

## Why Newborns Cause Acrimony and Alimony

**“Differences in expectations of what parenting will bring to the marriage, and how to handle children, money, power, decisions, and chores all factor into the stresses that erode so many unions.”**

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**B**abies enter a couple's life through birth, adoption, or remarriage, creating new relationships, responsibilities, and joys. Whether a surprise, planned, or long sought, most babies are preceded with increased excitement, careful preparations, and growing hopes. Tiny clothing is bought; bedrooms are repainted; the best safety furniture and carriers obtained. Parents-in-waiting attend prenatal classes, scour books for information, and tolerate bushels of uninvited advice from family, friends, and strangers. Many couples seem overprepared, if such a thing is possible.

Yet, in the midst of this nearly obsessive planning and preparing, something often evades notice: about one in 10 couples divorce before their first child begins school. How can a baby generate such a series of emotional tidal waves that so often culminate in acrimony and alimony?

The changes in duties, income, and even the layout of the family home are anticipated; my experiences in the therapy room and with professional literature indicate that the true impact of these changes apparently strikes with little warning. If they are wise, aching new parents in hurting marriages will come for counseling before the damage is irreparable. At the beginning of counseling, Rebecca and Joshua (made-up characters) are angry, hurt, unappreciated, disappointed, and ashamed. “We always put the children first,” they say proudly, but here they are, nearly dashed onto the rocks by an eight-pound tsunami.

The little tidal wave sweeps up both parents. Mom may be pulled up towards the crest, immersed in the profound relationship with the baby, while dad is swimming against the current under 20 feet water. These roles will shift as the waves crest, break, and rise again. Changes of all sorts—from money to time to perceptions of power and responsibility—drive those waves of emotional change.

If one parent, often the mother, provides full-time care for the infant, the loss of income creates emotional tension as well as

financial stress. Betty Carter, founder and director at the Family Institute of Westchester (N.Y.), discovered in her research that the primary wage earner gradually takes on more financial decisionmaking rather than sharing decisions as when both were employed. In marriages where couples maintain separate finances, the difficulties may be compounded: “my money” and “your money” become one person's money.

When Rebecca left her job to care for the baby, she felt like a child having to ask Joshua for money each week; to her, it was like he had a checkbook and she had an allowance. Their eventual solution was to budget an amount each partner can spend on personal activities and purchases, while setting up two individual checking accounts in addition to the family account. This way, each has “my money” and there is adequate “our money.” Neither Joshua nor Rebecca will have to ask permission to have lunch with a friend or get angry about ATM transactions not entered into the family checkbook.

Reducing any feeling of dependency will have to include an effort to discuss finances in terms of “us” rather than “mine and yours.” Feeling dependent can lead to feeling powerless, to resentment and a cutoff of communication; we only can resent those whom we feel have power over us. It may be that the working parent solicits input on decisions but that the nonworking parent seemingly is reluctant to act as a full partner—but each perceives it differently; one feels stuck with full responsibility while the other feels marginalized.

Who has power over whom? While the stay-at-home parent may feel dependent and helpless, the working parent certainly is not riding the wave. According to a study published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, men who are the primary or sole wage earner for a growing family often define themselves as successful parents if they provide financially for the family, while their wives define successful parenting based on relationships with the children and their satisfaction with parenting.

Dad is under pressure to work longer hours, earn more money, and increasingly be concerned about job security and benefits; a man who previously explored his options if his current position was not satisfactory may feel painted into a corner because others completely depend on him. Where his wife perceives power, he feels pressure. Separated by a wall of water, they are at odds, with fewer resources.

If they are typical, the couple has little time to discuss their differences. New parenthood correlates with less leisure time together, fewer positive interactions between the new parents, and a sense of reduced emotional availability for both spouses. Rebecca is preoccupied with managing the baby and household duties. Joshua is working longer hours and worrying about the bills and future expenses of childrearing. Like many couples, they may avoid addressing their problems—and tension will build between them. The financial freedom they had to go places has been reduced. Both are exhausted and stressed.

Angry that Joshua is “not helping,” Rebecca turns more and more to her family and girlfriends for emotional support, discussing practical issues as well as her loneliness, need for adult companionship, and resentment towards her husband. Women, in particular, are likely to look for emotional support outside the marriage, from friends and family members. Turning primarily to outsiders for support, even extended family—rather than one another—can weaken the relationship, already challenged by financial stresses, interrupted sleep, and shifts in power and responsibility.

Differences in how men and women tend to define family roles, satisfactory parenting experiences, and their expectations for the marriage continue to foment trouble for many couples even after the first months of their child’s infancy, when the parent on leave may have returned to work.

As introduced earlier, men often define themselves as successful parents based on how well they provide for their children. Society reinforces this perspective, from the marketing for the “best” infant equipment to the expectation that the parents of young adults should finance their offspring’s education. Both men and women can fall victim to a societal message that children always must come first. Many men confess to resentment at the pressure to provide financially at the expense of getting to know and enjoy their kids, but, in line with cultural expectations, fathers often focus more on providing and less on hands-on parenting.

