

Bringing Baby Home:

A psycho-educational intervention to increase relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

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The transition to parenthood is a time of excitement, possibility and hope for most new parents. However, it can also be a time of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. Bringing Baby Home is a psycho-educational intervention aimed at increasing relationship satisfaction during the first year when many couples experience increased stresses and strains, shifts in roles, decreased communication and increased conflict. A two-day workshop teaches couples skills to increase friendship, improve conflict regulation, and foster early parent-child connection.

Every year, approximately 4.2 million babies are born to couples in the United States and close to 135 million babies are born worldwide. Despite the excitement that comes with welcoming a new baby, research shows that within three years of the birth of a child, approximately two-thirds of couples will experience a significant drop in their relationship quality and a dramatic increase in relationship conflict, hostility, and dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1999).

Since the 1980s, relationship research has taken a particular interest in the transition to parenthood. Many interventions and therapeutic models have been proposed to help families adjust to having a baby. It has even been suggested that the way to maintain relationship satisfaction is to avoid having children! However, research by Carolyn and Philip Cowan (1988) at University of California, Berkeley, looked at this suggestion and discovered that choosing not to have children does not guarantee relationship happiness. In their study, they found that after five years of marriage, 50% of couples who had not had children were getting divorced, while only 25% of those who did have children were choosing divorce. When looking at couples who divorced, the Cowans noticed there was a common downward slide in couples' relationship quality after the birth of the first child.

Gottman (1994) looked at the same issue in his study of marital satisfaction. When studying young couples, he discovered that most separations were occurring during the transition to parenthood or in the first year after couples became parents. Gottman found that 67% of couples were less satisfied after the baby arrived than they were before. Additionally, it appeared that the timing of dissatisfaction was different for men and women. For women, the negative spiral began approximately four to six months after the first baby was born, with a precipitous drop in relationship satisfaction. Fathers typically experienced the same decrease in relationship satisfaction, but this usually started around nine months post-birth or closer to the end of the baby's first year.

DISSATISFACTION IN THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

Many couples and professionals alike are surprised that the arrival of a baby can bring anything but happiness to parents. In fact, birth is considered a celebratory event in every culture around the world. Several explanations have been identified for why the majority of new parents are dissatisfied after their baby arrives. One of the primary sources of difficulty is poor communication between partners which typically leads to conflict. When there has been poor communication or significant conflict during pregnancy, then the couple consistently reports larger declines in relationship functioning after the birth (Shapiro et al., 2000). Perren et al. (2005) identified that a decrease in the quality of the couple's communication can be a result of poor functioning in their families of origin. This means that it is important for new parents to understand their partner's upbringing, parenting expectations, life hopes and dreams.

Couples who live together before marriage are at a higher risk of experiencing difficulty (Stanley et al., 2004). Couples with unplanned pregnancies show more conflict and ambivalence as reported by the wife, but not by the husband (Belsky & Rovine, 1990). This does not mean that an unexpected baby will doom a relationship. Instead, it means there is an opportunity to help the couple by providing education about the transition to parenthood and tools for building friendship, fondness and admiration in the relationship.

A primary cause of dissatisfaction during early parenthood is poor communication.

Relationship commitment and confidence have both been shown to be important in understanding how a couple functions and how satisfied they will be following the birth of their first baby (Whitton et al., 2007; Impett et al., 2001). When couples have overly positive expectations about their relationship after the baby arrives, there is likely to be a greater deterioration in relationship satisfaction, especially when there are high levels of poor communication (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Teaching new parents about the physical, social, financial, and emotional realities of parenting can help couples adjust their expectations and thereby increase relationship satisfaction.

Stanley et al. (2004) document deterioration in relationship functioning after the birth of a baby for couples from a wide range of ethnicities, including both Caucasian and African-American couples within the United States (Crohan, 1996) as well as for couples in Asia (Lu, 2006) and Europe (Lorenson et al., 2004; Clulow, 1982). Lesbian couples who conceived a child through artificial insemination, also report a decrease in love and increase in relationship conflict after the birth of their baby (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006).

The transition to parenthood is a process that begins long before the due date. During pregnancy, each partner experiences significant changes to their individual identities, roles, values and goals. New moms may feel that their role as mother is valued less than they thought it would be. The time spent with the baby, sleep deprivation, the feeding schedule and the extra household tasks can lead to resentment and make the mother unavailable for her partner's needs. In turn, the new father may feel overwhelmed by extra demands and seek to withdraw from the mom and baby by becoming more immersed in work, hobbies, or other activities. The physical demands of a new baby, the decrease of intimacy and sexual desire, and postpartum mood disorders, can also lead to a decrease in relationship satisfaction. Increased emotional distance is a concern because when a partner feels neglected or lonely, he or she is more likely to participate in extramarital affairs.

GOTTMAN'S RESEARCH

In the mid1990s, John Gottman and his team recognized that the negativity in couples' relationships associated with the transition to

parenthood was leading to a generation of unhappy, dissatisfied couples. The team feared that the challenges couples were experiencing would result in an increased divorce rate, children being raised by single parents, financial distress for couples and negative outcomes for children owing to father withdrawal. To counter these effects, John and Julie Gottman and Alyson Shapiro created an intervention for couples intended to increase relationship satisfaction and parent-child connection. The Bringing Baby Home (BBH) study began in 1999 in Seattle, Washington, as a pilot and later grew into a full-scale research study that concluded in 2005, when the youngest of the research participants were 30 to 36 months old. The data showed that couples who took the BBH program had less 'relationship meltdown', higher relationship quality, less interpersonal hostility and markedly less incidence of progressive symptoms of postpartum depression.

