

REALIZE WE'RE ALL IN THE SAME SOUP

Jim wakes up early one morning in an amorous mood. He reaches over and touches his wife's breast. She sits bolt upright and exclaims, "Those are for the baby!" Jim is crushed. He dashes out of bed and jumps in the shower.

Margarita and Carlos are about to make love one night when the baby starts crying. Carlos jokes, "Damn! This baby must have a radar for our lovemaking. He's saying, 'No sibs for me!'" Margarita doesn't laugh. She gets up. Carlos grabs her nightgown, pulls her back, and, a little irritably says, "Stay. He can just calm himself. The trouble is you never give him the chance to." Margarita frowns, once again gets up, and Carlos utters another "Damn!" under his breath. She hears him. When she returns to bed a while later, she expects Carlos to be angry. But surprisingly, Carlos apologizes and says that he understands why she had to go to the baby. He offers to go the next time the baby cries. Now she cries, but in gratitude. Exhausted, both of them feel closer again and cuddle together. They fall asleep in each other's arms, as the baby sleeps through his first night.

Across the street, Debbie comes to breakfast with her baby. Her husband, Harry, sits down to eat, too, but pulls his chair over to the portable TV. Debbie says, "Can't you turn that thing off and spend breakfast with me and the baby?" Harry says, "Shut up and stop nagging! I just want to hear the news before work. Anyway, what do you want me for? You sure as hell don't want me at night. I'm pretty worthless to you, aren't I? What do you care how hard I work, or when I help out around here? You're the one driving me away. All you want is to be with that baby." Debbie yells, "What is it with you men? Can't you get it that when a woman has a baby hanging on her all day, she doesn't want a man hanging on her all night?" Harry gets up and leaves with the portable TV, slamming the door behind him.

A few blocks away, there's a different picture. Jason and his partner, Shanique, play with their six-month-old son, Marcus, who's getting a fresh diaper on the changing table. Marcus is watching his parents with eyes like saucers. Jason sings, "I'm gonna . . . get . . . your . . . belly!" and he gives Marcus a big loud kiss on the belly. Marcus giggles and flashes Jason a gorgeous smile. Jason and Shanique both dive in, tickling and blowing on their baby's tummy. The baby wiggles and squeals with laughter. Shanique and Jason pick him up, fresh and clean, and dance over the living-room floor.

What's the difference between these families? They all have new babies, they all face the same joys and the same stresses, and yet some are so happy, and some are not. In our research, we've discovered that everyone has the best of intentions after their babies are born. But some couples weather the transition beautifully, others stumble but regain their footing, while still others fall . . . and keep falling.

First, though, before we examine what distinguishes one group of couples from another, let's answer a more fundamental question: Who is having babies in this country?

BABIES ARE MOSTLY BORN TO COUPLES

About 4.5 million babies are born each year in the United States. The vast majority are born to married couples, not single moms. But the numbers are changing dramatically. In 1980, the estimate was that 18.4 percent of all babies were born to single moms. By 2003, the figure increased to 34.6 percent--over a third of all babies born in this country. These figures suggest that single motherhood is on the rise. There's a fear that children born to single moms are at greater risk for poverty, neglect, and maltreatment. Some say that if these babies were born to couples committed to staying together, their families would be much better off.

These statistics are highly misleading. A recent study in twenty-one American cities found that unwed mothers are rarely alone. Independent of race and ethnicity, a whopping 82 percent of these moms are romantically involved with the fathers of their babies. Sixty percent of these couples live together and are gallantly struggling to make it. So the overwhelming majority of unwed mothers are partnered already with the dads of their babies. "Single" motherhood, at least in the first year of Baby's life, is largely a myth.

As we travel around the nation conducting our workshops for birth educators, we also see men in every social class and ethnic group wanting to be better fathers and partners. Many men have experienced absentee fathers whom they either have never met or who disappeared early from their families. They don't want to repeat their fathers' mistakes. They want a different life for themselves. Many of them want families even more than friends or careers.

