

What Couples Can Do

Easing into parenthood is no easy task, here is what to expect.



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We have compiled a list of things that expectant couples and new parents can do on their own to reduce the expected strain and enjoy more of the positive side of becoming a family. Although some of these ideas may sound simple and obvious, we have found that many partners think of them without actually trying them. We believe it is never too late to give them a chance.

- Share expectations. Many husbands and wives neglect to share with each other their private notions of the ideal family. They assume that once they've decided to have a baby their ideal family picture will take place spontaneously. Others are reluctant to talk about their hopes and anxieties because they are afraid disagreement or conflict might result from finding that they differ on important issues. Men and women who can talk to each other about what they hope will happen, and what they are concerned might happen, begin their lives as parents feeling better prepared to deal with both the positive and the negative realities.
- Give yourself regular "checkups." Some of the issues we describe may be a starting point for couples to talk about how they feel they are doing in the major parts of their life together. These checkups should never begin during a fight, however; they require quiet, uninterrupted time when both partners feel free to explore their reactions.
- Make time to talk to each other. We suggest that partners try to make a regular time each week to go for a walk, to talk with no interruptions--basically to touch base with each other. Many husbands and wives say the day gets away from them. By the time everything is cleaned up at night, they are too exhausted for intimate conversation. It sounds terribly artificial, but making an appointment or a date can be useful--even if the laundry or dinner dishes have to wait or the "date" must be rescheduled because of a crying baby or fatigue.

- Negotiate an agenda. If one partner feels that something is a problem, at least for now, it is a problem. We recommend discussing only one problem at a time, with an explicit agreement that other difficulties will be addressed at the next opportunity. If partners can trust that both their issues will be addressed in time, they are less likely to sabotage today's discussion.
- Adopt an experimental attitude. Regard a fight as information that something is wrong in the relationship. The trick is not to worry that you are having a struggle, or to avoid a fight. Every couple has both trivial and important issues they need to work out. Take a step back and shift from a "What are you doing wrong?" position to a "What's going on in our lives that this is happening now?" attitude.
- Don't ignore sex and intimacy. The absence of sex that usually accompanies childbirth can feel like a longtime drought. Advice columns tell you, "if you're even partially ready, go for it.". But there is a territory between deprivation and the old pattern of more frequent lovemaking. If partners are able to discuss it at all, and some find it awkward at this time, they can recognize there are opportunities for nonsexual intimacy: touching, hugging, cuddling. This is often what they miss most. Sometimes, the discovery that your partner is missing the intimacy, too, results in increased closeness. Line up support in the early stages. Consider arranging for services or people who can provide support and relief when the going gets rough. This is difficult to do when most of your attention is focused on how to juggle everything you used to do and take care of the new baby.
- Talk with a friend or co-worker. We find that participating in an ongoing group with the help of a trained mental health professional and other couples can buffer men's and women's dissatisfaction and keep marital disenchantment from getting out of hand, at least for the first few years. Although these kinds of groups are not available at this time the same kind of sharing of information might come from special friends or co-workers who are willing to talk about their experiences of being partners and parents.
- Find the delicate balance. Especially when both parents work, they may hesitate to take the additional time to nurture their relationship as a couple, because they are away from their children so many hours a week and want to spend all their nonworking hours with them. Although it clearly takes ingenuity and juggling, we believe the children will do best in their development when their mothers and fathers find ways to balance their own needs with those of their children.