

Questions to Ask as You Consider Parenthood: A Couples' Guide¹

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There are a lot of factors to consider when thinking about becoming a parent. This article will cover some of the basic issues that it will be important to think about before deciding to become a parent. It's a process that may take quite a bit of time and energy. While there are many different ways of becoming a parent, such as adoptive parenting, foster parenting, biological parenting, and stepparenting, many things will be similar no matter what path you choose. Some considerations are important for everyone, but some will be specific to couples considering giving birth or adopting for the first time. If you are thinking about adopting, there are a number of issues to think about that will not be covered in this article, so you may wish to seek additional information.

This article is written for individual readers with the hope that both partners will read it and then talk about it with each other. A lot of what is presented here are the hard questions that you may find difficult to talk about, but they are important questions to be aware of and think about. Many people will already be leaning toward one decision over another. The purpose of this article is not to convince you (or your partner) that one decision is better than the other, but to provide topics for you to discuss as you make your decision.

Research has identified five main relationship areas for couples to think about when they are considering having a child (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). In addition to these

relationship areas, there are also situational factors to consider, including how to divide work, household tasks, and family time, finances, childcare, health and lifestyle concerns, living environment, and parenting styles. As we go through each section, we'll describe some of the changes that will occur in the five relationship areas, and then we'll list some questions you and your partner may want to ask yourselves.

1. Personal Changes

Although a lot more research has been done with women than with men, we know that both men and women go through significant changes when they become parents. The physical changes women experience throughout and after pregnancy are probably the most obvious, but there are many other important changes as well.

As people make the transition to parenthood, they may begin to describe themselves differently-- their roles, their values, and how they see themselves (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988). During and after pregnancy, many people say they are more anxious and socially isolated, and some feel more depressed and have lower self-esteem (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). However, it's important to remember that becoming a parent doesn't make you (or your partner) a different person.

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Some of these things may be more important for you to consider than others; everyone has his or her own priorities and situation. Give yourself some time to think things through. It may even be helpful to talk about your concerns with a close friend or family member. Here are some questions you may want to talk over with your partner to better determine if you are ready to be parents:

- a. Am I ready to be a parent? Do I feel as though I can deal with the additional responsibilities of caring for a child?
- b. What kind of lifestyle do I have? What kinds of changes will I need to make, such as adjustments to the amount of time I spend with friends and the hours that I keep? Do I feel good about making lifestyle changes to care for a baby?
- c. What are my personal goals and priorities concerning having a family, going to school, and/or having a career?

2. Relationship Changes for the Couple

Being a parent, especially the parent of an infant, is a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week job. The energy it takes to do this can place a large burden on a relationship. There are a few changes that many couples experience in the transition to becoming parents, especially during the first year. These include a decrease in their satisfaction with their marriage, an increase in conflict, less time together just as a couple, and a decrease in sexual activity (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). These things could be related to lack of sleep, changes that each partner is going through personally, difficulty in communicating with one another, stress around who is doing what around the house and earning money, and many other things that affect one or both of the partners, both directly and indirectly. But just as becoming a parent doesn't change who you are, it doesn't change the basics of your relationship, either (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Although becoming a parent will not ruin or rescue your relationship with your partner, it will make existing differences and conflicts stand out. According to research, the relationship you and your partner will have after becoming parents will be very similar to the relationship you had before becoming parents (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). This means that good communication and problem-solving are priceless to your relationship. Now is one of the best times to work on these things together.

You'll have your own relationship-specific questions to talk about with your partner, but these questions may help you get started in your discussion:

- a. What are your expectations about dividing work around the house and caring for the baby?
- b. What are your plans for taking time off from work or school? How do you each feel about these plans?
- c. How do you feel about the way decisions are made in your relationship? Do you feel as though you need more input into the decision of whether or not to have a baby and when?
- d. How do you feel about the ways you and your partner share intimacy? Do you have any nonsexual (but perhaps still physical) ways to be intimate? Would you like to add some things that you can do for each other to show you care?
- e. How do you spend your time now as a couple? If you have a child, how will you continue to find time for yourselves individually and as a couple?

