Protecting the couple relationship after birth

Becoming parents can put a strain on a couple’s relationship, risking a negative impact on both the adults and their baby. Here, we aim to increase understanding of the issues so that NCT practitioners can think about the preparation and support they can provide.

Q How does having a baby affect couples?
A Although a minority of couples report an improvement in their relationship on becoming a parent, 1,2 the transition to parenthood is widely recognised as a time of relationship stress.3 A baby puts new demands on parents’ time, so nurturing a relationship can seem less important. Couples, however solid their relationship, may find they argue more and that being warm and affectionate is more difficult. They may be dealing with overwhelming tiredness which impacts on their mood.3

Women may have physical changes and/or pain to cope with, poor body image and low interest in sex.4 Almost half the first-time fathers in an NCT study described feeling closer to their partner but nearly a quarter described increased conflict.5 Who does what in the home has been identified as a major stressor for new parents.6 A lack of time both for oneself and each other has been identified as a cause for relationship unhappiness, with half of new fathers citing this as having a negative impact on their relationship.7

Any existing problems are likely to be exacerbated. There is evidence that poor communication or conflict during pregnancy predicts a greater decline in the quality of the couple relationship after the birth.8 Mental health problems are both a cause and consequence of relationship distress. However, Relate says that the top four strains for couples arise from money worries, work-life balance, infidelity and poor communication.9

Q Why is the quality of the couple relationship so important?
A Happy, fulfilling relationships are important for emotional well-being, resilience and positive sense of self, and they protect against depression.7 During the first 1,000 days, couples who have a good-quality relationship are better placed to deal with the challenges of new parenthood and interact with their child with sensitivity and warmth.7 According to the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR), positive relationships have measurable emotional, cognitive and physical benefits for children. Poor parental relationship quality and conflict lead to increased stress within the family, and parents are less able to be sensitive to the needs of their baby. The TCCR suggests that supporting couple relationships during the transition to parenthood will provide far-reaching benefits.8

Q How is the transition to parenthood different for women and their partners?
A There is an extensive literature on this subject, which merits further reading (see ‘Supporting women in the transition to motherhood: a research overview’ on p16). For example, Stern argued that the birth of a baby alters a woman’s mind-set. She may become overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility for her baby but feel her partner’s life is unchanged, and may turn towards other women, particularly her mother, which can cause her partner to feel rejected.9 Gaunt carried out a detailed study in Israel to explore whether and how women ‘manage’ their partner’s involvement with their young child and argued that the mother’s beliefs and behaviours can be significant in determining the couple’s arrangements for work and child care.10

Evidence made easy

Points for reflection
• Consider how well you prepare and support women and men for the impact of a baby on their relationship. Actively consider men’s needs, as they consistently report feeling excluded from maternity services and postnatal care.11

• Consider the needs and sensitivities of lone parents. Emotional well-being is influenced by good-quality relationships all round. How can you encourage lone parents to build and maintain strong, supportive relationships, or separated parents to work together to build a nurturing relationship with their child?

• Be mindful that intimate partner violence (physical, sexual, emotional, economic) is common, but often not disclosed. Avoid making assumptions about relationships.

A review of men’s psychological transition to fatherhood, drawing on 32 research articles, has shown that men have to do a lot of psychological work during their partner’s pregnancy to adjust to changes, and this can be stressful. The postnatal period is highly challenging, involving juggling new relationship and emotional demands with persisting societal and economic pressures.11 If fathers of young children become depressed they tend to manifest different symptoms and behaviour from women, such as increasing alcohol intake, showing aggression and taking risks (for example, having an affair).12
How can new parents nurture their relationship effectively?

- Honesty, commitment and communication are the key ingredients for a good relationship, enabling new roles and responsibilities to be negotiated, and new ways found to meet each other’s needs and adjust to changes in sexual intimacy.

The Relationships Alliance uses the ‘VSA model’ (Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation) to raise awareness about relationship quality. Relationship quality depends on three inter-related factors:

- **Vulnerabilities**, such as partners’ individual traits and experiences
- **Stressful events**, including becoming parents for the first time
- **Adaptive processes**, such as the ability to communicate effectively by listening and resolving difficulties constructively

Individuals at risk in one area are very often at risk in another. For instance, parents who do not communicate effectively are more at risk of stress. This model can provide a useful framework for working with new parents, to help them gain insights and improve their adaptive processes such as more effective communication and conflict resolution skills.

Exploring relationship changes with parents

- **Exploring how couples can show each other affection will help protect their relationship, even when there is conflict.** Brotherson S describes the model of the Vicious/Virtuous circle, which can be very powerful; small changes in behaviour can make a big difference to the couple experience.

- **Parents can be prepared for difficulties regarding who does what** by identifying and discussing their expectations before the birth and being prepared to revisit roles and responsibilities when the reality of parenthood hits.

- **Brotherson suggests practical approaches to help make a healthy transition from partners to parents, including sharing personal experiences, having regular couple ‘check-ups’, negotiating topics, lining up support early in pregnancy, talking with trusted friends, family or professionals, and expressing appreciation for each other and the child.**

References

7. Sherwood C, Kneale D, and Bloomfield B. The way we are now: the state of the UK’s relationships. London: Bloomsbury; 1998.