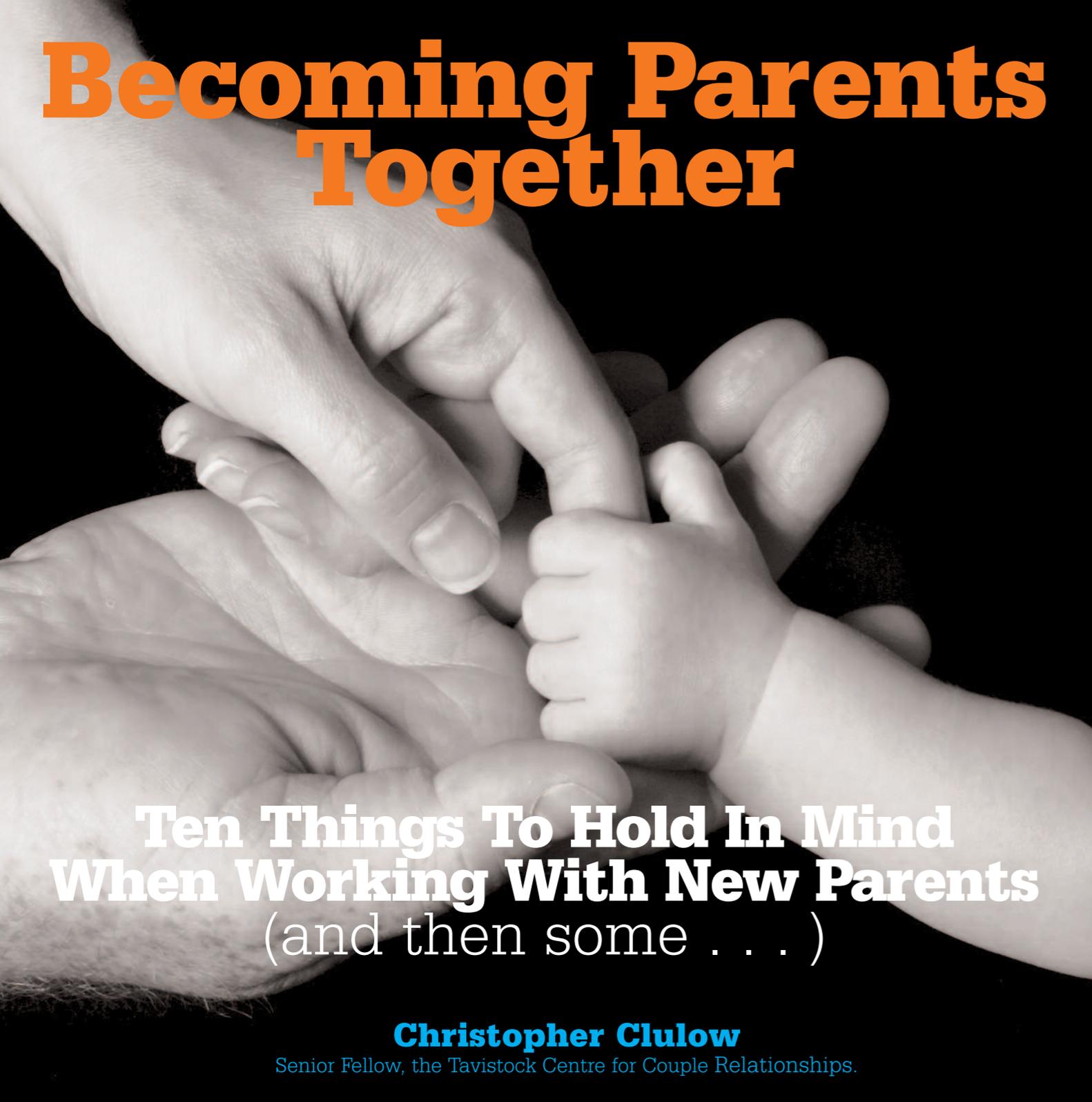


Becoming Parents Together



**Ten Things To Hold In Mind
When Working With New Parents**
(and then some . . .)

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The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) is a specialist centre of excellence for advanced training and practice providing tertiary level support to the mental health and family support field. Our work is grounded in the experience of training practitioners and supporting couples.

TCCR aims to provide the services that support couples, strengthen families and safeguard children. Its work is geared to improving the quality of adult couple relationships, preventing family breakdown, supporting positive parenting and thereby promoting healthy development in children.

● **Its main objectives are:**

To supply specialist therapeutic services to couples and individuals

● experiencing difficulties in their relationships.

To provide training and consultancy on delivering, developing and

● managing services for parents and families.

To undertake research that contributes to the understanding of couple and family relationships and how best they might be improved.

TCCR, founded in 1948, believes in the importance of the therapeutic relationship and its ability to enhance and heal the lives of adults and children.

In setting up TCCR 60 years ago, the founders proposed the following guiding tenet-

“Nothing effective can be done to or for people, only with them”

Becoming Parents Together

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Know how little you know (and don't worry)

A central concern for new parents is how they're going to manage the huge responsibilities of looking after a young baby when they believe they have little or no training for the job. Instructions are not included when children arrive,¹ so it is unsurprising that many parents scan every available source of information to help them with their new role. If you feel a sense of apprehension about being expected to be the expert when meeting young families for the first time, don't worry. You may simply be experiencing a version of what they're going through. You don't have to have all the answers. What you are offering is something that is potentially much more important than expert information: you are offering a relationship. Rather than giving advice, you can offer parents an opportunity to talk with you and each other about the most important journey they will ever make in their lives.