3. Changes in Relationships with Parents

Relationships with your parents can change in a few ways as you become a parent or even consider becoming one. Your parents may still have ideas about what you should be doing in your life or what your priorities should be, and these could be different from how you view things. Your parents may already have feelings about your partner that add stress to your relationship, and this stress could increase. Your parents may also have strong feelings about what kind of a parent you should be, how you should go about caring for your child, and the religious beliefs or practices that should be passed on to your children. These issues affect you, your partner, and your relationship, and they may be issues for your partner and his/her parents as well. Talk these concerns over with your partner. You may be able to help each other, and you may also be able to understand a little bit more about why you communicate with each other the way you do.

It's also very important to remember that our parents continue to influence us even when they are not in our lives. Our feelings about our parents remain in our "emotional field" (Lerner, 1989); considering becoming a parent may stir up thoughts and feelings about your own parents. If a parent has passed away or is no longer an active part of

your lives, regardless of how long it has been this way, the transition to parenthood can be another time of grieving. Whether you or your partner grieve the loss of a relationship or the lack of one, it's important not to dismiss these feelings, as they can greatly affect you and the relationships you have with your partner and your child.

Here are some questions you may want to think about and discuss with your partner:

- a. How do my partner and I get along with our parent(s)?
- b. Am I viewed as an adult by my parent(s)?
- c. In what ways do I want my child's life to be similar to or different from my childhood?
- d. If a parent is deceased or not in our lives, how does that affect us?

4. Changes in Relationships with Those Outside of the Family

Relationships with friends, extended family, supervisors, and coworkers can also change with a pregnancy or birth of a child. Sometimes this can be for the better. You may find some new support from those who are already parents and can relate to what you're going through. On the other hand, others, even long-time, close friends, may have a difficult time adjusting to your shifting schedule and priorities. With all of the things you and your partner are going through, it's important that you do find support from others. Some questions you may want to ask are:

- a. Am I prepared for changes in my friendships?
- b. Who could I go to for emotional support and knowledge if I had a baby?
- c. How would having a baby change things for me at work? If I do decide to have a baby, what would I need to do to prepare for this in the workplace (for instance, giving notice or asking for time off, or making changes to insurance)?

5. New Demands Associated with Being a Parent

You may have heard people tell expectant parents, "Get your sleep now, because when the baby comes, you won't get any!" Not getting enough sleep or having time to take good care of yourself are common issues with all new

parents, especially in the first few months, and even in the weeks leading up to the birth. It's normal to feel overwhelmed by the amount of work and energy that it takes to take care of a newborn baby and yourself. If you or your partner has a difficult delivery or surgery, there may be an even greater need for physical rest.

If you do decide to have a baby, you should work with your partner to create schedules for caring for the baby. You may wish to try taking turns getting up with the baby, or alternating feedings during the night. When you're stressed and not getting enough sleep, it becomes easier to start thinking that your partner isn't doing enough. Talk about these feelings with your partner and try not to place blame. Chances are that your partner is having similar feelings. You may need to focus on what each of you *is* doing to see where there might be some areas for give and take. Although you will probably remain tired and stressed, talking about these things may help you both to feel that you are working together.

Some questions you might want to think about or discuss prior to having a baby are:

- a. How do each of you react when you don't get enough sleep?
- b. What are the expectations that each of you have about being up during the night with a baby?
- c. Are there family members or friends who could help out, or would it be possible to hire someone to come and stay in the home and help with childcare in the initial months?
- d. How do you respond to stress, and what helps you deal with stress?

