needs to learn how her body and emotions will change as she prepares for a child's birth, couples need to know about the changes that may occur for them as they make the transition from partners to parents. Both parents share some changes that occur with the arrival of a child. However, men and women may experience differences in the key issues they identify as concerns in the transition to becoming a parent.

Talking about a "His vs. Hers" transition to parenthood also is accurate in some ways. This publication is meant to help couples think about the transition issues they will experience or already may have experienced in becoming parents. It also describes common transition issues and ways to cope with them.

"His" vs. "Hers" Transition to Parenthood – An Exercise

The transition to parenthood brings common stresses. However, some are more challenging to women while others are more challenging to men. To get a sense of what transition issues most affect each of you as a man or woman in the couple relationship, fill out the brief Transition Quiz in Activity 1 (*page 2*).

Activity 1 – The Transition Quiz

Select from the Transition Issues list and try to identify the top five issues for yourself and also for your partner. Have your partner do the same thing. Compare your lists and see how you are similar and different in issues that have been important to you. Use this to discuss transition issues with each other. Next, compare your responses to the top five concerns listed for men and women in general. How are you similar or different?

The Transition Quiz	
His Transition Issues – Top 5	Her Transition Issues – Top 5
1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____
4. _____	4. _____
5. _____	5. _____

Transition Issues List

- Lack of sleep and tiredness
- Changing diapers
- Expensive baby clothes
- Financially providing for the family
- Anxiety about child illnesses
- Increased chores and housework
- Decline in sexual interest
- Nutritional needs of the child
- 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 the child
- Personal doubts about parental competence or skills
- Recovery from labor and delivery
- Intrusive in-laws
- Marital communication
- Changes in body figure
- Financial preparation for child's schooling
- Individual stress about roles and responsibilities
- Couple disagreements about roles
- Decisions about child care

All of these topics can be a concern for one partner or the other in a couple relationship and the issues for each person may differ. Understanding one another's concerns and being sensitive 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 from this list for both men and women.

For men, the top transition issues tend to include:

- 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, the top transition issues tend to include:

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

Couples should take the time to discuss the particular issues that concern them and find ways to be supportive of each other in coping with the transition from partners to parents.

Key Transition Issues in Becoming a Parent

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 differences and work together, they are much more able to respond positively to the challenges of raising a child and provide a nurturing atmosphere. Some of the key concerns that parents encounter in this transition and helpful resources or strategies to cope with them are:

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 post-birth marital and parental challenges. Because infants and toddlers must be cared for almost 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 little). 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 up 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 birth 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 after a child is born. 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 partnership goes unaffected by a child's birth. 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 fathers feel 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, rocking the child, feeding or just providing support to mom.
- Women may feel their needs or the child's needs are ignored if a man focuses too much on work or his 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 is born. 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 is born. Try the following approaches:

- As a couple, both before and following a child's birth, 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's birth. 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, 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. 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 birth 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 a child's birth. Try the following approaches:

- Communicate regularly about how to handle the shifts in your social life that may take place with a child's birth. 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 or even just at-home movies or time reserved for each other. Communication often should include topics other than the needs of the baby!

Ten Tips for a Healthy Transition from Partners to Parents

Making a healthy transition from partners to parents will help you strengthen your couple relationship and provide a positive, caring environment for your new child. Apply the following ideas to your own experience and work toward a successful transition:

- **Share your expectations.** Men and women who are expecting a child should share with each other their hopes, expectations and concerns. This helps each person feel better prepared for what is to come and the realities that occur with the birth of a new child.
 - **Give yourselves regular couple “checkups.”** Couples should “take the temperature” of their relationship regularly. Ask questions. How does each of you feel about the new child in your lives? How does each person feel about the relationship right now? Discuss this when you have some quiet, uninterrupted time.
 - **Make time to talk with each other.** Babies fill up lots of time. Don’t let couple time slip away. Schedule time at least once a week for a walk alone with each other or just to talk. Even better, schedule in at least 15 minutes each day after work, before dinner or during the day.
 - **Negotiate what you will talk about.** If one person feels concerned about something, then it is a concern. However, it is easy to talk about too much at once. Agree to discuss only one or two issues at a time and focus only on solutions to those topics. The ground rule is: *Only one major topic at a time.*
 - **Be willing to experiment with new approaches.** Babies change things. What might have worked before may be difficult now, such as the time of day you connect or going out regularly with friends. Be willing to try new approaches both with your relationship and with the baby. Realize that an argument may be a signal that your relationship needs attention or a new approach. Instead of focusing on who is wrong, focus on what is happening in your lives to make things challenging and how to do things differently if needed.
 - **Don’t ignore sex and intimacy.** The physical changes that come with pregnancy and the tiredness that follows a baby’s birth really can disrupt a couple’s intimate life. Don’t ignore this topic. Recognize and pursue opportunities for nonsexual intimacy, such as touching, hugging or cuddling. Also, discuss your feelings and work to understand each other. Make adjustments as needed to this part of your life.
 - **Line up support in the early stages.** Support from others helps overcome stress — so think ahead. Contact and arrange for people or services that can be helpful or provide support before the need arises.
- Who can and will baby-sit in a pinch? Who can watch the baby while you have a night out as a couple? Make these arrangements early.
- **Talk with a friend or family member you trust.** If you struggle with the transition to being a parent or have fears, talk with a friend or family member you trust. Seek out others who can share their ideas or experiences. A listening ear can help you feel better about this new adventure.
 - **Find the balance between being a couple and being parents.** A new child consumes a lot of time and attention. Remembering you still are a couple is important. Do not abandon your relationship needs while fulfilling your child’s needs.
 - **Express your appreciation for each other and your child.** Work to remind yourselves that you have chosen to be a spouse or a parent for a reason. Focus on what you appreciate about your partner. Make a list and share it with him or her. Give your spouse a card that says what you appreciate. Say it in words. Also, tell each other what you appreciate about your child. Support each other as parents — and enjoy the adventure.

Recommended Resources

■ Books

Belsky, J. & Kelly, J. (1994). *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. (2001). *The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips, and Advice for Dads-To-Be* (2nd 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. (1992). *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*. New York: Basic Books.

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.

Jordan, P.L., Stanley, S.M., & Markman, H.J. (1999). *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.


A highly practical, engaging, and well-written guide to maintaining a strong marriage relationship when becoming parents. Based on credible research and proven relationship-building techniques.

■ Organizations

- Contact your county or state health department for information on making the transition to parenthood, raising healthy children or working through concerns with children.
- The NDSU Extension Service and North Dakota State University provide educational materials and support on issues related to child development, parenting and family life. Contact your local office of the NDSU Extension Service or regional Parent Resource Center to access information, resources and classes on these topics. Further information may be accessed on the Internet at: www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu.

■ References

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