Being a parent is something that has to be learned on the job.² Only a small part of what is needed can be taught. Giving advice may be helpful up to a point, but it can also be counterproductive. Most of us hate being told what to do, however much we say we need help. And we often ignore the advice we are given anyway. Why should parents be any different? All you have to do for parents (a bit like they do for their children) is to be interested in and supportive of the journey they are making. This will help to create the conditions in which they can learn from their own experience.

Easier to say than to do! So this booklet is designed to sketch out some things that might be helpful to hold in mind in the course of your work. In particular it aims to focus your attention on the parental couple, and to provide information and ideas that will help you work with the co-parenting relationship, given that this is such an important context for parenting and child development. Some of the information you will know already. Some of it may be new. Be prepared to discard what seems misguided or wrong to you: the purpose is not to provide a 'how to do it' manual but to widen the horizons of your work.

A young mother talked to a family support worker about her partner continually wanting sex when she just wasn't interested.

Feeling out of her depth the worker asked if she wanted to talk to someone more experienced than she was. 'Oh no,' replied the mother, 'they'll only want to do something about it'.

It takes two (and sometimes more)

All children have two biological parents, and most grow up with both of them. Some children have more than two adults who act as parents in their lives, and some have only one. Even for those who are parenting on their own there may be another kind of partner (for example, a grandmother or other relative) who shares with them the responsibilities of being a parent. In any of these scenarios, and however families are structured, it's fair to assume that what goes on between those parenting children will form a significant part of the social and emotional environment in which children grow up.

What goes on between parents is influenced by how they got together in the first place, and the support of those around them for their partnership. Romantic love may spark the passions, but the capacity to sustain a loving relationship has little to do with the intoxication of being in love. Perhaps this fact is most clearly recognised in cultures where partnerships are seen as the coming together of two families, with family members other than the couple having a say in the prospective arrangement. And it may also be recognised by those in gay and lesbian partnerships who feel the absence of community support for the choices they have made. Most tested of all, perhaps, is the love between partners who already have children from other relationships; establishing themselves as a couple can be a fraught business when the web of torn allegiances is complex.

However partnerships come about, if things are going well between the adults the outlook for children is usually good. If things are going badly, they may suffer in terms of health, behaviour, emotional well-being and the capacity to learn.

This assumption is well supported by research into the effects of parental conflict on children. Children suffer when they are exposed to and involved in damaging arguments between their parents, not least because they are susceptible to blaming themselves for what's gone wrong.³ In the wake of separation and divorce children growing up in lone parent families can be affected not only by the direct impact of the loss of one of their own parents but also by the effects of the shadow of that loss on the parent who remains to care for them.⁴ On the other hand, the experience of parents getting on well together boosts the security of children in ways that can benefit their own children when they, in turn, become parents.⁵

Despite knowing in our heads that adult partnerships are important to children, when it comes to parenting we often behave as if the only couple relevant to their upbringing is the mother (occasionally the father) and her child. The adult couple gets lost. While contemporary patterns of 'shift parenting' (in which child care alternates between mothers and fathers) ensure that both parents are involved with their children, partners tend to spend much less time with each other when they become parents. Of course it is important that mothers and fathers are involved with their children. But it is also important that they don't lose sight of the significance of what happens between them. The parental couple impacts on children both directly, in terms of what children observe and experience of their parents' relationship, and indirectly, through the effects it can have on the parenting capacities of each partner. Even if things are shaky in the partnership, when parents feel trusted and supported by each other in their parenting role, when they are confident that they share the same values and goals for their children, and when they believe themselves to be a good parenting team, the outcomes are likely to be very good for their children.⁶

Suggestions for practice:

- Identify which adults are principally involved as parents and try to establish an alliance with each of them.
- Focus your attention on the way they work together (or don't) as parents, and aim to help them mobilise the potential co-parenting resources they have between them.

Pregnancy unites parents (and also divides)

These days the decision to start a family can act as the primary symbol of commitment in a partnership, more important than a shared mortgage and overtaking the formal act of marriage (nowadays more children are conceived outside marriage than within it). Of course a pregnancy might not be planned, resulting in a 'slide not decide' route into parenthood, and sometimes into becoming a couple as well (in these circumstances ambivalence about a pregnancy might reflect ambivalence about the partnership, and this does not augur well for the future). But for many partners, children are relied upon to help them feel fulfilled as a couple, and for their sense of their relationship having achieved its primary goal. The arrival of babies can reassure them of their normality and creativity, both as individuals and as a pair. This may be particularly true for women, and especially important for the one in six couples who have fertility problems.

“We found we had trouble talking about what we would do if our baby was born not normal. We always ended up saying not to talk about it or even think about it”.

