

The transition to parenthood: impact on couples' romantic relationships

Brian D Doss¹ and Galena K Rhoades²

The birth of the first baby — often referred to as the transition to parenthood (TTP) — is both a time of great joy and great stress for new parents. Although the literature is mixed, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the TTP has a negative effect on relationship functioning for most couples. However, as children age, the relationship functioning of parents and non-parents converge. Notably, there are important moderators of this average trajectory; couples with higher levels of pre-birth relationship problems, insecurely attached parents, temperamentally difficult infants, and TTP following biological birth rather than adoption are associated with larger post-birth declines. Fortunately, several effective couple-focused interventions are available to help buffer the negative effects of the TTP.

Addresses

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Miami, PO Box 248185, Coral Gables, FL 33124-0751, USA

² Department of Psychology, University of Denver, 2155 South Race Street, Denver, CO 80208-3500, USA

Corresponding author: Doss, Brian D (bdoss@miami.edu)

Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, 13:25–28

This review comes from a themed issue on **Relationships and stress**

Edited by **Gery C Karantzas**, **Marita P McCabe** and **Jeffrey A Simpson**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.003>

2352-250X/Published by Elsevier Ltd.

In this article, we review the theories that are used to understand the transition to parenthood (TTP), the effects it has on the romantic relationships of new parents, moderators of those effects, and interventions that can be helpful. The TTP is also associated with changes in domains of individual functioning, such as depression and subjective well-being; however, those changes are outside of the scope of this article.

Theories related to the transition to parenthood

Several theories inform our understanding of the TTP.

Social learning theory

From a social learning perspective, changes in roles and demands help explain why couples experience declines

in relationship functioning (described in more detail below). Many couples experience changes in their roles when a first child is born and find the new demands of caring for an infant difficult to balance with other responsibilities [1]. Partners also tend to increase in specialization in their roles during the transition to parenthood [2], as mothers are more likely to be responsible for feeding and to receive parental leave from their jobs. Particularly for women, changes in employment are tied to decreases in relationship satisfaction [3].

Attachment theory

Attachment theory also helps us understand changes in couples' relationships related to the TTP. Indeed, attachment insecurity exacerbates dissatisfaction in adjusting to parenthood [4]. Particularly for those who are avoidant or anxiously attached, common stressors associated with the TTP, such as those related to work–family balance, seem to derail getting their attachment needs met. Thus, in addition to the stress of balancing new roles and responsibilities, for some new parents, the TTP means a disruption or alteration in their attachment working models.

Evolutionary theories

An evolutionary perspective reminds us that the role of fathers has shifted in recent generations. Children are weaned earlier in modern day environments and the interval between births has increased, allowing (or requiring) more involvement from fathers. This relatively new pressure on couples to work together in caregiving and for fathers to take on new roles may explain why the TTP is a difficult time for some couples [5].

Trajectories of change

Meta-analyses have documented that new parents tend to show small-to-moderate declines in relationship functioning after birth; however, the magnitude of declines are similar to declines seen in non-parents [6]. While it is tempting to conclude that there is no 'effect' of the transition to parenthood, there are two important limitations to this potential conclusion. First, parents and non-parents often report important differences before birth [7], making non-parents a poor comparison group. More importantly, it is possible that the TTP creates different trajectories or shapes of change in relationship functioning that are not revealed by cross-sectional examinations.

Therefore, perhaps the most accurate way to examine the 'effect' of the TTP is to examine how the birth of a child alters the trajectory of a couple's relationship functioning.

For example, Doss and colleagues [8**] found that new parents, compared to their pre-birth trajectories, showed sudden, small-to-medium deteriorations in relationship functioning after birth that persisted for at least four years (the end of the study). In contrast, non-parents did not experience these sudden decreases; instead, they evidenced more rapid linear changes over time such that, four years after birth (approximately eight years into marriage), parents and non-parents showed similar *amounts* of deterioration in relationship functioning. This pattern of more rapid declines in relationship functioning for parents after birth — but eventual equivalence between parents and non-parents — was also found in a large dataset of British couples [9**]. In this study, although parents showed steeper linear declines in relationship functioning than non-parents after birth, parent's relationship satisfaction began to recover when the child was approximately seven years old. For parents whose relationships remained intact, they returned to the levels of satisfaction they would be expected to have if they had not had children approximately 10 years later.