As published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, William Marsiglio of the University of Florida found that over 10% of fathers never take their child (age four or under) anywhere on outings alone, while 15% never read to their young offspring. Men become more involved as their children mature. Fathers spend more time with sons and outgoing daughters; quiet daughters generally are more difficult for new dads. Mothers report consistent levels of interaction with their children regardless of temperament or parental satisfaction; indeed, the cultural pressure for mothers is to put the relationship with their children above everything else. However, the balance of the family and the relationship between spouses only can suffer when their primary commitment stops being to one another.

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The differences between fathers’ and mothers’ involvement do not appear to be entirely explained by mothers being the at-home parent, as working moms spend much more time with their children than fathers do. Even the morning commute tends to include more parenting-related concerns for mothers than fathers. In many marriages, then, husbands tend to perceive, and act on, a greater range of options in their level of involvement with their children, with their wives carrying the greater part of the burden regardless of whether both parents are wage earners. In such a situation, the wife may grow to resent her husband. She perceives him as wielding more financial power and then acting on his apparent freedom to pick and choose how much to engage with his offspring. He, meanwhile, sees his previous best friend, lover, and companion putting him second, third, fourth—or lower—on the priority list despite his efforts to be a good husband and father.

Joshua, working longer hours and cutting back on his own activities, begins to shut down in the face of Rebecca’s apparent anger towards him. From his perspective, he cannot understand why she seems to be turning against him when he is doing his best to be a good husband and father. She cannot see why he does not want to spend more time with the baby. Didn’t they agree to start a family? She is returning to work and expects him to start doing his share.

The breakdown of household tasks is a common topic for general discussion, women’s magazines, and the occasional serious researcher. While many women stereotypically may complain that their husband does “nothing” around the house, research indicates this may be only a slight exaggeration. In 2004, surveys in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* revealed that, on average, a full-time working married woman with children spent over 80 minutes per workday on household tasks, while her employed spouse spent under 30. He, however, probably is working two-and-a-half to five hours more per week at a full-time job than she is, making up for some of those missed household hours. On weekends, her total time went up to almost 140 minutes, while his was just over 50. As time passes, the presence of daughters brings relief not to mother, but to father: The “mother’s helper” tends to take over chores previously done by dad, reducing his duties rather than mom’s!

Despite generally perceived changes in the inequality of male-female responsibility to children, moms still are spending more time than dads on household chores and tending to the kids. Youngsters under five require constant supervision: even a baby-proofed house can be dangerous when—if only for a moment—an adult’s back is turned. Somehow, working mothers are managing to spend well over twice as much time on chores, and perform those chores while keeping a watchful eye on children. It is arguable that those chores might take less time were she not simultaneously managing a toddler or two.

For a woman, then, children in the home tend to bring more work, restricted freedom and privilege, and less pleasurable time with her husband. Meanwhile, her husband tends to be working extra hours, worrying about finances, and looking forward to when the children are old enough for him to enjoy. While it is not a picnic for anyone, it is not surprising that mothers report greater distress during the new parenting period. It is a warning alarm for marriages that, for women, greater unhappiness with parenting is correlated to marital dissatisfaction. Essentially, for women, parenting, marriage, and self-image are part of the same package, while for men, dissatisfaction in one area can have nothing to do with another.

Interestingly, fathers often report less satisfaction with their role as parents than women, but compartmentalize this from their feelings about marriage. As women become resentful of men's decisions about finances, family time, and chores, they seek social and emotional support outside the marriage from family and friends. As fewer confidences are exchanged between the couple, emotional distance develops. As typified by Joshua and Rebecca, the gap may become a chasm if the husband feels criticized, unappreciated, or overwhelmed by his wife's disappointment and expectations, or if her attempts to make things better are not met with some compromise.

Marital researcher John Gottman, co-founder of the Seattle Marital and Family Institute and author of a number of books, including *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, has identified this turning away from one another—rather than towards one another—in times of trouble as one of the danger signs of impending marital failure. Turning away may be a case of seeming to ignore one another's efforts to mend fences or by investing emotionally outside of the marriage for needs previously met within the union. When couples stop talking about their differences, and no longer turn first to each other in times of joy and sadness, they become emotionally disengaged.

Happy marriages are correlated with low levels of distress over the challenges of parenting. Many marriage and family researchers have asserted that the quality of the marriage itself predicts the satisfaction with parenting. Healthy relationships more easily withstand the burdens of parenting. As we consider the evidence that so many new parents' marriages devolve into quagmires of power struggles over finances, parenting, and chores, it becomes clear that differences in expectations are best addressed before the baby arrives.