So children are invited into the world with a weight of parental expectation upon their shoulders. They must complete the family picture that their parents have sketched out. When they arrive they are likely to be greeted with joy. They realise the dreams of their parents (and, very likely, their grandparents and other family members) simply by being born alive and well. Children then bring an unalloyed fulfilment of the expectations of couples, although the picture may be more complex for those who become parents through medically assisted procedures, who take the path of adoption, or who inherit the children of others through re-partnering.

Biological parents often find they come closer together during pregnancy as they anticipate the realisation of their shared project. Concern for the unborn baby and a general sense of protectiveness can discourage conflict between them. It may deflect them from talking together about contentious or distressing matters. The magic of pregnancy can serve to dispel differences, put arguments on hold, encapsulate the couple and even deny biological differences.

During his partner's pregnancy Josh often felt tired and unwell, and as she got heavier with the baby he complained of backache and not sleeping well. He was not amused when she teased him for having all her symptoms in order to get all the attention for himself!

Her experience⁷

Women's moods during pregnancy are likely to change much earlier and be more intense than those of men. They soon become aware of the bodily changes occurring within them, and of disturbances to their biochemical make-up that accompany pregnancy. As the baby takes centre stage there is likely to be concern about the health, safety and viability of the foetus. Histories of previous miscarriage or stillbirth are likely to increase anxiety on this score. Fears about coping with labour and the delivery may grow as the pregnancy advances. But there may also be the wish to turn away from such thoughts and to deny that there is anything to worry about. Providing opportunities for women to air their concerns and receive clear information about what lies ahead can do much to reduce anxiety. It can also help women feel less alone and more in charge of what they are facing.

As well as the baby surviving, surviving the baby is likely to be an issue for prospective parents. At some times and for some mothers it may feel as if they have been disabled and prevented from doing what they are used to, or invaded by a parasite that will drain every ounce of their energy, annihilating the person she once recognised herself to be. At other times, and for other mothers, the swelling belly may be experienced as a sense of satisfaction and richness,

[Cartoon inset of baby holding up the parents as per Charles Atlas carrying the weight of the world?!]

Pregnancy unites parents (and also divides)

something that is fulfilling rather than depleting, which provides a vibrant sense of being alive. The experience may recapture feelings and anxieties that the mother-to-be had in relation to her own mother. Insofar as experience has taught her that others come first, or that she is unwanted, unvalued or unloved, she may have difficulty coping with amplified self doubt and destructive feelings. Or she may seek protection through idealising the unborn child, regarding her baby as the solution to life's earlier problems and the embodiment of her as yet unfulfilled potential.

His experience⁸

The physical and environmental changes affecting men during pregnancy are fewer than those affecting women. The key areas in which change is likely to be experienced are in relation to his partner and to his own feelings about himself. With the prospect of an at least temporary disruption to his partner's employment the work aspect of male identity may be reinforced. Protective feelings towards the mother of his unborn baby can evoke a tenderness and sense of responsibility that may come as a surprise to them both. But the added responsibilities can also be experienced as a burden and a trap, evidence of having entered into a lifelong commitment from which there is no turning back.

Along with the excitement of new life may come an uncomfortable awareness, perhaps for the first time, of the mortality associated with generational change. It is not unusual to find men dwelling on the relationship they had with their own father during childhood, sometimes experiencing the wish for – or indeed fear of – having a boy or a girl on grounds that may reflect anxiety about how adequate they will be as fathers.

Men may react to their partner's increasing pre-occupation with the unborn child with feelings of hostility and envy about being excluded from this primary love affair. Such feelings are often unconscious, but at their most extreme they can help explain why pregnancy, which usually creates feelings of togetherness, can also generate conflict and even increase the risk of domestic violence. The risk, although heightened, is small. Usually feelings of hostility, envy or exclusion are much less intense, and they can be sublimated through identification with the woman. Those

who have run groups for expectant couples may be familiar with group dynamics where the physical task of giving birth is discussed as if it involves him every bit as much as her, differences between the partners are avoided and even the most urban landscapes are represented as a rural idylls!⁹

Sam described in great detail the birthing room at the hospital in which their child was to be born. He had chosen the music they were going to listen to together in this softly-lit environment, and he portrayed a soothing, well-ordered and pain-free process that he would have an active part in orchestrating. Siobhan listened to him contentedly, but said nothing about her picture of the birth.

Their experience¹⁰

So what's wrong with a bit of idealization to get parents through an exciting and anxious time? Well, it may deflect from talking about things that are playing on parents' minds, from acknowledging the fears as well as hopes about what might be in store for them, from recognising the losses that children bring as well as the gains, and

from accepting that this major change can evoke mixed feelings. For the prospect of children does not always have a unifying effect upon couples. It can be threatening and unsettling. The growing 'bump', rather than representing a keenly awaited guest at the family party, may take on the form of an alien intruder, or a rival that separates rather than unites the host pair. It is often the case that women act as the driver to start a family, with their partners being more or less willing accomplices. But sometimes the question of whether and when to have children can be a source of conflict between the partners. Ambivalent feelings – both wanting and not wanting to embark on the project of parenthood – can be separated out between the partners, with one half expressing all the excitement and hope and the other being left with all the doubt and fear.

