

ESSAY

Don't Hate Your Husband: Advice for New Mothers

The first years of parenthood are tough on couples. A few survival tips



ILLUSTRATION: JUN CEN

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Before my husband, Tom, and I became parents, our sharpest moments of marital rancor involved where to go for Sunday brunch. Then we had a baby and began battling nonstop. Like all new parents, we were semi-deranged from sleep deprivation and inexperience, but the force of our anger took us both by surprise.

We're hardly unique. Numerous studies show that marital satisfaction—especially for women—takes a dive after couples become parents. A recent study of more than 12,000 parents published in the *American Sociological Review* found that mothers reported less happiness, more stress and greater fatigue in time spent with children than fathers.

In desperation, I plunged into research in order to mend our disintegrating relationship. I interrogated social scientists, time management experts, neuroscientists and couples counselors and put their advice into practice. Here are some lessons we learned to help couples with their first child stay on the same team.

An advertisement banner with a blue and white geometric pattern background. The text reads: "BREAKING THROUGH TO THE NEW" in large bold letters, followed by "How smart business leaders are accelerating in pace with the digital revolution." in smaller text. On the right side, there are logos for "accenture" and "WSJ CUSTOM STUDIOS". Below the logos is a blue button with the text "LEARN MORE". At the bottom right, it says "PAID PROGRAM".

Let your husband screw up. If Tom bathed the baby, I'd hover over him, pointing out that he was holding her the wrong way. If he struggled with putting her onesie on, I'd roll my eyes. Psychologists call this behavior “maternal gatekeeping,” in which mothers can swing open the gate to encourage fatherly participation, or clang it shut by limiting dad's interactions with the kids.

The result is a self-reinforcing loop: As she criticizes or takes over (“just give me the baby”), he grows more uncertain of his abilities. Fathers should be encouraged to spend time alone with their infants without maternal meddling. If the baby's onesie snaps don't align perfectly when he dresses her, who cares?

Tackle the big conversations. Tom and I could have avoided many post-baby battles if we had taken the time to address some of the issues that the couples therapists John and Julie Gottman explore in their counseling center's nationwide pre-baby workshops.

A sampling: Should we have mealtimes together? Who will take care of our child when he is sick? How should we include our relatives in our baby's life? Will religion play a part in his life?

The Gottmans say that new parents can quickly build intimacy just by asking open-ended questions such as: In what way has our child changed our relationship? How could we have more fun in our life? How have your goals in life changed since we had a child?

Get clarity on chores. A 2015 Ohio State study of 182 working couples found that men did a fairly equal share of housework—until they became dads. By the time their baby had reached 9 months, the women were doing an average of 37 hours of child care and housework each week, while the men did 24—even as both parents clocked in the same number of hours at work.

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How to fix? Conflicts arise from ambiguity. Researchers at the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families found that couples who “lacked clarity on what, when and how household responsibilities would

be carried out” negotiated their responsibilities every day, starting from scratch. This trapped participants in an exhausting cycle of “requests and avoidance.” Greater harmony came from having a plan for exactly who had to do what around the house.

Just do it. Given the many ways that sex can be sabotaged, it's amazing that new parents have any relations at all. Hilda Hutcherson, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University, says that it's critical to observe the Nike slogan and just do it. Sex releases endorphins, the feel-good hormone, as well as oxytocin, the “cuddle hormone” that produces feelings of devotion and trust.

And take heed, busy parents: The ideal frequency for having sex is just once a week for maximum well-being, according to a 2015 study of 30,000 adults by researchers at the University of Toronto Mississauga. More than that, and their happiness levels actually flattened.

An attitude of gratitude. It's easy to neglect each other in the tumult of new parenthood, but there are easy solutions. Research by the Gottmans has found that small, specific, everyday acts of affection that require almost no energy—giving a quick shoulder squeeze, giving a compliment like “you're a great parent”—matter more than the occasional sweeping gesture.

University of Georgia researchers found that expressions of gratitude were “the most consistent significant predictor of marital quality.” The power of a simple thank you, it seems, is considerable.

—This piece is adapted from Ms. Dunn's new book, “How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids,” published by Little, Brown and Co.

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