

Julien Posture

RELATIONSHIPS

Fighting Constantly After Baby? Read This.

By Jessica Grose



THE GIST

- The vast majority of parents are less satisfied with their marriages after they have kids than they were before.
- Mothers in heterosexual relationships report the lowest levels of marital satisfaction, mostly because they tend to take on more “second shift” work — housework and child care — than their partners do.
- Listing and dividing household tasks (including child care) make both partners feel a greater sense of fairness, though those tasks do not have to be divided 50/50.
- Maintaining a sexual connection is also important — and reestablishing that connection takes time postpartum.

The lowest point of my marriage was probably when I was excessively pregnant with our second daughter. It was 90 degrees outside every day, and I had blown past my due date with no signs of labor. I had trouble falling asleep but had finally drifted off one night when my husband came home from a work event and woke me up. I had a brief and fleeting desire to bludgeon him with a bedside lamp.

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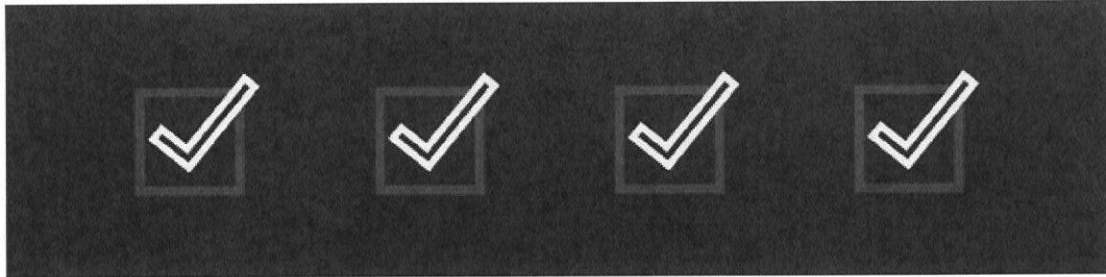
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I'm not alone: The majority of studies on marital satisfaction suggest that couples are less happy after they become parents, though the degree and length of unhappiness is more of an open question. Deeply unpleasant thoughts about your spouse will probably flit through your mind at some point during your child's first year, mostly because of the extreme exhaustion infants create in their parents (there's a reason extreme sleep deprivation is considered torture).

I spoke to three experts — including a New York Times-bestselling author, a sociologist and a relationship-focused psychotherapist — about how to keep relations as positive as possible during your transition to parenthood. All the experts I spoke with said that taking a transparent, proactive approach to

dividing household work — including child care — was the number one way to keep the rage-beast of new parenthood at bay.



WHAT TO DO

Collapse all ▲

Don't be surprised if you're not happy. ▲

Though it's normal for satisfaction to decline in any relationship over time, research performed within the past decade suggests that new mothers may be most vulnerable to that dip. Sociologists theorize that, in heterosexual relationships, mothers are more unhappy with their marriages after they have children because they tend to take on more "second shift" work — child care and housework — and begin to feel that their relationships are no longer fair. Surveys have shown that whether they work or not, mothers are doing more child care than fathers are.

There is less data about same-sex and gender non-conforming couples, but there is some — albeit dated — evidence that biological mothers in lesbian couples spend more time doing child care than their partners do (though their partners still spend more time on child care than fathers in heterosexual relationships). Lesbian and gay couples tend to divide housework in a more egalitarian way than heterosexual couples do.

Take the same amount of parental leave as your partner (if you can). ▲

If at all possible, make sure both partners are taking identical amounts of leave. Jennifer Senior, an Op-Ed columnist at The New York Times and author of the bestselling "All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood," said that imbalance in leave-taking can set the stage for an imbalance of caretaking that can last for years. The parent who takes less leave has less experience soothing the baby. So the parent who takes more leave — almost always the biological mother — becomes the default "baby whisperer," because she has more experience. It's hard to get out of that pattern once you're in it. In countries where parents tend to take equal amounts of leave, like in Canada or Sweden, marital satisfaction rates are higher. The unfairness

extends even to sleep: Past research has found that working mothers in America are significantly more likely to get up during the night with a sick or wakeful child than working fathers are — and sleep is more equal in countries with more egalitarian policies in place.