Suggestions for practice

- Ask for the story about how the pregnancy had come about, and be sure to get both partners accounts in the company of each other (the stories they tell may be different).
- Invite each partner to depict their relationship as it is at the moment, and how they feel it might change when their baby arrives.
- Make room for ambivalent feelings about becoming a parent to be expressed and shared between partners, and try to hold on to the knowledge that this part seldom represents the whole of what they may be experiencing.
- Explore each partner's expectations of the baby, and of themselves and each other as parents.
- Be curious about their parental families, and how the experience of growing up might have shaped their expectations (by doing so you invite them to be curious about this, and encourage them to continue thinking and talking about the influence of past families on future families).

Children make a difference always and forever!

Five decades of research on the transition to parenthood has led to a vigorous debate about the nature and severity of the impact of parenthood on couples. Whether the language of 'crisis', 'transition', or 'big life change' is used, most studies show that children fundamentally change the relationship between their parents for better and for worse, and the balance changes over time. On the credit side of the equation is the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that children bring to couples, providing a physical manifestation of their creativity together and a realisation of their hopes and dreams. There is also an opportunity for them to re-enter childhood through their own children, to re-experience the joys and pains of growing up, and to hold out the hope of redemption – putting right past wrongs. On the debit side we know there is a clear and consistent tendency for relationship satisfaction to fall in the pre-school years (especially for women), levelling out when the children go to school, sometimes dipping in the adolescent years and then generally recovering as children leave home. This shallow 'U' or 'W'-shaped graph charts a predictable trajectory of the way parents say children have affected how satisfied they feel as a couple.¹¹



So, are children bad for partnerships? The answer to this question is an unequivocal 'no', and especially if partners come from families that managed conflict constructively. But neither is the answer an unequivocal 'yes'. Children are definitely no cure for an ailing partnership. What research tells us is that while children don't break up partnerships, they may expose and enlarge any cracks that are already there in the relationship. Pre-existing problems, expectations of parenthood and changes in the quality of communication account for most of the fall in relationship satisfaction. These can provide a useful focus for relationship support in the early months and years of parenthood. But it can take time for parents to appreciate that their relationship as a couple is under stress. Just as the major concern during pregnancy is with the baby being born safe and sound, so the early months of parenthood are about the parents surviving sleepless nights, crying babies, lack of space, interrupted conversations and all

“I have realised how easily I can be pushed to the limit and how fine the line is between controlled and uncontrolled behaviour. At this point my husband has taken control until I could carry on with our child.”

the other demands that parenthood bring. While mothers may be the first to register dissatisfaction with their partners, the changes for the couple may take a year or two to be noticed and acknowledged between them.

Suggestions for practice

- Be responsive to any cues that parents may give you about strains on their relationship. Sometimes couples will talk about tensions they have experienced in the past as a way of discussing things that continue to bother them; talking at one remove can be a less anxious means of communicating about current concerns.
- Don't feel you always have to act on what you're told. A listening ear may be all that's needed, and the offer of referral to specialists may cause parents to clam up.
- Keep open the dialogue about whether the experience of being a parent matches up to expectations, and pay particular attention to the explanations parents give for any gap. Sometimes mothers blame themselves for the way the birth happened, how their baby is, the feelings they are having, or the way their partner is behaving, as if it is confirmation that something is wrong with them, or that they have failed. Disillusionment is not the same as failure, it is part of the process of growing up as a parent and as a couple.
- Encourage parents to try and protect some time for themselves to be on their own together, however hard this can be in the short term. Good habits started early are easier to maintain than those started late.

Five areas of conflict

(and their link with shame)

Research about conflict that triggers a fall in levels of relationship satisfaction has identified five key areas in which it occurs.¹² Here they are renamed and grouped into an acronym describing how people can feel when things don't work out as planned and they think they have fallen short in their own or someone else's eyes: shame.

Sex

is one currency that partners commonly use to assure themselves of their specialness to each other. Actual sex may be more important for men than for women at this time, especially when women are physically so much more bound up with babies than are men. Children do change the locus of intimacy in families, sometimes leaving a mother wanting respite from the unrelenting demands on her body that her baby makes. Sexual approaches from her partner may be regarded as another demand on her body. While she can't withdraw from her baby, she can from her partner.

For a father, the baby's monopoly of his partner's breasts, and his sense of being excluded from the physical and emotional intensity of the mother-baby pair, may heighten the need for sexual reassurance. On the other hand, perceiving a partner change from lover into parent can have an opposite effect on sexual feelings. As one mother said of the delay in resuming sexual relations after birth "... for a few months I found it difficult to view my husband as I had before. This new image was firstly that of a father rather than a sexual partner". And men can experience a similar hesitation. The realisation of both the need for and fear of

Sex
Housework
Activities
Money
Employment

"Our problem was my inability to explain what I felt or meant, and my partner's persistent requests for explanations because of his inability to understand the mental and physical changes taking place during and after pregnancy. For my partner, because I had had the baby I should then have been quite normal apart from 'postnatal depression', which he was all ready to deal with. When I wasn't co-operative about sex he thought I didn't care".

sexual intimacy, perhaps heightened by observing the raw physicality of infantile needs expressed by the baby, can be a shaming experience. What one man described as witnessing "the bullfight of birth" can also inhibit the resumption of a sexual relationship because of the association made between sex and damage. The process of establishing a non-intrusive, non-exclusive, intimacy in the couple relationship is under way from the moment of conception, a process that will continue to evolve and change between the partners in the years ahead.

