

Surviving Marriage the First Year After Baby

by Dr. Jenn Berman



The Challenge

According to a 2003 Newsweek article, more couples divorce in the year after the arrival of their first child than any other time, except for the first year of marriage. This is not surprising when you think about the magnitude of the shift for couples who previously were used to exclusively focusing on themselves and each other. When you are in the “baby bubble,” consumed by taking care of your child, you are isolated and sleep deprived and it feels like the conflicts you are having with your spouse will never get resolved. Typically one partner, usually the woman in opposite sex couples, feels like she is doing all the work, and the other partner feels neglected and unappreciated. Conflict and hostility tend to increase and sleep deprivation makes it more difficult to resolve. Given that dynamic, it is not surprising that relationship expert John Gottman found that 67 percent of couples studied had become very unhappy with each other during the first three years of their baby’s life.

There Is Hope

All is not lost. Many partners make it through this transitional time only to become stronger and more connected.

Here is what you can do to increase your chances of becoming one of those couples:

Allow For Help

Let others help you. Allow grandparents, adult siblings and friends to help both of you. A wise friend of mine once said, “Get as much help as you can afford and then get some more.” If you can afford a baby nurse, mother’s helper, or post partum doula, consider it money well spent. Getting a good night’s sleep can make you more clear-headed and patient with your baby and your spouse. That is good for everybody.

Learn Together

Allow your partner to be involved and learn parenting skills with you. Many men won’t change a diaper because they don’t know how or are afraid they will hurt the baby, and they are too embarrassed to ask. Give him the opportunity to learn the same skills as you.

Get Support

Join a Mommy and Me class, therapy group, or start a peer support group with your friends. The more support you and your partner receive, both individually and together, the better off your whole family will be. According to a recent study of new parents, those who met as a group with a therapist to discuss child-rearing issues had no divorces, versus a 15 percent divorce rate over three years for parents who didn’t meet with a support group.

Discuss Division Of Labor Prior To Birth

One of the most common fights new parents have is about division

The birth of a child is one of the most joyful events in a couple’s life. Prior to a baby’s arrival, most parents-to-be imagine being greeted by their infant’s smiling face, holding their sleeping baby, and playing with their happy child. The realities of sleepless nights, fighting with their spouse, postpartum depression, and diminished sex drive catch most couples by surprise. While new parents expect some sort of change, they often don’t expect it to feel like a bomb has gone off in their relationship. The arrival of a new family member (whether by surrogacy, adoption, or birth) shakes most couples to the core. It forces partners to redefine their roles, divide new chores, and often creates financial stress. All this takes place while learning how to care for a helpless person who cannot clearly communicate his needs. No wonder 83 percent of parents reported going through a moderate to severe crisis in the transition to parenthood!



of labor. Discuss your plans in advance so there are no surprises and reevaluate regularly as you see what works and what does not.

Do Not Fight In Front Of The Baby

You know that fighting is stressful for you, but you may be surprised to hear that it is just as stressful for your baby. According to Gottman's studies, babies have a physiological response, often causing their blood pressure to rise when they witness or overhear their parents arguing.

There are long-term problems for children with fighting parents as well. In a three year study of parents of 9 to eighteen year-old children, researchers found that parents whose conflicts revolved around personal insults, defensiveness, marital withdrawal, sadness, or fear had kids who displayed more depression, anxiety, and behavior problems than their peers. In another study of parents of kindergartners, the study found that parents who engaged in "dirty fighting" triggered emotional insecurity in both their sons and daughters.

Fight Fairly

No couple can completely avoid fighting but they can choose not to do it in front of their young children and they can choose to fight fairly. Fighting fairly means no name-calling and no personal attacks.

Gottman has identified four common predictors of divorce among married couples: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He explains that couples who discuss their grievances in a relationship seem to be able to work through conflict while those who criticize or attack the other person's character do not.

Create A Parenting Philosophy Together

Creating a parenting philosophy together can help you feel like you are on the same team. Also, it can make feedback feel less critical. As an example, my husband and I generally follow the RIE philosophies. If one of us tells the other, "You are not being very RIE," it doesn't feel like a personal criticism, whereas a critique of one's parenting might. Studies show that partners who admire, support, and agree with each other's parenting styles when their children are babies have happier marriages 2 and a half years later.

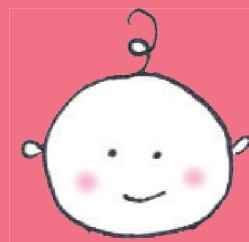
Just Get Through The First Year

Don't make any major decisions about your marriage, your relationship or your future in the first year of being a parent. Most parents are not clear-headed enough during that time to make good decisions. Make a commitment to work together and hold off all major decisions about the relationship until the first year has passed.

Express Appreciation

Even if you are not feeling sexual, affection and physical touch is a great way to stay connected with your partner. It can make partners feel loved and cared about and can help the bond between parents.

Dr. Jenn is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice. She is the author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids, and her "Dr. Jenn" column won the prestigious Parenting Publications of America award in Parenting and Child Development. In addition, she has appeared as a psychological expert on hundreds of television shows including The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Today Show, and The Tyra Banks Show. Dr. Jenn lives in Los Angeles with her husband and twin daughters. For more information, go to: www.DoctorJenn.com.



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