



# Tips for a Couple's Healthy 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. Also, tips for making a healthy transition to parenthood are included.

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?

Couples exist in a variety of circumstances as they undergo the transition to becoming parents. Some couples have been married partners for years; others are in a committed relationship. Yet others may be involved romantically but not expecting to have a child.

Couples may become parents through a child's birth, the adoption process, foster care or other means. The information shared in this publication applies particularly to men and women in couple relationships. Individuals making the transition to parenthood should consider their personal and couple circumstances in exploring and applying the information shared.

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, individual partners may experience differences in the key issues they identify as concerns in the transition to becoming a parent.

Talking about how individual partners may have differing concerns in the transition to parenthood is important. For example, among heterosexual couples, men and women may find that some issues are shared, while other concerns are more unique to one partner than the other.

## Partners and the Transition to Parenthood – An Exercise

The transition to parenthood brings common stresses. However, for opposite-sex couples, some issues may be more challenging for women, while others are more of a concern for men. To get a sense of what transition issues most affect each of you as a partner in the couple relationship, fill out the brief Transition to Parenthood Quiz below.

### Activity 1 – The Transition to Parenthood 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 some of the top concerns listed in general. How are you similar or different?

### The Transition to Parenthood Quiz

#### Your Transition Issues – Top 5

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

#### Partner's 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
- Anxiety about child's illnesses
- Increased chores and housework
- Decline in partner's sexual interest
- Nutritional needs of the child
- Lack of time for watching television
- Dissatisfaction with personal appearance
- Concern about partner's needs
- Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety
- Cost of child care
- Handling a fussy or upset child
- 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
- Couple 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
- Sleep challenges with the child

## 10 Tips for a Couple's 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.

Couples 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 or arrival 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 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 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, talking about too much at once is easy to do. 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 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/partner 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 partner 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.

# Managing Transition Issues in Becoming Parents

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 couples has identified some of the top issues from this list.

## **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 partner'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

Each partner in a couple relationship, whatever the circumstances of the couple, has a need to be understood. By identifying particular transition issues that may exist for a couple – concerns that are shared and those that may be unique to a single partner – couples can facilitate communication and enhance mutual understanding.

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.

Dealing effectively with the transition issues that may arise in moving from partners as a couple to parents with a child will strengthen a couple's relationship. This is important because it provides a healthier environment for raising a child. Together, couples can understand the life changes that occur in the transition to parenthood, work to resolve issues that may arise and maintain a strong couple relationship with becoming parents.

## References

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