

Supporting Married Couples Becoming Parents: Tips for MRE Practitioners

Background

Becoming parents is one of the biggest changes and challenges a couple can experience. Satisfaction typically declines in couple relationships over time, whether there is a new baby or not. But first time parents experience a greater and more sudden decline in marital satisfaction than married couples who are not parents. Approximately half of new parent couples experience moderate (38%) to severe (13%) declines in marital quality; approximately one-third experience no change; and 19% actually experience improved relationships. Overall, mothers experience greater declines in marital satisfaction than fathers, which is greatest when parenting infants. Declines seem to continue at least through the first few years of parenthood and may last longer if more babies are added to the family.

If couples have a 50% chance of becoming less satisfied in their relationship as they become parents, what can you do to help them move the odds in the positive direction? This Tip Sheet is for marriage/relationship educators working with married couples who are expecting a baby. It offers tips that will help practitioners facilitate practical ways to enhance the couple relationship as the couple becomes parents. For information on working with unmarried couples who are expecting, please see Additional Resources.

Keep in mind the following tips as you work with expectant couples:



- Make sure your class format is comfortable for pregnant women. It shouldn't be too hot in the classroom nor should you have long periods of time where people are required to sit. Frequent water breaks and bathroom breaks are a must.
- Even if a couple seems unprepared for parenthood, focus on the positive: they are using your resources to strengthen their relationship to be better parents.
- You may be very excited about the power of the information and skills you share with couples. Let them discover the benefits of what they are learning. Avoid making statements such as, "This is a great skill that you'll find really helpful." It can be a turn off to couples.
- Spouses are experts on themselves and their unique families. They will decide how it is best for them to do this thing called "family." Spouses get really tired of being told what they 'must' or 'should' do. Everyone seems to feel a need to give unsolicited advice to anyone who is pregnant or

parenting. Make sure your language is gentle and you treat them as the experts.

- Both spouses are becoming parents. Reinforce the importance of fathers.
- It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of the parents' couple relationship to the health and well-being of all family members.

There are more things to consider when delivering information for expectant couples:

1. Encourage spouses to make it a priority to take care of themselves.

Remind spouses that they cannot be in a healthy relationship with each other or the baby unless they first take care of themselves. It's a sign of strength and an investment in their family. These are such important words of wisdom, yet many people confuse self-care with being selfish. The majority of parents crave time for themselves. Every person is an expert on him or her self and needs to identify exactly what it is that will keep his or her personal batteries charged. Have spouses think about what they need to do and how often they need to do it to stay in touch with their core selves. Whatever it is, it needs to be a priority, and it won't happen unless spouses work as a team to take care of the baby so each can get their own self-care time at the necessary frequency. Help spouses create a schedule and put it on the family calendar so these activities are honored and protected as much as a health care appointment or important meeting would be. Listing individual self-care priorities and creating a schedule could be a great class exercise. Without self-care, spouses are likely to feel overburdened and resentful of each other and the baby.

2. Remind spouses to prioritize and take care of their couple relationship.

Too often couples neglect the foundation of their family—their own couple relationship—which creates the nest for their child's growth and development. Couple satisfaction declines when spouses' time, energy, and affection go to the baby instead of each other. Couple care consists of maintaining the 'goodies' of the relationship: growing as friends, having fun together, and being intimate in mutually satisfying ways. The 24/7 responsibility of caring for a totally dependent baby, while continuing to support the family financially and run a household, gobbles up time and saps energy. Ask couples to take time each day to talk as friends to stay connected. Remind them to limit the time they spend talking about the baby so they focus on each other. Emphasize the importance of dates and doing things for fun without the baby. Help couples create some guidelines in their relationship to protect it. Some class activities or exercises might include couples committing to statements such as:

- "We will not talk about issues in bed. Our bed is only for sleep and intimacy."
- "We will take turns planning dates so neither of us feels pressured or burdened."
- "We will find people who we trust to take care of the baby, so we can relax and not feel we need to cut our couple time short."
- "We won't let arguments spoil our couple time."

3. Encourage couples to set aside time to discuss serious issues.

Remind spouses that new parents are tired and stressed, which will make them less likely to communicate effectively and more likely to argue.

Giving each other the benefit of the doubt and making every effort to be polite, respectful, and civil will go a long way.

4. Recommend that spouses discuss their expectations.

Whether or not our reality matches our expectations greatly influences our level of satisfaction. As spouses become parents they have countless expectations of themselves, each other, their baby, and life as a family. Unfortunately many of these expectations aren't discussed. Unmet or violated expectations can lead to disappointment, anger, resentment, sadness, and/or depression. Unmet expectations are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. Lower levels of satisfaction for mothers of young children are related to what they perceive as an unfair division of labor. It is typical for one parent to feel burdened by the constant responsibility and care for the baby. It is also common for the breadwinner to feel a tremendous burden and feel left out of the family and time with the baby.

Have spouses discuss their expectations of each other. Suggest that spouses share their mental pictures of their future family. You can make this a fun activity in class by either bringing in magazines to cut up to create collages or by drawing a picture of what they want their future family to be. What should a mother do? What should a father do? Encourage spouses to be specific. How should parenting spouses treat each other? They may be surprised by the differences in their expectations and visions. Becoming aware of expectations can be the basis of negotiating who will do what in the family and meeting each other's needs. After the awareness exercise, the couple can then begin to create some common ground that will be mutually beneficial.

Becoming parents can be hard on the couple relationship. Relationship satisfaction stems from self-care and couple-care, including maintaining the 'goodies' in the couple relationship, discussing expectations, negotiating who does what, constructively dealing with conflict, and supporting each other as parents.

Additional Resources

Belsky, J., & Kelly, J. (1994). *The transition to parenthood: How a first child changes a marriage*. New York, NY: Delacourt.

Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (2000). *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dion, M. R., Avellar, S.A., Zaveri, H.H., & Hershey A.M. (2006). *Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Unmarried Couples with Children: Early Lessons for the Building Strong Families Project*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Hershey, A. M., Devaney, B., Dion, M. R., & McConnell, S. (2004). *Building Strong Families: Guidelines for Developing Programs*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/BSFguidelines.pdf>

LaRossa, R., & LaRossa, M. M. (1981). *Transition to parenthood: How infants change families*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

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