Housework

is how parents share household and child care responsibilities between them. The question of who does what around the home is sharpened when parental responsibilities mop up the resources of time, energy and emotional space. Even the most emancipated partnerships have been shown to revert to traditional divisions of labour at home when children arrive – much to their shame and consternation. This is particularly true in connection with child care itself, no doubt because women usually are and have to be the principal carer for young infants. But when this leads to women taking all the responsibility for housework, while men immerse themselves in activities outside the home, the consequences for couples can be corrosive.

There are signs that much is changing on these fronts. Whereas studies used to count a father's daily involvement with his children in terms of minutes, it is clear that men are much more involved in bringing up their children than they used to be. These developments are very encouraging. However, they may also bring with them new risks: parents may find themselves competing with each, or colluding in avoiding the important emotional challenges that parenthood brings.

"I used to be very independent, but now I do need my husband's support in both a material and emotional sense. In fact we just had a bit of a row about this as I cannot stand the detached attitude he sometimes takes."

Activities

In the same way that being a couple involves giving up the life of a single person, so being a parent requires adapting to the new life that children bring with them. Couples no longer have the time and energy, and probably not the money, to do all the things they used to do together, never mind the things they did separately. Priorities change. Holiday plans, sporting activities, time with friends, nights out, are all affected by the new responsibilities of parenthood. Some activities have to go. In this process women are likely to feel more constrained than men, and it may be a source of envy and tension if the men carry on as if nothing has changed in their lives while the women feel that everything is different for them. Talking together about what each partner wishes and needs for themselves, individually and as a couple, is likely to result in the best outcomes, and in each partner feeling positive about compromises and solutions they have worked out together.

Money This is another big one. The realities of a reduced income that may follow a mother's temporary withdrawal from the labour market can feed into a wider sense of there not being enough to go around, of resources being stretched, and sometimes a sense of the unfair distribution of what is available. The projected tens of thousands of pounds it costs to bring up a child is enough to make any parent wobble. Fortunately the outlays usually come in bite-sized chunks. But which of the partners has the final say when it comes to spending money, and in relation to what? This is usually a complex matter, often unclear, and testing a couple's capacity for flexibility and

"I feel the baby has brought us closer together. When we were both working we were like two individuals. Now we have something to share apart from our home".

"Although money is freely handed between us I find it difficult that I'm no longer financially independent. I'm used to managing my own affairs, and don't like the feeling that I have to ask for money or justify what I spend. Also I feel guilty about all the financial pressure he is under, especially with this recession".

protect him from exposure to the responsibilities that go along with being the only breadwinner. For new fathers, having the sole responsibility for paying the rent or mortgage, and to meet all the other costs of living, can be a daunting prospect, especially if work feels insecure and family expenditure is rising.

Employment

Feelings about being in or out of paid work are, of course, closely related to the issue of money. But there is another dimension to the working world that has enormous significance. We define a significant part of ourselves through the work that we do; employment impacts on identity. Work also allows us to contribute to something that is bigger than ourselves. It provides a social network, a framework for the day and a predictable rhythm to life. Stop working and all this can fall away. Work, along with family, form the twin pillars of our individual and social identities.

inter dependence. There is another important aspect to the financial question. If a woman stops earning, and a man becomes the sole earner, the balance of power and dependency can be felt to change between them, sometimes in unsettling ways. Many women say how uncomfortable they feel no longer bringing money into the household. This can reflect both a discomfort with having to depend on their partner for their keep and a wish to

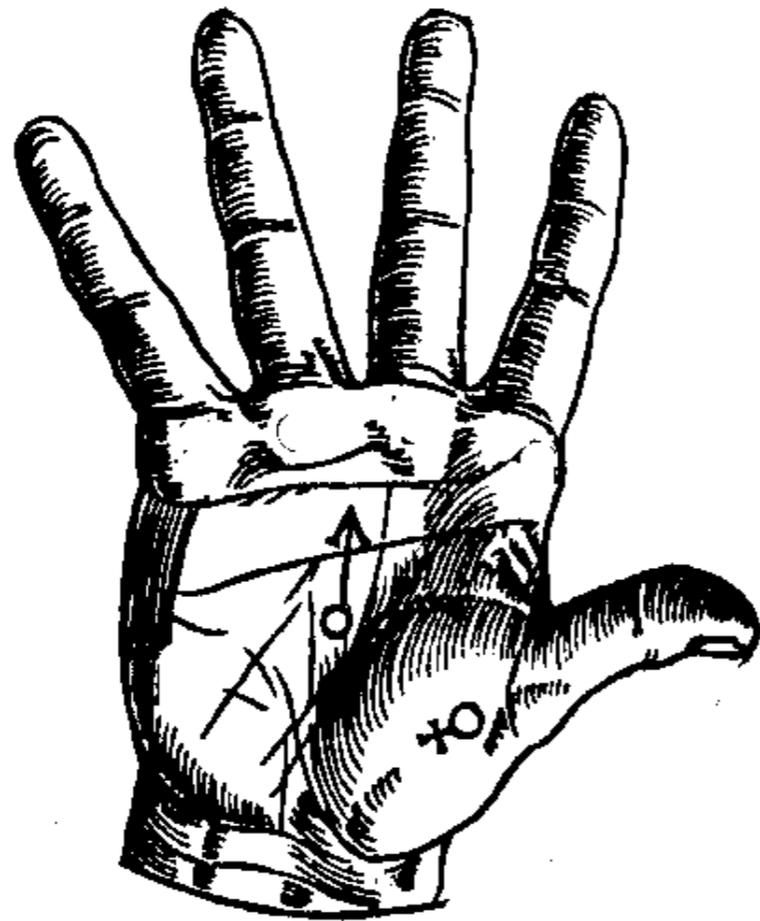
"At eight months I returned to part time work, which was a mistake, as I felt I had to look after the baby, work and run the house. This created a little possibly unjustified resentment against my husband, who has since tried to help more with the baby and with shopping etc. I intend to give up work when I have completed my notice".

