

Introduction

First-time parents are a gullible group that just loves guarantees. They will read any book that promises perfect parenting by the final chapter. They will buy any musical mobile that has been billed as a surefire way to boost a baby's IQ. Pregnant women flock to childbirth classes with instructors who swear that their approaches to labor and delivery will lead to relaxing, pain-free experiences on the big day.

Insecure about assuming such a significant role, which is like nothing they have ever done before, expectant parents are willing to do whatever it takes to make certain they get the right start on the parenting track. But preparing for parenthood is not just about doing or buying. It is about contemplating what it really means to be a parent. It is about recognizing how a baby will irrevocably transform their lives as individuals and as a couple.

In addition to focusing on guarantees, expectant parents also tend to pay close attention to the physical aspects of pregnancy – the weight gain, the diagnostic tests, the ultrasounds, the lists of foods a mother should and should not eat. Although these are all significant and deserving of attention, most people do not take stock of how they feel about impending parenthood and all that their new roles will entail. The journey to parenthood is far more complex than many realize. Typically, most parents-to-be understand that a new little person in their lives will mean *some* additional work, but they have no idea just how much. Nor can most expectant couples anticipate the many ways in which becoming a parent will change their identities, their priorities and the daily rhythms of their lives forever.

We live in a society that glorifies pregnancy and parenthood. A new life is certainly worth celebrating, but many men and women muddle through this enormous transition feeling inadequate, scared, stressed and even angry. In some ways, new parents have been set up to fail by cultural ideals that characterize the birth of a child as the most wonderful time in a couple's life. Society has sugar-coated the realities of the first-time parenting experience, leaving many new parents with a saccharine aftertaste. As a result, these new parents believe they are not experiencing the real thing but some mediocre substitute, when they do not feel an instant bond with their babies, when they do not sense a more intense love in their marriages, and when the postpartum period does not consist of endless joy but rather of tension, unpredictability and a yearning for the way life used to be.

This book attempts to debunk some of the myths about pregnancy and parenting while offering readers a glimpse into the lives and minds of first-time parents, both before and after delivery. These mothers and fathers, who

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come from a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, compare their expectations with the realities of pregnancy, labor and delivery, and the postpartum period. They discuss how they came to form their various beliefs about childbirth and the transition to parenthood, and how those expectations affected their adjustment to family life.

By exploring the psychological side of pregnancy and new parenthood, mothers- and fathers-to-be can start to identify, discuss and address concerns before the baby arrives. They can begin to pinpoint, and maybe even alleviate, certain stresses prior to the postpartum period, when new parents must contend with sleepless nights and the new baby learning curve. Exploration questions are included at the end of the book so that couples can start to contemplate and discuss their own thoughts and feelings about impending parenthood.

Chapter 1 identifies those myths we hear about, and come to accept as true, on the journey to parenthood. Because the physiological aspects of pregnancy – what we can see, measure and physically feel – are such an obvious and integral part of bringing a new baby into the world, an entire chapter – Chapter 2 – is devoted to the mind–body connection of pregnancy. The physical changes in the woman’s body can trigger the beginning of an emotional tie between both parents and their unborn baby. But the pregnancy transformation can also affect a woman’s body image, as well as feelings about sexual intimacy.

This book also examines how expectant and new parents define their own parenting styles and what it means to be a “good father” and a “good mother.” It looks at the transition to parenthood from three distinct perspectives – that of the woman, the man and the couple. Chapter 3 delves into the psychological experience of motherhood, Chapter 4, the psychological experience of fatherhood and, later in the book, Chapter 7 explores the couple’s changing relationship. It is important to understand the unique viewpoints men and women bring to parenting, and how they mesh their separate ideas and opinions to form a collective parenting unit.

Chapter 5 breaks down the labor and delivery experience. It analyzes women’s expectations regarding pain, the length and difficulty of the childbirth process, and their partners’ abilities to comfort and assist them. Chapter 5 also looks at men’s expectations concerning their roles in the delivery room. In addition, couples share their reactions to what is supposed to be the most dramatic and emotional event of the whole nine months: the baby’s debut.

Welcoming a baby into the family and into the home is often nothing short of chaotic. In Chapter 6, new parents talk about what life is like once they bring their babies home from the hospital. They discuss their frustrations in trying to figure out just what their babies need, why they might be crying and why they are not sleeping “like babies.” The chapter addresses the conflicts that can arise when a new division of labor is required to accommodate all of the additional work in the postpartum period. It also offers some practical advice on what parents can do about the hordes of new baby well-wishers who visit

or phone. With good intentions, these friends, colleagues and family members often have a tendency to dispense advice on anything and everything having to do with babies. They inundate the rookie moms and dads with suggestions on how to feed, clothe, diaper, swaddle, soothe, rock, bathe and dress a baby. However, at such a pivotal juncture in the transition to parenthood, this advice can undermine new parents because this is the time when they are just getting to know their infant and just beginning to gain confidence in their parenting abilities.

Chapter 8 presents an overview of postpartum depression and other perinatal mood illnesses, their causes, symptoms and treatments. The chapter identifies which women have a greater risk of developing a mood disorder in the period surrounding childbirth, and it recommends certain measures women (as well as men) can take during pregnancy to try to prevent the onset of depression, or at least lessen the severity of the symptoms. Approximately 13% of women who have babies will develop some form of postpartum depression.

And finally, because there are so many different ways to put together a family today, and because modern medicine has provided us with the technology to help people create babies, Chapter 9 looks at the many paths to parenthood and variations on the traditional family. It explains the unique issues and conditions that define those mothers' and fathers' journeys to parenthood.

Thinking about the psychological experience of becoming a parent, and identifying and managing certain fears and sources of potential conflict, can make the transition to parenthood smoother, giving parents a sense of order amidst the turmoil of the hectic postpartum period. This psychological dress rehearsal does not guarantee a seamless shift from couple to family, but it can decrease the likelihood that these issues will take center stage once the baby is born. As the curtain rises on this new chapter in a couple's life, they will want to do everything possible to enjoy the show.

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