

Involved Dad, Happy Couple By John Hoffman

“Becoming productively and passionately involved with his children may be the best thing a father can do for his marriage.”

Originally published in Today's Parent, March 2005

I am sometimes impulsive in public. I've been known to butt into conversations of total strangers. But one impulse I've never given in to comes when I see an expecting couple or a glowing new mom and dad out with their baby. I'm seized with the urge to rush up to the guy, grab him by the collar, and say, “You have a really good chance of being separated or divorced within a few years. What are you going to do about it, right now?!”

I promise never to do this. But I have seen so many marriages break up when kids are young. There are a multitude of reasons for divorce. I want to touch on one that is seldom talked about.

Twenty years ago when my wife led support groups for new moms, she heard lots of frustrated wisecracks like this: “You'd think that after eight months I wouldn't still have to tell him where the diapers are.” Or “Is there something genetic that makes men unable to hear a baby cry at night?” I've never stopped hearing stories like that. I'm not dumping full responsibility in the laps of fathers, but I do submit that becoming productively and passionately involved with his children may be the best thing a father can do for his marriage.

This requires more than good intentions. Mothers have little choice but to become closely involved with a baby. Fathers have to choose to become involved; and if they don't, or are not supported in doing so, I believe it can create the first fissure in an ever-widening rift. Seattle psychologist John Gottman, who has done a lot of research on what happens to relationships after a baby is born, says 25 percent of American couples split up in the five years following a baby's birth. Tracking a group of couples, in some cases for as long as 14 years, Gottman has delved into the factors that make new parenthood a trouble spot. He says the first baby usually brings a big drop in couple intimacy (no surprise there); there is often a rise in conflict, hostility and, in some cases, alienation, which is the first step towards divorce.

Not only do these new-parent problems put marriages in jeopardy, Gottman says discord and depression (which he believes is much more prevalent than most experts say) can cause parents to become less sensitive to their baby's signals.

His solutions are that we should warn expectant parents about the big changes coming, show them how to deal with conflict, teach them about infant development and get (and keep) fathers involved with babies. Father involvement is good for child development, he says.

Agreed, but he misses a key point. Father involvement isn't just good for the baby; it may be the key to a contented couple. Marriage advice givers have a way of trying to put the parent-baby relationship in one corner and the mom-dad relationship in a separate corner. They're always advising parents to stay connected — usually by getting away from the baby. This fails to recognize that the baby is an inseparable link in the tie between the two parents.

I agree that parents should find time for themselves as a couple, but if they can only connect away from the baby, then there isn't much to build from. The baby dominates a new mother's emotional world; if the father is not similarly tuned in, there's a major part of his partner's life he can't get at.

It's not just a question of loving the kid. Most new fathers are gaga. The trick is to turn that love from a noun to a verb. A father needs to develop the ability — and confidence — to wade in and change a diaper without being asked, or take his turn walking the 3 a.m. floor. He also has to learn when to work in the background (read: fetch, cook and clean) to support his partner's mothering. For me, the baby is epicentre of the whole thing and if we keep ignoring that, we'll never solve the new mom and dad problems that Gottman talks about.