

AND BABY MAKES THREE

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Ah, the thrill of parenting . . . such an exciting time, filled with hopes and dreams for new couples. Couples who may have been totally focused on one another, learned to ebb and flow as one and shared everything together. Suddenly, the new baby enters their family, their home, their lives . . . the couple is now a threesome, or worse, one parent and the baby become a unit, with the other partner feeling left out and alone.

Soon, fatigue and sleep deprivation begin to catch up with the adult half of the new parent/child unit. Despite the need for relief, this sleep deprived, exhausted member of the new dyad feels compelled to live up to her/his commitment to be the best parent ever. He or she may be unintentionally pushing the partner farther and farther away. And the saga continues . . . sound familiar? For many new parents this scenario is played out upon the arrival of the first child. Some couples do not even recognize what has come between them, but feel somehow neglected by their formerly attentive partner. Others realize the source of the problem, but feel too guilty to speak those words. Many of the latter are forced to face the feelings later when a second child is born, only underscoring their feelings of shame and/or guilt. After all, who would be so selfish and needy as to put his or her feelings above the needs of a newborn child?

On the other hand, in families where one parent is assuming most of the responsibilities of caring for a child (possibly asking for assistance at times, yet receiving little or none) their feelings of resentment and hostility can have devastating long term consequences. Some suffer in silence, particularly women who believe child rearing to be the role of the female in a family. Others make their displeasure known in subtle, passive ways . . . seldom mentioning it until a confrontation occurs, yet unconsciously freezing out the partner and child much of the time. Still others become openly hostile toward their partner and/or child.

In either scenario the damage to a relationship between two partners can have long lasting and devastating effects. In the first situation mentioned, the results may not surface until another transition or crisis happens in the family. This can be the birth of another child, or when the last child leaves home to enter the world of adulthood. At that time the adult partners are often forced to recognize that their

relationship as a couple is in trouble. Others make it through the "empty nest stage" mentioned here, only to have retirement trigger this awareness. Many marriages survive, and the relationship is renewed . . . but more than 50% of all marriages do not make it.

What is one to do?

There are many options in our society as we approach the 21st century. More and more couples are waiting until they have been married longer to have children. There seems to be great wisdom in that decision because it allows the couple more time to nurture their relationship. It also gives each individual some time to mature and address the other changes and transitions that come along in early adulthood.

Many marriages that are not going to survive are over in two years, and other within five years. Given that rule of thumb, waiting until you have been married or living together consistently for at least five years makes sense. Get to know yourself as you mature and change from ages 20 to 30. Your entire outlook on life may change during that time, which will influence your thoughts, desires and interests. Share your new awareness with your partner and watch carefully to see if the two of you grow together, rather than apart. Put off long term decisions until both of you have evolved to that next level of self awareness. And remember, people do not necessarily mature at the same times.

Arrange a routine that allows both partners ample time alone and for each other. This may mean taking turns getting up at night for feedings (breast-feeding technology makes this possible for almost everyone) or rotating early mornings on the weekend. Arrange for someone to come in to help with housework one or two days a week, or to care for the baby while you take some time for yourself (take a nap, a bath or walk without the baby). If the baby goes to a nursery, take turns driving the child . . . use your imagination.

Schedule one morning, afternoon or evening each week to spend together, alone.

Begin now to TALK about your true feelings, interests and dreams for yourself and your family.

Involve family, friends and neighbors in your lives before the child is born to alleviate your fears about leaving him/her alone with others.

Talk to your partner about how you were raised. If there are major discrepancies, try to come to an agreement about how to handle things with your child.

If you can't come to an agreement, go to a counselor or pastor for assistance. If you do not get help there, look for a support group.

If either of you were raised in an overly rigid, strict, isolated family discuss how that has affected you.

If either of you were raised in families that had little or no consistent rules, discipline or structure, discuss how that has affected you.

If you have serious differences in your religious, philosophical, political, male/female stereotyping or parenting beliefs and practices . . . get help NOW from an objective outside party (this means not family members, friends, neighbors or others who think and behave just like/opposite one of you). A support group or counselor would be best in this case.

If either of you has been abused, neglected or assaulted as a child, teen or adult, seek outside help NOW. Those wounds do not just go away . . . they can be easily resurrected during times of stress . . . and this is going to be a stressful time!

If either of you grew up with family or friends who were addicted to alcohol or drugs, involved in violent relationships with partners, family members, etc., moved around a lot as a child or teen or were separated from one or both parents, brothers, sisters and loved ones, seek outside help NOW. You may not realize how it affected you, so talking about it with a trained professional can help you be more aware of danger signs.

BOTTOM LINE: Do everything you can to ensure that you are committed to one another as much as you could be to anyone/anything else . . . and make a pact to nurture that relationship consistently, unless to do so would place one or both of you, or a child, in a position to be harmed physically, or emotionally. Above all, you must agree that the emotional and physical safety

and well-being of a child is the most important thing . . . including being in a relationship that is harmful for the child. After you make the choice to have a child, your desires no longer come first, the baby's needs do.

For those who are in a committed relationship, and contemplating having children:

Do all of the above.

If you cannot come to an agreement on any of those tips, particularly the last one . . . **DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN TOGETHER.** If you are not willing to put a child's needs for safety, stability, etc before your own desire/need to be involved with a partner who is putting the child at risk of emotional or physical harm, then perhaps you shouldn't have children, at least for now . . . and that is okay.

Learn to compromise, perhaps you can resume your career after the child is in the nursery, day care or kindergarten. Or perhaps one of you could work at home or part time and care for the baby. Remember, if you decide to have a child, your priorities will change, at least temporarily.

Allow yourself to grieve the loss of your dreams . . . whether it is the dream of living your life as a Mother/Father, the dream of climbing the corporate ladder, starting your own business or anything else you feel has been taken from you, including your independence. It would be advisable to postpone pregnancy until these issues have been dealt with and you honestly feel no resentment toward anyone for forcing you to make a decision that results in feelings of resentment.

Making a decision to put your desires or needs first is a healthy and insightful choice. We are not all cut out for parenting! Choosing to put the well being of a child first, sometimes means making a decision not to be a parent. If this causes so much distress in your relationship that you feel you have no choice, think of how trapped you will feel once you have a baby you do not want or cannot care for. Go to couple/marriage counseling immediately!

Give yourself credit for your awareness, courage and growth. Choosing not to have children may also cost you emotionally, particularly if you have parents or in-laws who are desperately awaiting a grandchild. Putting your needs above the desire to please

those whom you love is very difficult, but it may be best for everyone, including the child.