Five areas of conflict

Becoming a parent is enough of an identity crisis before taking account of the impact of giving up work. So this change may be delayed as long as possible, and the prospect viewed as a temporary measure, covered by maternity leave, before normal life is resumed. On the other hand some women might crave a break from earning responsibilities, but return to work early because there is no expectation of a partner providing for them. Again, some may feel they have traded high status positions for an activity that is poorly valued and scantily supported. They make the trade because, in the main, they choose to do so, but can then feel they have no right to any feelings of regret or loss that might follow from exercising their choice. Moreover, once they have children they can feel torn between the maternal longing to stay put, reinforced by a disinclination to trust others with their precious baby, and the expectation of others (if not themselves) that they should return to work and within a timescale that causes them least financial disadvantage. If they keep abreast of the debate that questions the advisability of placing very young children in nursery day care for extensive periods of time, that conflict can be intensified. The fall-out from all of this may impact on the couple.

The key to handling conflict in all these areas is, as always, communication – something that can be easier to advocate than to do.

“Showing my feelings about the whole situation is difficult, and talking about coming to terms with problems which existed in our relationship before and after the birth. So much was said in my wife’s childhood – her parents argued all the time and finally divorced. My parents kept emotions secret, and feelings weren’t discussed. So neither of us, for different reasons, seems able to confront the problems”.



Suggestions for practice

- Explore with partners how they communicate together about each of the five areas of potential conflict in their relationship.
- Invite couples to represent, perhaps in pictorial form, how the different segments of their lives have enlarged or reduced as a result of becoming parents, and to look at how these representations have changed over time, including differences between them.
- Encourage discussion of how each partner sees and feels about any changes in the dynamics of their relationship as a couple now they are parents, and ways in which their self-worth and identity may have been affected by these changes.
- Explore how families have responded to the arrival of a new member, and whether the new baby or the new parents are the focus of attention. Consider how the new parents feel about receiving help and support from their own parents, friends, other family members and child care professionals.

Every birth involves a death (and vice versa)

There are gains and losses in becoming a parent. Most people focus on the gains, so that it can be hard to acknowledge, never mind express, feelings of loss. The exception to this is ‘postnatal depression’. Postnatal depression describes the experience many women have on becoming mothers. Whether this is the ‘blues’ that affects the majority of women within days of giving birth, the post-puerperal psychosis that is a rare but devastating experience, or the chronic sense of anxiety, listlessness and unhappiness that results in tearfulness and disturbed sleep patterns affecting around one in ten mothers in the early months and years of parenthood, it can shatter illusions of parental bliss. Deciding whether the triggers to these states are biochemical or psycho-social has been the source of much debate. For chronic depression we have known for a long time that a confiding relationship with a partner can be really helpful.¹³ It’s not a big step to infer from this that a poor relationship can be a cause of depression. One of the risks of using screening measures like the Edinburgh Post Natal Depression Scale¹⁴ is that it can affect the way we think about depression, converting ordinary responses to loss and change into medical conditions.¹⁵ The medical view also overlooks the fact that men can have similar emotional responses: 57% of men using a relationship counselling service for parents tested positive on the EPDS.¹⁶

Letting go of the past can evoke feelings of grief, and involves mourning. It may seem odd to use a word like mourning in connection with a family change that is primarily associated with joy and gain. But with every change comes a sense of loss, even if that loss is only experienced in the abstract sense of an awareness of the passing of time. Birth heightens an awareness of aging and mortality and this may pre-occupy some mothers with respect to the loss of their pre birth body. (Not every new mother will have the time or inclination for the gym!) Sometimes of course, births coincide with the death of a family member, alerting couples to the fact that they are children no longer. More immediately, partners will be faced with the awareness that the rhythm of their lives is fundamentally different, that they may be perceived differently by others, and that they may see themselves and each other in a different light. Their more or less care-free life becomes a thing of the past, and the clock can’t be turned back. Their capacity to change will be affected by how previous losses have been managed in their lives, and how they regard the experience they are caught up in.