Besides a healthy, honest dialogue about expectations for parenting styles, couples should address how money will be handled, division of chores, who will take family medical leave to provide care for the infant, etc. Whether through family members, professional therapists, or secular or worship communities, classes and guided discussions can provide useful assistance for new parents and help short-circuit the patterns that lead to divorce preceding kindergarten for so many families. Couples preparing for parenthood would do themselves a great service by learning about one another's actual expectations of what family life will be like. In this era of smaller families, many premarital programs include discussions with long-married couples that can enlighten young people (who may have grown up with one or no siblings) about childcare, time demands of

children, and some common pitfalls of early parenting. Those of us who have grown up in large families have few illusions about the time demands of parenting and are not shocked that a newborn can take control of a household or create emotional havoc. Inexperienced parents may have misconceptions about normal child development, leading to anger, frustration, and disappointment with the parenting role. How many of us have seen steely-eyed, clenched-jawed parents striding through an amusement park pushing a stroller with an over-tired, crying child far too young to appreciate a \$75 per person, 12-hour day in what is advertised as a family heaven? A one-hour visit to a petting zoo can challenge a young family; heavily invested days of mega-amusement parks are out of line with most young children's energy and attention spans. Experienced parents or older children in large families know this. New parents from small families may not.

A primary complaint of many mothers is their mate's lack of involvement with the kids: not just in sharing the burdens of the household, but in actual engagement. One of Rebecca's main contentions is that Joshua never seems to do anything with the baby: she feels everything is left to her by default. If she does get help, she added, it is with household chores rather than spending time with the baby. Many experts cite men's relative inexperience and lack of confidence in handling babies and small children. Added to this may be a solicitous new mother's tendency to hover and correct based on what she would do; daddy may be within the bounds of correct care, but if different from mommy, she is likely to correct him. Providing training to new fathers, and encouraging new mothers to withhold all but constructive criticism can improve inexperienced fathers' confidence and comfort in accepting more responsibility for direct child care.

Coaching both parents can help them handle various situations and ease fears, perhaps unspoken, that they will "lose it" and make a terrible mistake with their child. Discussing household tasks and division of duties sounds simple, but most therapists familiar with couples' work will assert that such discussions tend not to occur under ideal circumstances. Differences in standards are a good area to seek a workable truce. This requires real listening and work: if one parent believes toddlers need daily activities (play dates, gymnastic classes, etc.) and that the house must be vacuumed daily, it may be necessary to compromise with a mate who believes that weekly—or perhaps twice-a-week—vacuuming is sufficient and that babies do not need expensive daily activities.

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Bullied by the popular media's obsession with telling parents how to build the perfect child, Rebecca scheduled exercise classes, music and reading groups, and other activities, besides holding herself up to an unrealistic expectation of household

cleanliness. Joshua, meanwhile, was more concerned with having a happy, relaxed family. He could not see the purpose in being frantic about activities that were supposed to be fun or in "driving ourselves crazy" with daily cleaning routines. Simplistic as it sounds, switching tasks for a few days can be a real eye-opener for everyone. Coaching mothers in asking for the help they need directly from their spouse and in being proactive in arranging for breaks in childcare duties to pursue adult interests is another means to improving the situation. Mothers can take advantage of fathers' hands-on time by getting out of the house, having alone time in another room, or enjoying an uninterrupted phone call. In situations where the father is the full-time, at-home parent, the roles would reverse: he needs to spend time alone or with friends.

Many couples stop having couple time in exchange for family time, leading to dissatisfaction with the marriage because the intimate emotional relationship has been subsumed into a parent-child-parent triangle. This is unhealthy for the marriage and the children. Kids learn by observation. When they see parents putting one another last, they develop this as a template for their own future relationships. Children who later have difficulty maintaining truly intimate adult relationships should not be a surprise to parents who put family time far ahead of couple time.

I routinely "prescribe" a couple's night for every family I see, even if the problem is not the couple but a child's in-school behavior. The parents are urged to set aside one evening for themselves; they do not have to go anywhere or spend money. Couples with infants can schedule this around typical feeding

times. If they have older kids, they are to send them to their rooms for an extra hour of reading before bedtime. This will provide a grown-ups' evening, as simple as a video and dinner, or a game of Scrabble, or pushing back the furniture for some dancing. Interestingly, my clients often report that their school-age children become enthusiastic about the parents' evening, for example, hearing a teenager explain to a friend, "No, we can't watch the game here. . . . It's my parents' date night. How about your house?" A kindergartner reminds the parents each Sunday, "Don't forget! It's your date night! We get to go to bed early and read." Children fear their parents divorcing. If Mom and Dad have a romantic night every week, it might be gross—but at least it's not a divorce, runs the child-logic. The youngster also is getting a powerful message about the importance of the marital relationship.

Differences in expectations of what parenting will bring to the marriage, and how to handle children, money, power, decisions, and chores all factor into the stresses that erode so many unions. A combination of education, support in seeking healthy ways to breach differences and strengthen the marital relationship, and, above all, turning towards one another to find solutions and support rather than turning separately to outsiders, serves to avoid and ameliorate the difficulties of early parenting that lead to so many fractured families before the first back-to-school night.

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