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Keeping love alive after baby arrives

By Laurie Thompson

AUTHOR NORA EPHRON said, “When you have a baby, you set off an explosion in your marriage, and when the dust settles, your marriage is different from what it was. Not better, necessarily; not worse, necessarily; but different.”

Having a baby is a supremely joyous occasion for most couples, but it is also a major life event. New parents struggle with physical and emotional pressures including pain, sleep deprivation, fatigue, lowered sexual desire, violated expectations, changing roles and identities, and perhaps depression.

“Our research shows that within three years after the birth of a child, approximately two-thirds of couples will experience a significant drop in relationship quality and have a dramatic increase in conflict and hostility,” says Carolyn Pirak, LICSW, parent educator and national program director for the Seattle-based Bringing Baby Home project.

In our society, there is little support for parents during this vulnerable time. “In less-developed societies, the entire community comes around new parents to honor their new status and to provide for their basic needs, allowing them to rest and get to know their new baby,” says Pamela Jordan, PhD, RN, developer of the Becoming Parents Program through the University of Washington. “In the U.S., the only preparation is for labor and birth, which lasts for about 24 hours and is accompanied by professional and lay support. Then, the ejection button is pushed and the new family is on their own.”

Just as you wouldn’t approach labor and delivery without knowing what to expect, neither should you enter parenthood without understanding how it might affect your relationship. One of most frequent mistakes that Pirak sees parents make is assuming the transition will be easy. “This means they are surprised by the challenges and assume that something must be wrong with their relationship.”

Jordan adds, “We tend to be satisfied or dissatisfied



A quick hug can nurture your relationship.

AGES 3 TO 5

Navigating the demanding preschool years

By Lisette Austin

MOST PARENTS EXPECT that the first few years of their child’s life will be tough on their marriage. With the lack of sleep, piles of laundry and endless diaper changes, it’s clear there won’t be much time left for mom and dad. Parents of babies and toddlers often dream of that magical day when their child will use the potty by themselves, play independently and put on their own clothes — the magical preschool age. Finally they’ll have more time for romance and less tension in their relationship. Or will they?

The reality is that parents of preschoolers are not out of the woods when it comes to marital stress. “Marital dissatisfaction sometimes doesn’t even start for families until their child is around age 3,” says Alyson Shapiro, Ph.D., of the Gottman Institute, a nationally known relationship research and counseling center. Research at the institute shows that roughly 67 percent of couples experience marital dissatisfaction once they start having children. A quarter of those don’t start experiencing marital difficulty until their child enters the preschool years.

Why the strain on marriages? For one thing, preschoolers are just as time-consuming as babies or even more so. Increased verbal

and reasoning skills means more frequent and complex demands on parents. “Research shows that this age group places up to 50 demands on their parents’ attention per hour,” Shapiro says. The arrival of a second child, common at this stage, only adds to the chaos.

Not only do the demands increase, but so does the child’s need to be independent and test boundaries. Learning how to set limits, handle misbehaviors and establish consequences is not easy. Parents often have different parenting philosophies, which can lead to arguments about how to handle situations. Although the importance of a united parental front is suddenly

in life to the extent that our expectations and reality fit hand in glove. Couples typically don’t discuss their expectations of themselves or each other or their future as a family. Violated expectations are fertile ground for frustration, resentment, anger and conflict, especially when parents are tired and stressed and control of their lives has been taken over by the smallest and newest family member.”

After baby comes home, the most important thing you can do to preserve and strengthen your marriage is to focus on your couple relationship and make time for fun, friendship and intimacy. “I find that

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very clear, it can be hard to achieve.

For Edgar and Lisa Riebe, West Seattle parents of 3-year-old Eston, the biggest challenge is lack of time. With opposite work schedules, they often feel like single parents. Meanwhile, their son has entered a developmental stage that requires an entirely new set of parenting skills. “We’re trying to figure out how to take our parenting to the next level and it’s been tough,” Edgar says. “We want to be cohesive and consistent, but it’s hard to do since we don’t see each other that much.”

Julia and Marc Young of Wallingford, parents of 4-year-old Max and 18-month-old Brigitte, also find parenting a preschooler challenging in ways they hadn’t fully anticipated. “Communication between my husband and I is more difficult because Max’s interactions with us are so much more demanding,” Julia says. “When he is around, trying to have a two-minute conversation with my husband is almost impossible.” With Max demanding more mental attention and Brigitte needing physical attention, Julia has less time to address tensions and frustrations in her relationship with Marc.

With limited communication, little time and a steep parenting learning curve, it’s no wonder that the relationship between parents of preschoolers can feel strained. “The important thing is to be aware of the stress, then make sure you have a plan to deal with it,” says Sal Severe, Ph.D., parenting expert and author of the best-selling book *How to Behave so Your Preschooler Will Too*. “Finding ways to work together is the key,” he adds. “When both parents are singing from the same songbook, then things get easier.”

A parent of four children, Severe knows how hard it is to find extra minutes to read a parenting book, let alone discuss it. He nonetheless stresses the importance of setting aside some time,

however minimal, to explore parenting issues like discipline and consistency. “Don’t wait until a situation comes up to discuss your parenting philosophy — that’s when it is hardest, when defenses are up and tempers are flaring.”

Severe also encourages parents to pay attention when their spouse does something that works and learn from it. “One parent might have a great idea at a time when the other is out of ideas and needing a break,” he says. Taking the time to tell your spouse that you admire their parenting can help foster a sense of appreciation and respect, both essential ingredients in a healthy relationship, he notes.

As with any stage in parenting, it important to remember that one of the biggest gifts you can give to your child is a good relationship with your spouse. “Some people think that they need to just focus on being a better parent, but if they just do that they are missing an important piece,” Severe says. “If you really work on your relationship and maintain a strong bond, parenting your preschooler is going to be easier.”

Edgar and Lisa Riebe have discovered this to be true. “If we don’t continue to find ways to tend to our relationship, we’re doing a disservice to Eston,” Edgar says. The couple tries to have regular date nights and find time at the end of each day to discuss, however briefly, how things are going.

Julia and Marc are also realizing that time away and checking in with each other after the kids are in bed — as well as simply being affectionate and supportive of each other — can make a huge difference. “It’s important for us to recognize we’re both doing the best we can,” Julia says. “Taking care of each other as a couple makes it so much more enjoyable to raise our children together.”

Lisette Austin contributes regularly to local publications. She lives in Seattle with her husband and 4-year-old son.

MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN? 7 tips for staying close

1. Take a break. If one partner is spending more time with the kids, make sure she or he can get away to re-energize.
2. Make time to discuss parenting issues and strategies. Find a parenting book with short chapters to read together during meals or before bed. Post parenting tips on the refrigerator. Take a parenting class together (minus kids – if necessary, find a sitter).
3. Go out on weekly or monthly dates. Enjoy uninterrupted conversation about anything but the kids. Better yet, go away and stay overnight.
4. Show affection daily. A quick hug, smile or kiss goes a long way in nurturing your connection to each other.
5. Make sex a priority. Lock your bedroom door and move your bed away from the wall. Put the kids to bed early. Enjoy a “hot lunch program” when the children are at school. Take a “nap” with your spouse while the kids play a game or watch a movie.
6. Express appreciation to your partner for the specific things he or she does for the family. Recognize you both have strengths and can learn from each other.
7. Seek professional help of a marriage or family counselor if you can’t resolve your differences.

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