Kamala attended a group for mothers with postnatal depression. She said at one meeting that she thought her depression was linked with the discovery that her partner had been unfaithful. She’d thrown him out of their home but now didn’t know what to do. Another member of the group relieved the tension by saying that the thing to do was hire a huge warehouse, buy an unlimited supply of plates and smash them against the wall. She added that she had been through a similar experience, it had been devastating and had taken her a long time to get over it, but in the end she had succeeded. Kamala felt supported and reassured by hearing she was not alone in facing her problem. The group facilitator recorded that a useful discussion followed, linking depression with suppressed anger and providing ideas about how to channel rage.

Suggestions for practice

- Acknowledge that partners may have feelings of loss as well as excitement about becoming parents, and make room for these to be talked about.
- Review other important changes that couples have experienced, in their relationship together and as members of their parental families. How were they managed, and are there any lessons that they drawn from these experiences that might help them with their current transition?

The past is ever present and so is the future

“I remember how lonely I often was, and would like to protect my daughter from that – I was an only child with no father. I remember how much I envied my friends who had proper families, and how much I wished I had the general ‘hurly-burly’ of family life in my own home, and very much want her to be happy in her home and for it to be a haven for her”.

Although parents usually are aware of the influence their family experiences have upon them, they may not know its full extent. What it means to be a mother or a father, and to be a couple with children, is something that is absorbed from different experiences of growing up. The family culture, divisions of labour, role models, patterns of relating and levels of expressed emotion that partners bring into their new family have all been learned from their own parental families, including their associations to heightened attachment, experiences of separation and the fear of loss. Because no two families are the same, there will always be work to do in managing the differences between different family cultures and templates. Expectations of family life are often only discovered in retrospect, when experience does not match to what had been anticipated.

As we have seen, if pregnancy usually unites couples, being a parent may divide them. The companionate values that underpin contempo-

rary expectations of partnerships are always challenged by the arrival of children. Babies, after all, come first. As time passes, parents come to realise that they are being overtaken by their children’s needs in the rank ordering of family members. They may be keenly aware of a growing sense of separateness in their partnership, or of feeling left out and excluded from where the main action is taking place. Such feelings may reactivate distress about separations and exclusions experienced earlier in their lives, adding an overlay from the past to the intensity of what is happening in the present. The experience of mothers is likely to be a little different from that of fathers. Rather than being overwhelmed by feelings of separateness and exclusion, they may experience strong feelings of claustrophobia and a sense of being sucked into and taken over by their baby’s needs and demands. Partners need each other to rescue them from these twin abysses of isolation and incorporation.

[Ulysses steering between the rocks of Scylla and Charibydís cartoon here?]

The problem of being part of a three-some is that the maxim ‘two’s company, three’s a crowd’ so often comes to define the rules of relating. Commonly the bond between a mother and her child can leave the father feeling on the outside of the triangle, peripheral to the main action of the family drama. In these circumstances he may add to the problem by immersing himself in extra-familial activities – most commonly work. Sometimes, the bond between a father and his child may leave the mother feeling undermined rather than supported in her parenting role, so that she feels on the outside of their parenting project (a particularly difficult place to be in a culture that still equates parenting with mothering). Very occasionally the problem of the triangle will be managed by the partners putting themselves first and requiring their children to fit in: as the adage “the children of lovers are orphans”. But parents who have grown up with the confidence that being displaced is not the same as being cast into outer darkness, and that being involved is not the same as being incorporated by others, will have the best chance of moving flexibly between being an insider and an outsider in the triangular dramas of family life.

Mustapha and Ameena adapted to Ameena’s depression in the early months of parenthood by Mustapha taking primary responsibility for baby care, making up the feed bottles, getting up in the night and so on. Rather than making things better, Ameena’s depression got steadily worse. She decided to return to work, but this, too, failed to resolve her depressed state. Exploring their different approaches to taking up parental responsibilities revealed a man who was so anxious about being excluded from the nursing couple that he intruded upon it and consequently undermined his wife’s shaky confidence with their baby. She, having been nursed by a housemaid while her mother worked, was torn between her desire to be with her baby and to emulate her mother’s

successful career. Her own conflicted feelings about being a mother, and her partner’s ‘helpfulness’, left her feeling excluded and abandoned by him, something that resonated with the relationship she had with her own mother that had contributed to her feelings of depression in childhood. Becoming parents gave the couple an opportunity for Ameena to learn from Mustapha about the mother she had found difficulty finding inside herself, and for Mustapha to discover that letting Ameena “have the baby” would not repeat a traumatic separation he had experienced as a child.

Suggestions for practice:

- The question ‘how were things managed in your family when you were growing up?’ can be a useful way of accessing hidden expectations and rules of relating that partners bring into their new family. Exploring whether and how these rules worked, and if they are slavishly followed or peremptorily dismissed, may allow the past to be reappraised in the light of current circumstances. Most mothers do talk with their own mothers about their experience of giving birth and looking after young babies, but do men have comparable conversations with their fathers? What’s your experience of visiting couples with a young child?
- As an outsider to the family do you feel welcomed in, sidelined or excluded? Does one parent try to draw you into an alliance with them against the other? Reflecting on the role that has been cast for you (not necessarily consciously) may provide you with an insight into tensions the parents are having to manage and the strategies they use in doing so.