Manage your expectations.



“Take the image of the ideal parent and throw it in the garbage,” said Dr. Leah Ruppanner, Ph.D., a sociologist at the University of Melbourne who specializes in family and gender. She gives this advice especially to mothers, because there are much more aggressive cultural expectations about what a good mother is supposed to be. According to the Pew Research Center, the majority of Americans still believe that women do a better job caring for new babies than men do (only 1 percent of Americans think men do a better job), and almost 80 percent believe women face a lot of pressure to be an involved parent.

Make a list of tasks, and divide them fairly.



Senior suggested that parents should list all of their household tasks, including child care, and divide them in a way that seems fair — not equitable. For example: If one partner works 15 hours more a week than the other partner, then they will probably be doing fewer hours of house- and child-related work. But all the experts we spoke with agreed that ad hoc arrangements led to the most strife (and, in hetero couples, usually leave the mom feeling shafted). Merely making the list provides a way for parents to work through all of the potential pain points.

Get granular with your list.



The writer Alix Kates Shulman created a “Marriage Agreement” with her husband when she had children, so that household responsibilities would be distributed fairly. She wrote about it in 1970, and her list gets very specific: “Transportation: Getting children to and from lessons, doctors, dentists, friends’ houses, park, parties, movies, library, etc. Making appointments. Parts occurring between 3:00 and 6:30 p.m. fall to wife. Husband does all weekend transportation and pickups after 6.” Senior said you should get as granular as possible when you’re listing and dividing chores — the more specific you get, the less resentment will fester.

Don't be a maternal gatekeeper.



Some mothers believe themselves to be the superior parent, and engage in what sociologists refer to as “maternal gatekeeping” — they mediate their spouses’ interactions with their children. Practically speaking it often means nitpicking: “Why are you swaddling Ruby that way?”; “Jasper doesn’t like his bottle so cold.” If mothers want child care to be divided fairly, they have to let fathers do things their own way, even if it’s not *your* way (if the child is truly in danger, that’s another story — you should always intervene in that case). “You’re letting them learn how to respond to the kids,” Ruppanner said. “They learn how to do it. It’s not astrophysics.”

Ruppanner suggested that if a parent is really struggling not to meddle, they should physically leave the house when their spouse is on duty — go for a run, take a nap, give yourself some personal time.

Redefine your sex life.



Having a child is a “complete reorganization of the structure of your life,” said Esther Perel, M.A., L.M.F.T., a psychotherapist and author of the book “Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence” — and that includes your sex life. Many biological parents are given the go-ahead to have sex six weeks postpartum, but that’s because “at six weeks you can be penetrated without tearing,” Perel said — and that doesn’t mean you’re ready for it physically or psychologically. Perel added that it could take as long as a year before you’re ready to have penetrative sex — so don’t be discouraged if you’re feeling uneasy at six weeks. It takes time to re-establish the rhythm and get used to a changed body and a restructured life.

Parents who gave birth need time to recover, and nursing parents may experience vaginal dryness because of lowered estrogen levels. About 90 percent of mothers resume sex within six months of birth, though 83 percent are experiencing sexual issues three months postpartum, and 64 percent are still experiencing issues at six months. Perel encouraged parents to “broaden their erotic interests” outside of penetrative sex and experiment with new erogenous zones. Continuing to connect sexually is important for keeping those hostile feelings at bay, for both parents. “On the long list of what your kids need, making sure the couple remains intimately connected remains very high,” Perel said. “There’s nothing holding a family together except the contentment of the couple.”

Jessica Grose is the lead editor of NYT Parenting, author of two novels and mom of two girls.



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SOURCES

Jennifer Senior, author of “All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood,” July 24, 2018

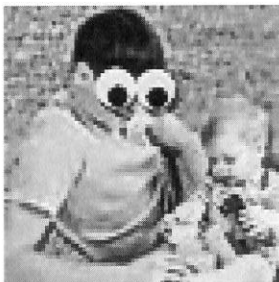
Dr. Leah Ruppanner, Ph.D., associate professor and co-director of [The Policy Lab](#) at the University of Melbourne, July 25, 2018

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