Situational Factors

If you do decide to have a baby, you may want to prepare or make some changes ahead of time. For instance, you should consider:

Division of labor, or "who's responsible for what": Research has shown that satisfaction with the couple's relationship in general is related to satisfaction with how housework is divided (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). However, it has also been shown that many couples become more "traditional" in their division of labor after having a child, even if they didn't intend to. It's important to talk about your expectations and to take a good look at how things are going now,

before becoming parents. This could be an important place to start working on your relationship if there are disagreements about “who does what.”

Finances: How do you plan to cover the medical bills? Do you have health insurance, or can you find other resources through the community or state? If you have health insurance already, will you need to pay different premiums once you or your partner become(s) pregnant or only after the baby arrives? If you are planning on getting health insurance, find out if it will cover the costs of prenatal care and delivery *if you are pregnant before you get the insurance*. Consider your monthly budget and the extra costs that come with a baby (food, clothing, laundry, furniture, etc.), and the potential decrease in income if one or both of you takes time off work. Can you start doing some long-term planning and saving before the baby comes?

Childcare: It's very important to discuss how your child would be cared for and by whom. Will one or both of you take time off from work or school, and for how long? What are your views on babysitters and daycare? Are there quality programs you can afford in your community? Do you and your partner agree on how you will handle childcare?

Health and lifestyle: All parents-to-be should work on becoming healthier, but this is especially important for women. This means that you should try to quit smoking if you currently smoke, not take drugs unless they are prescribed to you (and ask your physician about the impact of any medication on a developing baby), stop drinking alcoholic beverages, and reduce or stop your use of caffeine. Are you ready to make these sacrifices?

You should try to eat nutritious foods, and begin taking prenatal vitamins. It is also a good idea to get regular exercise. You may want to evaluate how healthy you are and what you would need to do in order to prepare your body for a pregnancy. It is also important to think about your environment: do you spend a lot of time around smokers or in smoky environments? Are you exposed to a lot of chemicals at work or at home? All of these factors can impact the baby during and after pregnancy. You may need to consider making changes in your environment if you decide to have a baby.

Living environment: It is a good idea to think about how a baby would fit into your current living environment. For example, if you and your partner are squeezed into a small studio apartment, you may want to consider moving into a larger space. Moving may mean higher rent or mortgage costs. You will have to cover moving expenses, and you may

need to move farther away from your job or family. If you do have enough room in your current home, there may still need to be some alterations to the living environment in order to accommodate a baby. Are you ready, willing, and able to make any needed changes to your living environment?

Parenting styles: These issues will probably not be your top priority as you begin to think about having a child, but they may become more important as the baby's arrival gets closer, or in trying to resolve disagreements about how to interact with the baby once it has arrived. You may want to think about what sort of parenting style you would like to use with your child and discuss this with your partner. What are some of the values you want to emphasize in raising your child? Are they different depending on whether your child is a girl or a boy? Do you and your partner agree on these values? Do you have differences in your beliefs about discipline (e.g., the use of spanking)? Do you and your partner have religious or spiritual beliefs that you would like to share with your child? If you have different beliefs, how will you work together and what will be shared with your child? Other things to consider here are things such as whether or not you will let your baby cry if he or she has been fed and is dry, or if you will soothe the baby as soon as possible whenever he or she is upset.

Bringing it All Together

Having a child can be a wonderful and fulfilling experience, but it also can mean changes to lifestyles and relationships. There are many issues to consider, both on your own and as a couple that can help you decide whether you are ready or would like to have a child with your partner. If you do decide to have a child, it is normal for there to be problems along the way. It will take some time to create a new balance in your life and in your relationship with your partner (Pacey, 2004). However, discussion and preparation can help you and your partner have a smoother transition to parenthood.

You may feel more comfortable talking about some of these questions than others. Some questions may not seem important now, but may become so as you and your partner continue talking about becoming parents and as you actually make the transition to becoming parents. As you think about this important decision and talk with your partner, try to express yourself as honestly as possible, and try to remain open to his/her feelings and thoughts as well. Good communication won't solve all of your differences, but it may help you understand each other, and help you feel as though you are still on each other's side.

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