

PARENTING TOGETHER: *A Team Approach to Caring For Baby*

Whether or not this is your first child, having a baby can take its toll on your marriage. Many mothers and fathers worry about the changes a baby brings to the family. Among these concerns are the added expenses of a new child, providing quality child care, and balancing work and family responsibilities. More often than not, couples do not stop to think how their marital relationship will change.

Nearly all couples report lower marital satisfaction after the arrival of their first child. This is understandable, normal, and preventable. The responsibilities of parenting add heavy demands on couples. Negotiating these changes can often become a source of tension. Even making an easy decision, such as deciding who does which chore, becomes an important issue for couples when they become parents. Each partner's expectations, values, and beliefs will strongly influence the couple's preferences for how these new responsibilities are handled. The opportunity for conflict is greatest when each partner has different expectations for how things should be done.

How couples manage their parenting responsibilities *now* will affect the quality of the marriage later. It's important to work out a plan that meets your personal, marital, parenting, and family needs. Here are some ways to strengthen your parenting and couple relationship.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities Where do you want to invest more of your time and energy? What are the pros and cons

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of prioritizing your roles this way? Couples often fall back on more "traditional" roles: men tend to shift more commitment and time to providing for their family, and women tend to identify with work less and prioritize parenting more. Unfortunately, this arrangement does not always work out as expected because a lot of the day-to-day child care responsibilities are unintentionally placed solely on moms, often leaving them isolated and stressed. As well, both men and women end up placing less emphasis on their marriage. Find the balance that works best for your family while making sure to take time for each other.

Share Your Thoughts Discuss in great detail with your partner the realities and needs of your own family. Couples rarely talk about the specifics of how they plan to raise and discipline their children, and often fall back on the way they were parented. Share your preferences and work out an arrangement that will meet everyone's needs. Some important questions to address may include: How will parenting responsibilities be shared? Will you need outside child care? Who does what around the house, and when?

Find Common Ground Point out the things you both agree on, and discuss ways to build from there. Where differences exist, zero in on the big picture and what you both want for your child; then negotiate ways to achieve that goal. Often, your disagreements may be diffused by understanding the root of your concern and talking about your basic ideals.



Be Open to Change The decisions you make now don't have to last forever. As you and your partner negotiate work and family responsibilities, make sure to give yourself options. Plans usually need to change as time goes by, your baby grows, or you have additional children. Agree on a time frame when you will check in with each other to see how your arrangement is working out and make any necessary changes.

Give Support Avoid expressing disapproval or dislike of each other's parenting strategies, interfering with each other's parenting efforts, and competing for the infant's attention. Instead of focusing on what you feel your partner is doing wrong, try to see things through her or his eyes



and move past what you perceive to be your partner's parenting shortcomings. Above all, communicate with your partner. Sharing your fears, concerns, and feelings as a parent can help diffuse parenting conflict and help you maintain emotional intimacy and work as a team.

Compliment Each Other Focusing on the negatives and criticizing what your partner does that you don't agree with can lead to hurt feelings, defensiveness, and communication breakdown. Instead, focus on the positives and provide constructive praise, such as "the baby really seemed to enjoy the way you played with her on the floor" or "I really like it when we take turns getting the baby ready for bed." The other parent will feel more appreciated, good about his or her parenting, and more willing to listen to your ideas.

Build on Strengths You will both bring strengths and weaknesses into your new parenting roles. Something you may find difficult your partner may be able to do with ease and vice-versa. Build on one another's strengths and weaknesses and work as a team as often as possible. You are both in this together as the new parents of your baby.

Schedule Bonding Time In attending to all the parenting, work, and household responsibilities, couple time is often ignored, or you are just too tired to think about it. Make a conscious effort to set aside at least a few minutes a day to check in with each other. Turn to friends and family for child care support so you can spend alone time together.

The Bottom Line The stress resulting from balancing work and family roles, coupled with fatigue and the seemingly endless demands of a baby, make it easy to understand how conflict in the couple relationship could increase. Although becoming a parent can challenge you and your relationship, view this transition as an opportunity to enrich your marriage – take charge of these changes and create opportunities for lasting love and connection!

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What if we're not together?

Parenting together for parents who are apart can be challenging. However, it's important for children that their parents cooperate. Here are some more ways to manage this relationship:

- **Establish clear rules.** Clarify with each other what's expected in your relationship and what feels comfortable when interacting.
- **Don't try to change the other parent.** Instead, focus on your behavior and the way you react to each other. Parents who try to control the other parent's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors end up frustrated, dissatisfied, and bitter when things don't go their way.
- **Be respectful.** Respect each other's privacy, and don't expect to get the details of his/her life. Instead, focus discussions around your child unless the other parent agrees to something different.
- **Keep agreements and appointments.** Be on time dropping off and/or picking up your child. If you promise to do something, do it. If you have difficulties honoring your commitments, let it be known and why.
- **Be flexible.** Work with each other on visitation schedules, holidays, and vacations. Remember that your child's needs change as he or she gets older.
- **Be polite.** Refrain from name-calling or bad language when referring to the other parent, particularly in front of your child. Ask yourself if what you are doing is in the best interest of your child.

Respect your child's need to love and develop positive relationships with both parents. By promoting good will in your relationship, you are investing in your child's happiness and success in life.



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or visit: www.gafamilies.org
for more helpful resources on
supporting healthy couple, marital,
and coparental relationships.*

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