All told, this means that nearly all babies are born to couples, married or not. And couples are showing a profound commitment these days to creating not just babies, but healthy families. That's what this book is all about.

THE SOUP WE'RE ALL IN

There's an old joke about a man who goes to a restaurant, and after his soup arrives he calls the waiter over. He says to the waiter, "Taste the soup." The waiter assures him that this soup has taken weeks to prepare, and that the chef is one of the finest in the city. The man again says to the waiter, "Taste the soup." The waiter offers more assurances. He brings over framed restaurant reviews that all mention the soup. The man nods and smiles and again says to the waiter, "Taste the soup." Finally, exasperated, the waiter says, "All right. I'll taste the soup . . . Where's the spoon?" "Aha!" the man says.

There's no way for us to know how our lives will change after our baby arrives. We think we'll be full of joy. Everyone tells us that there's nothing more exciting than a new baby. Babies are the natural culmination of the love we share. They are the dawning of new hope. Babies delight us with their cuteness and draw us into their peaceful, loving world. They are soft and tender, helpless and small. They need us. They call us to love and nurture them. They are also very nice people. They openly greet us, and they eagerly play with us. They engage us, imitate us, and smile at us. Once we get to know our babies, we think, maybe our species is good and fine after all.

But sometimes we find that we may have cooked up a tasty fantasy. Once the realities of new parenthood set in, the stresses stand out, too, like too much salt in a dish.

Our thirteen-year research study with 130 young families uncovered a startling fact: In the first three years after babies were born, a whopping two-thirds of parents experienced a significant drop in their couple relationship quality. Being with Baby tasted so sweet, but being together as partners turned bitter; increases in conflict and hostility soured family life.

If these research results are representative, we're talking about an overwhelming majority of American families who suffer from relationship distress after children come. We heard many stories like these (the following names and identifying details were changed).

Angelica complained that her husband expects her to do almost all of the housework and child care even though she now works half-time. Robert said that he now works not only full-time but does a lot of overtime as well, and that should count for something.

She sarcastically said, "Thank you, Your Highness. But you can change this diaper right now as part of your overtime at home."

He snickered. "No way. I'll change a wet diaper, but the poop ones are all yours."

She did not laugh. She changed the diaper.

Jonathan and Jenny sat on a couch together during an interview. He said, "Jenny's too involved with the baby. She's got no limits. She doesn't get that we have to save our money now. She'll spend a week's salary just so the baby will look cute when she brings him out to her friends. It's like our baby is Barbie. She's totally impractical."

She said, "You don't understand! Our baby outgrows everything so fast. Besides, I am not impractical. I resent that! You're just a cheapskate who doesn't earn enough money. I had to get that new stroller. The old one wasn't safe."

He shot back, "All I ever hear out of your mouth are zingers, nothing but criticism. What about all the good stuff I do? "

She whipped out, "Whenever you do anything, you don't do it right, so I have to do it all over again." She laughed.

He said, "Another zinger."

The two of them ended up sitting next to each other, not talking, stone-faced and looking straight ahead.

These examples are typical. In our research, we score videotapes of couples discussing problems in detail, second by second. Here's what we see: The couples in trouble are critical, defensive, and disrespectful with each other. They are blind to their partner's point of view, and they can't compromise. They often say things they later regret. Not surprisingly, most of these couples have elevated heart rates during their arguments. Their fights feel like tripping through mine fields. Their partners seem like enemies, not allies. Apparently, their partners don't even like them, let alone respect them. Over time, both partners are haunted by feeling unappreciated, neglected, and lonely.

How does this calamity happen when there should only be joy? The story seems to be this: When a baby arrives, a couple's intimacy deteriorates. Sex, romance, and passion often decline. The relationship shifts its center to the baby. Husbands and wives who were once friends and lovers no longer have time for each other. Dating stops entirely, and long conversations disappear. Both parents get lonely, and can be drawn to others outside the marriage. Most affairs occur after children come. Family time is now battle time.

