

Relationships
in pregnancy
and early
parenthood

Becoming a parent – get ready for some changes ...

Many people aren't prepared for the changes that being a parent brings to their relationship. The change from being a couple with time to spend on yourselves and each other to being parents with a small baby is a big one.

Attention pregnant partners!

Because the woman is carrying the baby, it's often easy for a pregnant woman to bond with the baby and to get used to the idea of being a parent. But for you, it may not be so easy. There are simple ways to get to know your baby before he or she arrives, and to get used to the idea that you're a parent now.

- Be there for ultrasound scans. It's a very powerful experience to see your baby for the first time.
- Talk to other friends who are parents. Talk to your own parents. Ask about their feelings and experiences.
- If you're apprehensive about being with your partner during labour and birth, talk to her about it. Ask other parents about their experiences in labour and talk to the midwife – this can give you an idea of what to expect.
- Go with your partner to childbirth education sessions (they're for both parents, not just mothers). Ask if you can go on a tour of the delivery/birthing unit at the hospital to see what it's like.
- Whenever you can, feel the baby kick.
- Get involved with caring for the baby as soon as possible after the birth. It does more than give your partner a break: it helps you feel more confident about parenting and closer to the baby too.

Parents at last

Some people think having a baby won't change their relationship much and that the baby will fit into their lifestyle. But your lifestyle will change. Thinking about this and getting used to the idea before the baby arrives will help prepare you emotionally for these changes. Some things to think about:

All babies are different. Yours will arrive with a unique personality and temperament. As with any other person in your life, there will be things about your baby that you can't change. You'll need to spend time getting to know, understanding – and learning to live with – this little person just the way they are.

It's not just first babies that change things. The arrival of other children also affects relationships between parents, and relationships between parents and their children.

Babies have a habit of changing other relationships too, especially with a couple's own parents. Some women find that motherhood deepens the bond they have with their own mother, for instance. Some partners may find this change a bit threatening ('she's at her mum's again ...'). But this doesn't mean that she's abandoning her partner. It's just natural for some women to feel closer to their mothers (or other mother figures) at this time.

"If you're a partner, talking about the baby helps you feel connected and involved. But the ultrasound really helped too – that's when the baby seemed to become real." Mark

The experience of changing from being partner to partner-and-parent can be different for each person. If you're the one doing most of the nurturing of your baby in the early days, your experience will be different to your partner's. Yet at the same time, many concerns and experiences will be similar. See the examples below. Don't be put off by the list of losses some parents feel – most people find the gains of parenting more than make up for them.

Women may feel

- I've lost the identity I had before.
- I've gained a new identity as a mother.
- I've gained a different relationship with my partner as we learn to be parents together.
- I've gained a new relationship with my child.
- I have less time for myself.
- I have less time to spend with my partner and less time for just being together and talking.
- What will happen to our sex life?
- I've lost my work identity.
- I've lost my body shape.
- I've lost control over my body.
- I've lost control over my routine.

Partners may feel

- I've lost the identity I had before.
- I've gained a new identity as a parent.
- I've gained a different relationship with my partner as we learn to be parents together.
- I've gained a new relationship with my child.
- I have less time for myself.
- I have less time to spend with my partner and less time for just being together and talking.
- What will happen to our sex life?
- I wonder how much my life will change?
- What will happen to my time with friends?
- Will I have time for activities I enjoy?

Emotional ups and downs – tips for coping

- Remind yourself that some emotional ups and downs and arguments are normal for both of you. They're normal at any time – but especially in pregnancy and early parenthood when you're both coping with big changes.
- Share your feelings with each other. This will help you understand and support each other. Although it's usually the pregnant woman who's the centre of attention and concern, you're not the only one who needs support. Your partner is often dealing with the same worries.
- Remember your partner isn't a mind reader. If one of you feels you're not getting the support and understanding you need, talk about it.
- Talk about possible changes to your life that being a parent will bring. These may include financial changes, sharing household tasks, sharing the care of your baby, changes to your social life, less time to go out as a couple or changes to your working life. Think about how you'll cope with these changes.
- Remember that parents still need 'couple time' after the baby is born. This is a part of the glue that strengthens a relationship when you become parents. Try to find friends and relatives who'll mind your baby while you have time together as a couple, or just some time for one or both of you to get a few hours' sleep.

"While I was euphoric about my new son, I wasn't prepared for the lack of closeness with my wife. It took many months to rebuild the loving, sexual relationship we'd previously enjoyed." Lex

Domestic violence

Domestic violence has a big impact on the health of families, especially on women and their children. Domestic violence is also a crime – a crime that affects all kinds of women from all kinds of backgrounds.

Domestic violence isn't just being punched or hit. It can mean other things that are done to control and dominate another person, such as:

- making threats
- forcing you to do sexual things when you don't want to
- controlling your money
- stopping you from seeing family and friends.

Research tells us that:

- many women experience domestic violence for the first time in pregnancy
- for women already living with domestic violence, the violence gets worse in pregnancy.

Domestic violence can affect a baby before they're born. Sometimes it's because their mother is physically injured. But new research also shows that the stress of living with violence (whether physical violence or another kind of violence) has a significant effect on pregnant women. It can influence how their baby develops. Babies of women affected by domestic violence in pregnancy may have a lower birth weight, and may grow up with social and emotional problems (even if they don't experience violence after they are born).

This is why all women are likely to be asked about domestic violence by their midwife or child and family health nurse.

You may be asked more than once – it's part of routine health care in NSW. You don't have to answer questions about violence if you don't want to, but it's important to know that violence is a health issue. If you tell a health worker you are experiencing domestic violence and that you are afraid, they will offer to help you get in touch with services that can help.

If you're afraid or concerned for your safety or the safety of your children, you can:

- call the police or a local refuge
- tell someone you trust (a friend, your midwife, your doctor or health worker)
- go to a safe place
- use the law to protect you and your children – talk to the police or local court about how to get help
- make a safety plan in case you and your children have to leave quickly.

There is free counselling, information and medical help for anyone who has been assaulted or abused. These services are based in many hospitals.

You can also call the Domestic Violence Helpline on 1800 656 463 or TTY 1800 671 442 (toll free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week). This service can give you details of the nearest refuge, court assistance schemes and other services.

If you are in danger, call the police on 000.