

❖ Managing Children

Having children is clearly something to discuss with your spouse before you marry. Do you expect to have children with your spouse? How many?

Once you've decided you will have a child, you'll need to discuss with your spouse what your solutions for work and childcare may be.



Will one of you stay home after the child is born? If so, who? If so, for how long?

•
Will you work at home?

•
Will you ask family members outside of the home to provide childcare?

•
Will you hire someone from outside the home to provide childcare?

•
Will you trade childcare with a friend or neighbor?

•
Will you use the services of a daycare center?

•
What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?



Having children brings changes to a marriage. “We really wanted the baby,” Sharon says, her eyes brimming with tears. “And we still do. It just feels like we’ve grown farther apart since she came.” Jim pipes in: “Between our jobs and caring for little Samantha, there’s not much time for anything else.”

The writer Nora Ephron summed it up pretty well, saying, “When you have a baby, you set off an explosion in your marriage, and when the dust settles, your marriage is different from what it was. Not better, necessarily; not worse, necessarily; but different.”



Adding a baby to the family represents a major life change for most couples. Children can bring new meaning and depth to a family. While children certainly bring joy, most couples find that responsibilities, routines, and relationships change in some ways after the baby comes. *Many couples notice that parenthood sets off some ripples of relationship dissatisfaction for at least a couple of years after the baby arrives.* For dual-earner couples, the arrival of a child often changes the employment status of at least one partner, typically the mother. Even when these changes are desired and planned, they can be accompanied by negative feelings, maybe even depression. To add to the challenge, young babies often pick up and respond negatively to stress, and this adds to the new parents’ problems.

According to the authors of *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*, new parents like Sharon and Jim often show four related signs of stress: they keep score, their focus narrows, they resent pressures of the outside world, and they lose their perspective.

They keep score.

When stress levels are high, people begin *noticing and comparing* how much work they’re doing with what they think their partner is doing. This is always dangerous because while Sharon is well aware of all that she is doing, it’s hard for her to see everything that Jim is doing! And the things that Sharon does always seem more difficult and important to her than those that Jim



does. Lately, when she finds herself keeping score, Sharon tries to keep quiet until she can remind herself that Jim is working as hard as she is. Both she and Jim have decided that the score is likely to even out over time.

Their focus narrows.

When life gets intensely stressful with many demands, many people respond by focusing on one aspect of their lives (often the baby, work, a hobby). *This one area begins to edge out the others, and their world shrinks.* They sometimes feel that they don't have time to relax, have fun, or do things in other areas of their lives. Of course, this can be a problem because the other partner may begin to feel very resentful. Jim began focusing more and more on work in the months after the baby came. Sharon felt that she could barely make contact with him anymore. When they finally talked about this, Jim was shocked. He felt that he was being a good provider. During this emotional conversation, Jim promised to not let work take over his life.

They resent the people, pressures, and activities of the outside world.

Because time is tight and sleep is precious, new parents often feel overwhelmed by what used to be normal social ties and activities. The tendency is to cut off those pressures, and it's hard to remember that *sources of pressure can also be sources of support.* Sharon began noticing that her sister and mother were planning big family dinners far too often. The resentment built until she blew up at them one morning and accused them of trying to stretch her too thin. That's what it felt like! After cooling down and talking with Jim, Sharon realized that the family dinners were no more frequent than before the baby. And she realized that she really cherished those chances to see other family members. She and Jim worked out a plan for attending some but maybe not all the dinners. For this young family, it worked best to set realistic boundaries but keep the relationships alive.

They lose their perspective.

What used to be little things can sometimes look unbearably large after the arrival of a little one. Previously accepted standards may have to shift. Jim had never thought of himself as a neat-freak, just a somewhat-cleaner-than-average guy. When Sharon went back to work and the newly walking baby began wreaking havoc on the house, Jim felt constantly irritated. One day he blew up at Sharon. "Can't you at least get this mess cleaned up?" After some time for cooling off, Jim realized that making messes is part of the way that just-



walking babies learn about the world and that Sharon only made it home an hour before him. In the end, he decided that it was really not a big deal, certainly not worth his energy nor hurting Sharon. These problems are hard to avoid completely, but it can help to recognize them and try to have realistic expectations.

When difficulties do arise, expert John Gottman has some advice: stay calm, speak nondefensively with your partner, and take the time to express understanding of his or her position. Some couples have difficulty communicating when they're having a disagreement. When couples decide to talk about conflicts, they should avoid put-downs and negative assumptions about their partner. Rather than waiting for conflicts to occur, prevention is a wise investment.

New parents in dual-earner families are often especially challenged to find time to focus on their relationship, and many feel guilty when they do take the time. Setting aside some time, even small amounts throughout the day and week, can be very nourishing for a relationship strained by a loved but needy new child. Once the new baby has settled into a reasonably predictable pattern, new parents can actually plan some little dates throughout the day. These can be as brief as five minutes (a morning snuggle, an evening bath after baby falls asleep, and/or a brief but sincere "how was your day" followed by active listening to the response). Finding ways to have fun and nurture friendship is important. *While some dual-earner new parents feel guilty about spending nonworking time away from their child, keep in mind that a healthy relationship between two parents is the best gift they can give their child.* The parents' relationship with one another has been called the child's blueprint for his or her future relationships. It makes sense to invest in keeping your relationship strong even when time is tight.

* From *Intentional Harmony*, Angela R. Wiley, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist, University of Illinois.



Recommended Reading

- *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows.* 1999. Pamela Jordan, Scott Stanley & Howard Markman. Jossey-Bass, publisher.
- *What children learn from the parents' marriage: It may be your marriage but it's your child's blueprint for intimacy.* 2000. Judith P. Siegal. New York: HarperCollins, publisher.
- *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail.* 1994. John Gottman. Simon & Schuster, publisher.