

Beginning Parenthood & Marital Stress: A Pre-Parenthood Workshop

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Introduction

Pregnancy and early parenthood introduce significant challenges to the relationship of most couples. Psychological pre-parenthood education, especially in a group setting, can be beneficial in helping couples deal with these challenges, yet very little training is usually received or available to prospective parents. Instruction which offers emotional preparation for pregnancy and beginning parenthood is almost non-existent.

Because of this educational void, the authors decided to design and conduct a pre-parenthood study group similar to the Adlerian parent study group. The focus of the new group was upon specific relationship stresses commonly manifested during pregnancy and the first year after the baby's arrival.

Need for Group

Although there is some disagreement as to the nature and extent of problems faced by couples during early parenthood there is no question that this cycle places many new stresses upon most relationships. From an emotional and psychological viewpoint most couples simply don't know what to expect from pregnancy and those first months after the baby arrives. Therefore, they are quite unprepared for the experience. Couples often approach this phase in their lives with such high expectations that when stresses do occur they represent a shattering reality. In truth, arrival of the child forces a rapid reor-

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ganization of the former two-person system. Because the status quo has been upset, new working relationships are required. Subsequent role changes can be very abrupt and demanding.

Inevitably couples have less time to spend by themselves once the baby arrives and adjusting to the decline in companionship can be difficult. Normal relaxation, communication and even arguing are now subject to interruption. In fact the couple's relationship can become submerged to their relationship with the baby.

The father commonly feels left out during pregnancy and especially after the baby comes home. Usually the mother goes through a "honeymoon" period with the baby, generally reducing the time and energy available to the husband. Jealousy can result from the attention given to the newborn. The husband is no longer the sole center of attention and he may be compelled to compete for his wife's attention. A form of sibling rivalry may develop between father and child. Logical realization that the helpless infant must occupy first claim upon his wife may not be enough to prevent a sense of frustration and rejection.

Once the baby arrives a loss of freedom is usually felt. Mothers commonly complain that caring for the infant decreases leisure time and freedom of movement and tends to stifle independent achievement. It is easy to lose perspective in the midst of dirty diapers, sleepless nights, and mounds of clutter around the house.

Changes in sexual function usually accompany early parenthood. Fears, myths, fatigue, perceived loss of attractiveness, and discomfort often result in a decline in the frequency of sexual intercourse. The relationship can suffer if sexual frustrations and associated needs are not dealt with constructively through cooperative communication and exploration of alternatives.

During pregnancy and early parenthood almost all parents experience some negative and very natural emotions such as uncertainty, fear, and resentment. But usually the parent thinks that he or she is the only one who feels this way, that these feelings are "wrong" and must be suppressed or denied. Unfortunately, no one has prepared them for the fact that they might feel that way. They become afraid to admit their fears to anyone including their partner. But without communication there is little chance for relief. A real sense of isolation can erode any potential for cooperative problem solving.

Unfortunately the tools necessary to cope effectively with parenthood today are not instinctive but must be learned. The authors believe that emo-

tional pre-parenthood education is essential because this period is too critical and pivotal to entrust to trial and error. With the re-emergence of natural childbirth and breastfeeding there are classes readily available which deal with the physical side of pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care, but education for the psychological effects of pregnancy is almost non-existent.

Education BEFORE the arrival of children assists the couple in dealing with stresses from the beginning before they develop into acute crises. For those contemplating family life, appropriate education would allow the couple to better assess their readiness for parenthood.

Dreikurs (1962) stated that the most effective prevention against conflict in marriage is the feeling of belonging or the creation of a "we" atmosphere. This concept of cooperative, mutual sharing is essential and can be fostered during a group experience. Being with other couples facing the same institutions with similar problems is reassuring, helping the couple feel that stresses are not unique to them. Participating in a group where all members are anticipating the same event helps intensify interest in parenthood and can make the experience a welcomed one.

Group Design

The purpose of the group was to strengthen relationship skills while preparing couples for specific stresses which they would likely encounter as parents. The intent was to provide cognitive insight into the stressful dynamics of early parenthood while practicing behavioral skills to help deal with these dynamics. Assisting the couple to explore expectations, values, capacities, roles, and limitations should help them develop open, effective communication and promote mutual understanding. Resultant sharing and disclosure in an encouraging and accepting atmosphere should help partners feel good about themselves and promote cooperation.

Three specific objectives were formulated. The group would:

1. Create an awareness of potential stresses which commonly arise during early parenthood and discuss practical suggestions for dealing with the stresses.
2. Teach and then have the couples practice some basic relationship skills emphasizing effective communication, understanding, and cooperation.
3. Create an atmosphere of warmth, acceptance, and encouragement conducive to the open exchange of experiences, thoughts, feelings, expectations, suggestions, and fears.