THE BBH PROGRAM

In addition to antenatal education that helps mothers and fathers prepare for labour and birth, for breastfeeding and newborn care, the BBH program provides a relationship component to help couples understand what to expect and how to overcome hurdles. Parenting experts, therapists, medical providers and clergy may all be effective in helping couples understand the profound philosophical shift that occurs when they become parents and BBH gives all of these professionals the tools necessary to make a strong impact on new families.

Bringing Baby Home is a psycho-educational intervention. Typically taught in a two-day model, it focuses on:

- (1) Strengthening the couple's relationship and preparing them for the challenges typically associated with the transition to parenthood
- (2) Facilitating involvement by both parents in the family
- (3) Giving new and expectant parents information about infant psychological development and tips about playing with their infant.

Workshop content teaches couples how to strengthen their friendship, create Love Maps, increase fondness and admiration for each other,

LOVE MAPS

Over time, people change. Their likes, dislikes, daily activities and friends all evolve. Our research shows that couples can lose track of what is meaningful to one another. This happens between parents and children too. As soon as you become comfortable knowing what your newborn needs and what makes him comfortable, his preferences change. One effective way to manage these changes and keep relationships strong is to build 'Love Maps' of one another's worlds. In essence, this is a mental 'map' of your partner's or child's preferences, daily schedule, life dreams and history.

For example, when your child is in preschool, you can learn his or her daily schedule and find out what the kids do during their circle time. Then at dinner each day, you can ask your child about their day using the information you have learned, creating an instant connection and letting your child know that he/she is important. Making Love Maps is a lifetime skill as your children will change and have new friends, new hobbies, new hardships and new successes. Each of these is an opportunity for growth and connection and ultimately, a stronger parent-child relationship.

DYADIC ACTIVITIES

There are 12 exercises/activities presented over the course of the BBH workshop that couples can do in pairs (dyads) so that when they go home, they have learned the same skills and have shared their ideas about parenting roles, goals and rituals. Six of these activities use card decks and allow couples the opportunity to ask one another questions that further their understanding of the type of parent they want to be and what their dreams are for parenting. We find that by doing these exercises together, couples share their learning and increase their friendship, enhance their respect for each other and improve their communication, and thereby have decreased conflict when making the transition to parenthood.

early parent-infant dialogue, which serves as the foundation for childhood literacy.

BRINGING BABY HOME TODAY

In 2005, an Educator Training Program for professionals wishing to offer the two-day BBH workshop or a six week series to parents and families commenced. More than 1200 educators have now been trained worldwide. Educators come from a variety of employment settings such as medical centers, faith-based settings, military operations and therapy centers. They represent 45 US states and more than 15 countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Australia, Singapore, Iceland, Israel and Romania. Professionals who have undertaken the training are offering workshops to thousands of couples.

resume intimacy, and regulate conflict. Couples learn how to think about themselves as part of a triad. BBH uses a variety of teaching methods such as lecture, video and dyadic exercises to teach sensitive and responsive parenting. It helps parents to assist children in their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development. It encourage

CONCLUSION

A couple's emotional connection is the real foundation for a baby's development. A hostile parent-parent relationship and a withdrawn or intrusive parent-child relationship have lasting negative effects on a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. A majority of American

Area	Research Findings
Parent-baby relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both fathers and mothers who took the BBH program (compared to those that did not) showed greater sensitivity and responsiveness to their infants' signals. This was particularly true for fathers. • Parents who took the BBH program demonstrated better coparenting in that they were able to work together more positively during family play with their 3-month-old baby. • Babies expressed more smiling and laughter during family play if their parents had participated in the BBH program. This was true for both three and twelve-month-old infants. • Several indicators of father-infant attachment security were rated more positively in families who had taken the BBH program.
Infant Development & Temperament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were fewer language delays in one-year-old infants of parents who took the BBH program. • Mothers who took the BBH program rated their babies as showing less distress in response to frustration (such as a toy being out of reach). • One-year-old babies in the workshop group were rated as responding more positively to their fathers' soothing.
Father involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fathers who took the BBH program reported being more involved in parenting, more satisfied and better appreciated for their parental contributions. • The quality of father-baby interactions was more positive.
Couple Relationship Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Couples who took the BBH program reported more stable relationship quality. Those who did not take the program showed a decline in relationship quality over the first year following the baby's birth. • There was less hostility expressed by both husbands and wives during conflict discussions if they had taken the BBH program.
Parent Psychopathology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer mothers who took the BBH program showed symptoms of post-partum depression, the baby blues, and other indicators of psychopathology such as anxiety. • Fewer fathers who took the BBH program showed signs of depression and anxiety.

children are living in homes with fragmented family relationships. It is critical to the health of young families that we address the tragedy of parent-to-parent hostility, postpartum depression and emotionally insensitive parenting. The question for couples having children is, 'How can we maintain the quality of our relationship and build a strong and healthy family?' Many parents believe that there is a choice to be made between being close to one's partner or one's child. Yet our research demonstrates that when parents have a good, satisfying relationship, their children enjoy optimum emotional and social development. The impact of the couple's relationship on their children has encouraged us to promote lasting change by implementing the BBH program in communities around the world.

More information about Bringing Baby Home for couples and educators can be found at www.gottman.com

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