

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

When Baby Makes Three: Making Time for Two

Becoming parents for the first time is a significant experience, personally and for your marriage. A lifestyle that was once comfortable and familiar becomes unpredictable and perhaps stressful. Many first-time mothers and fathers share anxieties regarding the changes a baby brings to the marriage. Among these concerns are the added expenses of a new child, managing child care responsibilities, and—the biggest concern of all—how the marital relationship will change.

Nearly all couples report lower marital satisfaction after the arrival of their first child. Changes in roles and expectations place heavy demands on new parents and negotiating these changes can often become a source of tension. In fact, research on first time parents shows they not only change, but they change differently. On average, men tend to shift more commitment and time to providing for their family, whereas women tend to identify with work less and prioritize parenting more—a shift towards more traditional roles. Consequently, both men and women end up placing less emphasis and energy on their marriage.

According to Dr. Pamela Jordan, co-author of *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows* (2001, Jossey-Bass), deciding who does what becomes an important issue for couples as they become parents—whether or not it's been an issue for them before. Each partner's expectations, values, and beliefs will strongly influence the couple's preferences for how economic, child-care, and household responsibilities are divided. And, while there is no one 'best' arrangement, Dr. Jordan cautions that “when you have different expectations for how things are going to be, your opportunities for conflict are greatly increased” (p. 260). Therefore, it is important to take action and negotiate a plan to meet your unique individual, couple, and family needs.

- **Re-evaluate what roles and responsibilities are important.** Where do you want to invest more of your time and energy? What are the pros and cons of prioritizing your roles this way?
- **Share your thoughts with your partner.** Discuss, in great detail, the realities and needs of your own family. Work out an arrangement that is not only best for you, but that will work for you and your spouse as well. Some important questions to address may include: Who will work outside

the home? How will parenting responsibilities be shared? Will you need outside child care? Who does what around the house and when?

- **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.
- **Set aside time for each other.** In the businesses of attending to parenting, work, and household responsibilities, couple time is often ignored—or you are just too tired to worry 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 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!

Activity

Setting aside time to spend together as new parents is important to maintaining a healthy marriage. Take a moment to sit down with your spouse to explore ways you can make time to be alone together. When the baby goes to sleep, use that time to just sit, rest, and talk together. Spend a few minutes each morning or night to check-in and discuss the days events and plans. Plan a fun date night for just the two of you or with other adult parents. Make a list of people you trust to watch your child and call them to ask them to babysit for the night you choose, or trade-off babysitting with other parents. Make spending time one-on-one a priority and challenge yourselves to focus on each other, and not talk about household responsibilities.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

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