Worse yet, battles get physical. One U.S. study found that 37 percent of obstetric patients experience domestic violence with their partners. Another study found that 30 percent of domestic violence begins in pregnancy. Is it any wonder that our divorce rate has climbed to 50 percent, and that many of these divorces occur within a few years of babies' births?

Part of the problem is that we think becoming parents shouldn't be a big deal. It seems unthinkable that our new baby could be clutching in his little hands some major stresses. After all, isn't having a baby a happy event? We receive those Hallmark cards that say, "Congratulations!" to celebrate the occasion. And of course, our baby's birth is a wonderful occasion. But maybe, in tiny black letters, the cards should also read, "Say good-bye to your romance."

Does it have to be this way? Not if we have the skills to create savory family time, instead of sour and bitter moments. The findings of many research studies can help us.

PARENTS ARE VERY STRESSED

As early as 1957, a landmark study by E. E. LeMasters claimed that an astounding 83 percent of new parents went through moderate to severe crisis in the transition to parenthood. Unfortunately, no one believed LeMasters. His claims were initially dismissed--or, at best, strongly debated--because no one could believe such high-percentage numbers could be real. But later, in the 1980s, other studies began to appear, and they confirmed LeMasters's findings. Now, after more than sixteen long-term studies, we know that he was right.

BOTH PARENTS ARE IRRITABLE,

OVERLY EMOTIONAL, AND THEY FIGHT A LOT

There is so much to do when a new baby arrives. Babies need to be fed every two hours, including at night. So most babies don't sleep through the night, at least for a while. Also, babies signal their needs by crying. This means that babies cry a lot. Babies cry when they are wet, when they are in pain, when they have gas, when they are scared, when they are lonely, when they need to be held, and when they are hungry.

We parents spend many nights at 3 a.m. walking around the house with our babies trying to help them go to sleep. We dance with our babies, sing to our babies, count to a hundred with our babies, reason with our babies, rock our babies, and bathe our babies. We wipe up baby drool, baby pee, baby poop, and baby spit. We look in mirrors with our babies, go for drives with our babies, play the saxophone to our babies, and take our babies into our parental beds. We sleep with our babies next to

us, and we sleep with our babies on top of us. Then we change our babies, feed our babies, take our babies to the park and to the pediatrician. And we buy things for our babies--cribs, playpens, rattles, toys, mobiles, baby music, car seats, diapers, baby food, more diapers, and more baby food. We parents love our babies so much, yet there's so much to do!

It is possible to not answer the phone, to avoid returning messages, to ignore someone knocking at the door, and to avoid doing our e-mail, but most of us cannot ignore our crying babies. Baby cries awaken an archetypal drive in us to nurture, protect, and sustain our own. So, of course, with responding around the clock, we get sleep deprived, tired, and crabby. This is totally natural. It happens to all of us.

But what happens when we are sleep deprived and stressed for a long time? We can get mildly depressed. Apparently, sleep deprivation sometimes biologically results in depression even when there's nothing to be depressed about. For example, one study took healthy young childless volunteers and deprived them of deep sleep (found during delta-wave and dream stages) every night for a month. At the end of the month, they were evaluated. Every single one of them had become clinically and biologically depressed! And these young volunteers had no baby in the picture, no one crying to wake them up, and no one saying, "You get the baby, I'm tired."

Sleep deprivation also makes our daily hassles seem more intense. We feel worse, and we take things harder--like encountering rude people, waiting at red lights, or enduring long lines at the grocery store. When we're exhausted, we lose our sense of humor. We just can't cope as well.

In our relationships, we also feel more emotionally out of control. We think we hear something mean and snap! We crack back with something hostile. One minute we're laughing, and the next one, crying. And the fuse on our temper is only a millimeter long. Astoundingly, all of this is normal, given a few months of sleep deprivation and so much to do.

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