A second important consideration in mapping the effect of the TTP is that 'parents' are not a single group — there is important variability in couples' reactions to the TTP. Indeed, previous studies have indicated that approximately 10% of couples show increases in relationship satisfaction after birth [8**]. Moreover, 20–23% of mothers and 28–37% of fathers report stability or even gains in love and the ability to handle conflict [10]. Using Latent Class Analysis (LCA), it is possible to empirically identify subgroups of couples that experience different trajectories of change after birth. In a sample of first-time parents [11*], LCA revealed that more than three-fourths of mothers started with high levels of relationship satisfaction and reported moderate declines in relationship satisfaction (approximately 0.75 SDs in magnitude). The remainder reported steep declines (approximately 2 SDs in magnitude) in relationship satisfaction. Fathers, in contrast, were approximately evenly split between groups that showed moderate and steep declines. LCA has also been applied in studies of changes after the second child is born. In parents having a second child, over three-fourths of couples followed one of two trajectories over the first year of birth [12]. In the most common patterns, women reported either linear decreases in relationship positivity or increases in negativity over the first year while men showed either declining levels of positivity or temporary decreases in relationship negativity (that returned to baseline by four months).

Group differences

Some work has examined whether different types of families experience TTP in different ways.

Unmarried parents

In the United States, cohabiting fathers, compared to married fathers, tend to experience greater declines in relationship dedication and confidence across the TTP [13]. However, cross-cultural studies suggest that the larger declines in life satisfaction for cohabiting couples during the TTP is associated with cultural norms; in cultures with stronger norms against having children outside of marriage, declines in life satisfaction following the TTP are larger [14]. Indeed, in a large sample in Norway (with notably accepting attitudes regarding children born to cohabiting couples), married and cohabiting women reported equivalent trajectories of relationship deterioration after birth.

Adoptive parents

The information available on adoptive parents is relatively sparse. In a sample of 136 couples from the National Survey of Families and Households, evenly divided between adoptive and biological parents, adoptive parents experienced fewer deteriorations during the TTP [15]. Specifically, compared to biological parents, adoptive parents reported smaller increases in disagreements (Cohen's $d = -1.13$) as well as smaller decreases in life satisfaction (Cohen's $d = 0.37$) and relationship quality (Cohen's $d = 0.81$). Indeed, couples who adopted reported non-significant increases in relationship quality on average. Other examinations of adoptive parents have been somewhat less positive. For example, in a sample of heterosexual and same-sex adoptive parents, couples reported increases in conflict and decreases in romantic love [16**]. Therefore, additional research is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Same-sex parents

Couples that undergo the TTP with a same-sex partner typically do so through two pathways — adoption or surrogacy/donor insemination. In studies of same-sex couples that adopt children, few differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples are found [17]. On average, both groups maintained relatively high levels of satisfaction and non-clinical levels of depressive symptoms and parenting stress [17]. However, both groups also identified decreases in 'couple' time as a significant post-adoption challenge [18]. For lesbian couples that conceived through donor insemination, most reported that the TTP was stressful for their relationships, with decreases in the amount of time together and sexual satisfaction as well as increases in relationship conflict [19]. Indeed, by five years after birth, almost one-third of these couples had separated [20], a rate similar to heterosexual couples. Similar changes were reported by gay male couples that had a child through a surrogate [21]. Specifically, these men reported significant declines in time spent alone with their partner (Cohen's $d = -1.10$) as well as feelings of romance and personal intimacy (Cohen's $d = -0.52$). However, even after these declines,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/879212>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/879212>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)