



## Parents, Lovers or Partners?

How to Have It All  
By Carma Haley Shoemaker

Researchers have found that nothing increases marital conflict like issues related to children. Whether it's disagreements about childrearing, fairly sharing the workload or maintaining a satisfying sex life, couples who have a new baby are more likely to have an argument.

"Studies have shown that in the typical family, marital satisfaction drops dramatically after children, especially for mothers," says Rick Hanson, Ph.D., co-author of *Mother Nurture* (Penguin, 2002). "In one study, researchers found couples had eight times as many arguments after children arrived."

### Why Strains Occur

A new baby typically changes the status quo in any household, and this instant change can create a substantial strain. Schedules are turned upside down, Mom and Dad aren't sleeping as much or as well, and everyday chores seem minuscule

compared to the new demands around the house.

"Most couples aren't prepared for the magnitude of such changes, and it takes time to adjust," says Stephanie I. Blum, author of *Divorce and Finances* (DK Publishing, 2000). "In that interim, tempers flare, folks are on edge, and couples tend to neglect their personal relationship. If things aren't brought under control, such chaos can easily adversely affect the couple's personal relationship."

### Common Factors

The reasons for marriage strain after Baby arrives are obvious to anyone who is a new parent: Personal stresses create short-temper; you care deeply about raising a child, yet are working with your spouse in unprecedented ways; family members who feel they have a stake in raising grandchildren, nieces or nephews may interfere; Mom may suddenly be spending more hours per week on household work and baby care than her partner does; and physical and emotional changes create sex life disturbances.

Ask any new parent what it is they miss the most about life before Baby and often the answer will be "sleep."

"One of the most common contributing factors to marriage strains after a baby comes is sleep deprivation," says Stacy D.

Phillips, a certified family law specialist at Phillips, Lerner & Lauzon in Los Angeles, Calif. "Because of it, couples aren't as kind to one another as they can or should be. Also, with a new baby, the couple suddenly finds they have little time for one another. These strains tend to introduce tension into the marriage and without remedies, can cause irreparable damage. These strains are a big problem because it introduces a new dynamic into the marriage – the couple suddenly becomes a family."

### Overcoming Strains

Of course, adding a baby doesn't spell doom for a relationship. Babies can, in the end, bring couples closer together. The important thing is to be aware of problem areas and take steps to correct them. According to Hanson, there are some basic rules that couples should keep in mind, especially when a marriage is already strained by the addition of a new member:

1. Keep a civil tongue. Try to speak accurately and constructively, and ask your partner to do the same.
2. Focus on empathy. Empathy means understanding, not necessarily agreement. Try asking three questions in a row about the inner thoughts and feelings of each other.
3. Make agreements. Come to an understanding about childrearing practices, sharing the load or how you interact. If your partner will not

keep the agreements, consider involving a third party like a therapist.

4. Make time for your relationship. Do some childrearing or housework tasks together; insist that older children leave you alone for 10 minutes so you can talk; have a regular date night; go to bed at the same time.
5. Be intimate friends, not just co-parents. On a foundation of communication and teamwork, build daily affection into your relationship. Let yourself be nurtured by the love you feel for each other. You are partners in the profound undertaking of raising your precious children.

#### **Advice to Avoid Strains**

Hanson states that often it is the mother who typically does the majority of the tasks related to home and Baby and so absorbs the majority of the strain. To offset these strains, concentrating on personal care and attention can do wonders. "I recommend a whole list of self-care suggestions for mothers," says Hanson. "By improving her personal well-being, a mom can cope better in her relationships, in her daily life and in raising her children."

#### **For Your Mind:**

1. Remember that your health and well-being matter. Your children need you to take good care of yourself, plus, you have a right to enjoy this special time.
2. Keep the needle of your stress meter out of the "red zone." Do little things throughout your day, like splashing cool water on your face or simply taking a deep breath, and it will make a big difference.
3. Take in good experiences. Notice the good moments, savor them and let them sink in.
4. Do something routinely that's calming and restorative. Examples include walking the dog, reading inspirational literature, playing music, meditating, doing an art or craft or yoga.

#### **For Your Body:**

1. Eat well. This means protein with every meal, lots of fresh vegetables and fewer refined ingredients like sugar.
2. Take high-quality supplements. Either continue your prenatal vitamins or get a good brand from a health food store; be sure to supplement essential fatty acids.
3. Make sleep a top priority. For example, nap when the baby does instead of doing housework, and

ask your partner for lots of help at night.

4. Get some exercise several times a week. You could push your child vigorously in a stroller, join a gym with good childcare or hook up with moms who go on regular walks.

Many experts recommend that couples attend parenting classes prior to the birth of their first child. Many classes, offered by the hospital where the baby will be born, offer information on how to nurture the relationship after the baby arrives. Sometimes being informed is the first step in prevention.

"There are countless books on the subject that can be most helpful in assisting new parents with ways and means to fortify their relationship through such a stressful time," says Blum. "Preparation and communication are key aspects to keeping a marriage wonderfully intact while working through the life-altering event of welcoming a permanent and new member to the household."

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