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## Parenthood and your relationship

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### Summary

- The birth of your first child can significantly change your relationship.
- Everyone's experience in the early months after the birth of their child is different.
- Both men and women can find this time challenging.
- Your relationship can be a great source of strength and support.
- In many cases, there are ways to look after and strengthen your relationship with your partner.
- For some couples, things can start to feel unsafe around the time of the birth of a new baby. If you have concerns about safety in your relationship, call 1800 RESPECT on **1800 737 732**.

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Having your first child and becoming a parent is a major event for most people, and it affects lives and relationships. Couples have to cope with the demands of pregnancy, childbirth and parenting, as well as dealing with their changing relationship.

Other significant relationships also change. For example, grandparents often become more involved in day-to-day life. This can bring up issues about your own childhood or your relationship with your parents. Social interactions with friends change due to the demands of caring for your new baby, and your new priorities. Open communication can help you to address and come to terms these feelings.

Many couples adjusting to parenthood find their relationship is enriched and is a great source of strength and support. However, for some couples, relationships can feel unsafe and this can increase at the time of a new baby. If this becomes the case in your relationship, there are a number of services that can help.

For information about specialist services for people experiencing family safety, sexual abuse or family violence issues, contact the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service, **1800 RESPECT** on **1800 737 732**. You can also contact dedicated family violence support services in your local community.

### Pregnancy and your relationship

It is important to share the pregnancy as a couple and talk to each other about your feelings. There are issues for both partners during pregnancy, including:

- each person's reaction to the pregnancy
- coping with the emotional and sexual changes that accompany pregnancy and child rearing
- concerns about the future.

### Becoming a parent

The birth of your child also changes your family situation. Sharing the experience of birth is important to many couples and many fathers are present at their child's birth.

All sorts of thoughts and feelings will arise for both the mother and father during and immediately after their child's birth. It is important to have time to talk about this, because it is part of forming the early family bonds.

### Parenthood, intimacy and your relationship

Everyone's experience in the early months after the birth of their child is different. For some couples, the transition to parenthood is easy and it strengthens their relationship. For others, it can be a time of tiredness and stress that causes them to become distant and withdrawn.

Becoming parents may also mean there is less time for each other. While some people are happy to make this change, some may feel left out or unloved. It's important to acknowledge and communicate feelings of grief and

sadness about losing your exclusive couple relationship. Make time to sit down and talk with your partner.

Many couples experience uncertainty in their sexual relationship after the birth of a child. Some find that the demands of parenting affect their sexual needs and their lovemaking. It is important for couples to be honest and open about this to avoid pain and misunderstanding.

It's also important to remember that forced or coerced sexual activity is never okay. Support is available from **1800 RESEPECT**, the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service on **1800 737 732**, if you need it. You can also contact dedicated family violence support services in your local community.

Resumption of sexual activity after having a new baby is a decision for both of you to make. For women, it may be a good time to talk about when to resume having sex once your bleeding has stopped and you feel comfortable.

It is possible for women to become pregnant while breastfeeding, and before the return of their period after giving birth. Breastfeeding delays the return of a woman's period, but women ovulate before their periods return. If you have sex at this time, you may become pregnant.

Some issues that may affect the decision of either men or women to resume sexual intercourse include:

- tiredness
- feeling unhappy with your body after pregnancy and birth
- lack of libido (sex drive)
- pain during intercourse
- having had an episiotomy or tear
- breastfeeding for woman
- pelvic floor problems (sometimes experienced by new mums).

Discuss any health problems that continue beyond six weeks after the birth of your child with your doctor or midwife. For more information, contact your:

- doctor
- midwife
- maternal and child health nurse
- men's help line, or
- family planning clinic.

Couples may also find it helpful to talk to a counsellor if they are having difficulty resuming their sex life and it is affecting their relationship.

### **Contraception for new parents**

After the birth of their child, there are a number of contraception options for couples to consider. These include:

- **mini pill** (for breastfeeding mothers) – this method is 96 to 99 per cent effective when taken carefully, and it has little or no effect on breastmilk and does not harm the baby
- **combined pill** (for non-breastfeeding mothers) – this method is 99 per cent effective when taken according to the instructions. Evidence suggests that the combined contraceptive pill (containing oestrogen and progestogen) is unsuitable for breastfeeding mothers
- **condoms** – this method is 95 to 98 per cent effective at preventing pregnancy when used correctly every time
- **diaphragm** – this method is 86 per cent effective when used correctly every time
- **intrauterine device** – this method is 99 per cent effective
- **sterilisation** – this operation is very effective, with a failure rate of 0.2 per cent
- **natural family planning** – this method can vary from 75 to 99 per cent effective depending on the method you choose and how well you use it
- **hormone implant (Implanon)** – discuss this option with your doctor or family planning clinic.

## Strengthening your relationship with your partner

If you are expecting your first child or are a new parent, there are some steps that may help you strengthen your relationship with your partner.

- **Share your experiences.** Talk about the joys and achievements, as well as the doubts and frustrations. Let your partner know how you feel.
- **Take control of your relationship.** Be clear about how you want your relationship to be and how you would like your new family to be. Talk about family traditions and values that are important to you.
- **Give yourself time.** Spend time alone together as a couple, regularly and without your child. This will give you a chance to get close and regain some energy.
- **Work as a team.** Try to ensure you both get enough sleep, share housework and parenting tasks, and be kind to each other. Remember to give praise and encouragement and to share your successes together.

## Seeking help for your relationship

If you find that there are difficulties in your relationship after you become parents, consider seeking the help of a counsellor. This will give you the chance to talk to someone who understands some of the changes you are going through. A counsellor can help you and your partner to feel closer and communicate more clearly about your feelings and expectations.

Both new mums and dads can find this time challenging for varying reasons, but with the right support, things can often improve.

## Where to get help

- **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia** (PACFA) Tel. **(03) 9486 3077**
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **1800 RESPECT** – the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service provides information about specialist services for people experiencing family safety, sexual abuse and family violence issues Tel. **1800 737 732**
- Dedicated family violence support services in your local community
- Maternal and child health nurse
- **MensLine Australia** Tel. **1300 789 978**
- **Relationships Australia** services include counselling, mediation, family violence services, family dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally Tel. **1300 364 277**
- **Family Relationship Advice Line** Tel. **1800 050 321**
- **Australian Association of Relationship Counsellors** Tel. **1800 806 054**

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