Pregnancy and early parenthood stresses were ranked by members of the helping professions and the highest ranked stresses were specifically dealt with as part of the group design. Parenthood stresses and their rank are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Parenthood Stresses

Rank	Stress
1.	Not realizing what is involved in parenthood beforehand and faced with new roles which have not been defined or worked out.
2.	Failure to communicate problems and negative feelings to spouse and others.
3.	Exhaustion, fatigue, lack of sleep.
4.	Decline of leisure time, recreation, and social life.
5.	Husband feeling left out or neglected.
6.	Feelings of doubt and inadequacy about fulfilling the parent role.
7.	Fear and anxiety over the childbirth process.
8.	Parents thinking that problems and negative feelings are unique to them and not proper.
9.	Wife failing to recognize and fulfill husband's need for closeness and reassurance.
10.	Post-partum depression.
11.	The relationship between husband and wife becomes submerged.
12.	Wife's increased needs and demands for attention and reassurance.
13.	Sexual adjustments.
14.	Need for abrupt adjustment to new routines.
15.	Resentment by mother that baby is interfering with her career and/or relationship with her husband.
16.	Sense of rivalry of father toward child.
17.	Mother's perceived loss of independence and identity.
18.	Wife's concern over her appearance.

The decision was made to meet once a week for five weeks. Each session would run 2½ hours in the evening from 7:00 to 9:30 p.m.

Lecture, modeling, role playing, group discussion, homework and other activities were used to accomplish the group's objectives. Discussion of fears, experiences, ideas, problems, questions, and feelings were to be facilitated. Getting acquainted exercises were used to help members get to know each other quickly and break down communication barriers. Homework was formulated to initiate dialogue between partners outside of the group sessions. Each homework assignment was designed to lead into main topics discussed in the next session.

A pre-test and workshop appraisal questionnaire were designed for evaluation purposes.

An auxiliary function of the group was to educate participants about parenthood related services and aids available in the community. A comprehensive annotated list of services were distributed and briefly discussed.

A reading list was also developed for distribution and discussion.

The Group

The pilot group was publicized through a modest informational brochure which was distributed to obstetricians, childbirth organizations, counseling agencies, hospitals, and other settings. The workshop was attended by four married couples. Half of the initial group were childless, the remaining couples had at least one child. The general education level of the participants was high with most of them possessing a bachelor's degree. None of the couples dropped out during the group. All participants seemed involved and enthusiastic throughout the five sessions.

The following is a brief outline of each group session. Additional information concerning content may be obtained from the authors.

Session I

- A. Pre-Test: Parenthood Information Questionnaire.
- B. Getting Acquainted Exercise
- C. Ground Rules
- D. Introduction and Overview

- E. Ideas and Expectations
- F. Homework Assignment

Session II

- A. Getting Acquainted
- B. Homework Sharing
- C. Communication
- D. Homework

Session III

- A. Introduction of Spouse
- B. Homework Sharing
- C. Postpartum Depression
- D. How to Simplify Housework
- E. Role-play Relationship Stresses
- F. Homework

Session IV

- A. Helpful Hints
- B. Community Resources
- C. Homework Sharing/Role Definition
- D. Hand Massage
- E. Homework

Session V

- A. Homework Sharing
- B. Sexual Adjustments
- C. Potpourri/Warm-up
- D. Evaluation
- E. Celebration

Written feedback from group members was accomplished via a special appraisal form specifically designed for the group. The questionnaire focused on how the participants perceived the group and the changes in themselves as a result of the group.

Responses were highly favorable indicating that the workshops had been effective as an educational mechanism. Most respondents indicated that feelings were easier to express and indicated a greater sensitivity to their partners' needs. All participants felt they had acquired a better understanding of early parenthood problems and were unanimous in rating the group a valuable and enjoyable experience.

Members left the group with a better understanding of early parenthood stresses, and were successful in sharing their individual ideas, thoughts, fears, experiences, and feelings. They spent time at home and during the group sessions practicing new skills.

Things the group members liked the most about the group included the opportunity to share ideas with others, modeling done by the leaders, becoming aware of early parenthood stresses, and learning about effective communication skills.

Discussion and Implications

Instruction which offers emotional preparation for pregnancy and arrival of the baby is almost non-existent. Therefore, it is recommended that pre-parenthood training groups be established in conjunction with Adlerian Parent Study Groups and Adlerian Family Counseling Centers. The workshop presented in this article could be used as a model for pre-parenthood groups that are available to the community at large and are repeated at various times during the year.

The most effective leader approach to the group would be a team consisting of one member from each sex as co-leaders. These leaders would be trained in the stressful dynamics of pregnancy and early parenthood and be familiar with tools that couples can use to help cope with these dynamics. The leaders should also be familiar with group leadership techniques, and possess working knowledge of effective communication skills.

Like parent study groups, pre-parenthood education emphasizes an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and encouragement. Leaders must promote communication and have the ability to impart knowledge. Conditions must be established conducive to the interchange of ideas, fears, feelings, and experiences.

By participating in a pre-parenthood group training experience which deals with common problems, promotes open and effective communication, facili-

tates sharing, and provides constructive suggestions, couples can more effectively overcome the stresses of early parenthood. Participation in a pre-parenthood workshop coupled with later participation in the Adlerian parent study groups represents a very powerful educational combination for strengthening marital relationships and the family unit.

References

Dreikurs, R. Living together in a family. *Family Life*, 1962, 22(5), 1-2.

No advance is ever made without the consciousness of a hindrance. It is the thing which appears to be a deterrent which acts as the incentive whenever there is a courageous struggle for success.

— Alfred Adler