Affect is infectious

(so pay attention!)

Becoming a parent can be a time of extreme emotional turbulence. Couples can find themselves lost in familiar places, caught in the grip of feelings that sometimes renders them strangers to themselves and each other. They may find they are feeling what they believe they shouldn't be feeling, and not feeling what they think they should be feeling. Finding the words to talk about this can be difficult at best, and sometimes impossible. In these circumstances an experience can be conveyed unconsciously, before the words are found to express it.

A health visitor described the less than warm reception she received when visiting a couple and their young baby. The father answered the door, wanted to see her credentials, and asked if they had to be visited. He then said his partner was upstairs with the baby, didn't want to be disturbed and would not require visiting. The health visitor asked if she might at least introduce herself. When she met the mother she received a litany of complaint about how she had been treated at the hospital where she was confined, the incompetence of the staff who had allowed her labour to go on for a very long time and then had had to use forceps in the delivery. She had had enough of this poor standard of care, and could do without further exposure to the failings of health service staff. Although feeling attacked and unwanted, the health visitor stayed to talk for a bit. The mother then produced a notebook cataloguing the detail of her contact with the baby, adding that she would forget where she was if she didn't keep a note. She asked the health visitor to look through it. At the end of the visit, and with her partner present, she asked: 'can you tell me why I don't love this baby?'

Here, a mother criticising the care she has received from health practitioners expresses her own dilemma about becoming a mother. Her story is essentially one of carers who fail in their job, and her feelings about this failure are intensely critical. The health visitor has to withstand not only the criticism but also being associated with the failure

attributed to her colleagues. Tolerating these feelings, without becoming defensive and withdrawing or retaliating, created the conditions in which this young mother could say what was really on her mind, and with her partner present – that she felt uncaring towards her baby and was very critical of herself for this.

Such unconscious exchanges, where one person is made to feel something for someone else, are valuable ways of conveying what cannot be put into words. It is common for young parents to feel that everyone is managing better than them, or that everyone else has the problems and are not making a good job of it. This division of parents and carers into 'good' and 'bad' figures may act as a cue for practitioners to work with the idealized expectations that parents can have of themselves and each other, and with the sometimes acute feelings of self-criticism that parents turn on themselves for not, as they would see it, measuring up. Parents may have to turn their supporters into being either 'good' or 'bad' (in terms of how they make them feel) in order to convey what they are really experiencing themselves but can't know about or put into words.

Suggestions for practice

- Consider the possibility that parents may be carrying feelings that belong to their partners: for example, her depression may also be indicative of his.
- Pay attention to how you are feeling, as well as to how parents say they are feeling, and entertain the thought that your emotional experience is connected to theirs.
- Use supervision to think about the feelings that get stirred up in the work and to make sense of what they might be telling you about the couple.

Timing is everything

(but space counts too)

Those running groups during pregnancy can often be heard to say that there are things parents will not hear, no matter how often you repeat them. They will tell of parents returning to see them with their babies and saying 'why didn't you tell us!' There are times when parents will be receptive and times when they will not.



Information is best absorbed when it relates to a recognised need. It may be screened out if it constitutes a threat or doesn't fit with preconceptions. So for those supporting the parental couple it is usually important to be receptive to cues about perceived need, and what might be difficult to hear because it provokes anxiety. This is not a prescription for offering bland reassurance; when people are clearly feeling anxious about something the best response is to address their concerns directly. But it usually takes time to build a relationship in which there is confidence and trust about

disclosing difficult things. Building this confidence can be helped by offering a predictable and bounded relationship. It may also be the precondition for ensuring your own availability, for without protecting your own time, and setting the parameters of your relationship clearly in line with your professional task, you cannot be expected to function effectively.

When the need you encounter exceeds what you feel able to do, or lies outside your competence, it may be necessary to make a referral. This can be a complex matter when parents may not want to relinquish you for someone else, and may become anxious about what the referral means or might precipitate. Referrals work best when they have been thoroughly thought about with parents, and ideally are something that they can initiate themselves.

Suggestions for practice

- Arrange to meet at a time and place where both parents have the chance to be involved.
- Be clear from the outset about how much time is available, and stick to it.
- Know the boundaries of your own role and competence.
- Get acquainted with other services in your locality so you have referral options when needed.

Two's company

(but three's a community)

A word in conclusion. Many practitioners feel that it is intrusive to focus attention on the relationship between parents. They believe it is more appropriate (and comfortable) to work with a mother or a father than with both parents as a couple. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that there are times and places in which 'two's company and three's a crowd', supporting partners in becoming parents is not one of them. After all, making room for another person in the family is what the transition to parenthood is all about. To develop a relationship with one parent and ignore the other is excluding in the extreme, and may constrain what you are able to achieve. That is not to deny the importance of working individually with one or other parent – this is no advocacy for treating parents as if they were exactly the same – but a plea to keep both parents in mind even if you are seeing only one. You, as a third party, coming into the lives of new parents, will experience and have to manage something of what they are going through. And the subtle process of influence is mutual, working both ways round. By being inclusive in your approach, and supporting them in becoming parents together, you stand the best chance of helping them in that most important of life's projects: building family and community life.

Notes and reading

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