

## HELP YOUR CLIENTS PREP THEIR RELATIONSHIPS FOR PARENTHOOD

by Rhona Berens, PhD, PCC

This is one of my favorite quotes:

*“The greatest gift a couple can give their baby is a loving relationship because that relationship nourishes baby’s development.”*

- Drs. John and Julie Gottman, *And Baby Makes Three*

In a culture devoted to encouraging expecting couples, especially moms, to make healthy in-utero choices for babies’ postpartum wellbeing—Eat well! Exercise! Buy organic crib sheets! Cultivate an attachment pregnancy! Breastfeed!—relationships aren’t on most couples’ radar.

Yet new parents’ relationship satisfaction often takes a nosedive after a baby arrives. Pre-baby arguments—the recurrent ones about money, housework, and other issues—skyrocket postpartum. Plus, new conflicts emerge, for example, around childcare, sex, and in-laws.

### **What’s the impact on babies and older children?**

The poorer the quality of parents’ relationships, the more negative developmental outcomes in children. This is true in multiple ways and across a range of variables—sleep patterns, physical health, infant and toddler attachment, interpersonal competence, intellectual and emotional development, and social outcomes—and across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.<sup>1</sup>

**Parents with better quality relationships who coparent effectively—meaning, use teamwork to raise children—have better adjusted kids.**

All too often, we use “coparents” to refer to divorced or separated parents. Researchers use “coparenting” to describe teamwork (or lack thereof) among *all* adults raising children, regardless of marital or relationship status, regardless of roles, e.g., grandparents sometimes coparent.

Children whose caregivers are aligned around parenting strategies, who find ways to compromise effectively, and support each other’s parenting efforts, are more likely to experience positive developmental outcomes, including a greater ability to self-regulate and decreased distress.<sup>2</sup> So...

**Relationship prep for expecting couples isn’t just about relationship satisfaction. It’s also about effective teamwork and positive compromise, which support children’s developmental health from infancy through adulthood.**

In my work with perinatal and parenting professionals, I'm often struck by how vividly their experiences with new parents confirm the intensity of the relationship conflicts mentioned and offer anecdotal evidence of their impact on babies and older children, especially around sleep challenges and heightened emotional distress. I'm also deeply moved by professionals' desires to support the families with which they work and lessen their clients' struggles.

I believe the best way to help coupled clients create, maintain, or improve relationship quality and coparenting effectiveness is to help them prepare their relationships for a baby. What if they're too busy nesting to consider doing so?

**Underscore the importance of preparing their relationship to their *baby's developmental wellbeing*. Relationship prep is baby and childcare prep, and the more couples understand that the more they will choose to devote time and energy to this crucial issue.**

At present, there are limited ways to help expecting couples prepare their relationships for a baby, but they're worthwhile, nonetheless. (Scroll down for ways to help them repair relationship distress after the baby's here. Plus, check out my new cowritten book, [Fight Right for Your Baby: The How-To Guide for Expecting and New Parents to Shift from Conflict to Connection](#) for lots of tools and info on skilled and quick ways to manage conflict and repair, and enhance connection.)

- **Educate yourself:**
  - Learn more about the bidirectional connection between babies and relationships—meaning, the impact of relationships on babies and the impact of babies on relationships. The two articles cited above are a great place to start.
  - Take trainings for professionals, whether a weekend workshop like *Bringing Baby Home* from the Gottman Institute, or a shorter online or in-person class through a local professional organization.
- **Educate your clients:**
  - If you offer baby care or childbirth prep classes, add a section on relationship prep and emphasize its crucial role in parenting effectiveness.
  - If you meet with expecting couples in other ways—like pre-birth consults—mention relationship prep and suggest resources, such as John and Julie Gottman's book, *And Baby Makes Three* or Tina Stanley and my book, *Fight Right for Your Baby*.
  - Underscore that, even if only one member of a couple reads one of those books, or reads articles, or listens to podcasts on this topic, that will help their family.
- **Refer out to those who specialize in helping expecting parents:** There are some relationship coaches and therapists with [short-term programs for expecting couples](#). The upside of working with a coach is that coaching offers tools as applicable to relationship dynamics at work as at home. Yet finding a coach who is well trained in working with couples is harder than finding a qualified therapist, which means it's important that you research and know your referrals well.

## What can you do once the baby's here and couples struggle to find relationship equilibrium?

Perinatal professionals are in a unique position to offer help. Not only are you on the front lines with new parents, sometimes spending time with families in their homes, you work with them in an intimate way, which means you're privy to their vulnerabilities and yearnings.

That's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the risks of offering relationship guidance include crossing or pushing clients' boundaries, triggering negative responses, and alienating one person to offer support to the other. The risks of silence include bearing witness to the negative impact of parental discontent on infants' and older children's developmental health, not to mention on those parents' individual and relationship wellbeing. It's a challenging tightrope!

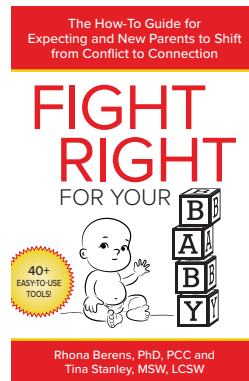
Here are a few ways to walk that tightrope more capably:

- **Normalize parental conflict** and drops in relationship satisfaction. Let clients know that, at least some of their relationship distress is, while uncomfortable, also normal. (Interestingly though not surprisingly among heterosexual couples, more moms report that drop in the first year, while dads tend to experience it in years two or three.)
- **Encourage couples to find *small* ways to reconnect, what I call "[The 10% Rule.](#)"** Instead of planning a big activity or gesture, something that demands 100% focus and effort—e.g., a weekend getaway without the baby—encourage clients to expend 5% or 10% of their precious energy to come up with something they can do now, or soon, something they actually make happen, like a candlelit takeout dinner when the baby is asleep or a five minute walk down the block when a friend agrees to watch the baby for a few minutes. The goal is to encourage new parents to set themselves up for small wins that infuse their relationship with positive energy.
- **Help new parents get to the heart of their complaints.** I think of complaints as the hard candy that protects the chewy center of a tootsie pop; complaints cover what matters most, at least if you're a chocoholic like me. By focusing on complaints—"you don't help enough with the baby," "you work too much," "you only care about sex"—couples further alienate each other by pointing fingers and blaming. By contrast, if we help new parents get to the core of what's upsetting them, to the personal need, request, or hope their complaint points to—"I want us to be a great parenting team;" "I miss you and wish you were around more;" "I miss my old body and feeling like my body is my own"—then they are far more likely to get their needs met, even if only partially, and be understood.
- **Refer out.** If tensions are high, and you believe there's a palpable negative impact on a baby's *or* parent's health, gently suggest it might be a good idea to speak to a professional. If only one member of the couple is willing to, encourage them to do so. Do your homework to find the most qualified professionals. If addiction or abuse issues are at play, or you suspect a postpartum mood disorder or mental illness, refer to a therapist with experience in these areas and *do not* refer out to a coach.



While there's no quick fix to relationship dissatisfaction, especially in the months and sometimes years after a baby arrives, the good—no wait, the *great*—news is that helping expecting and new parents devote time and energy to improving and maintaining relationship quality and coparenting success delivers payoffs, especially for their children.

*Rhona Berens, Ph.D., PCC has been working with expecting and new parents, parents with older kids, and [birth professionals](#) for more than a dozen years. She also coaches couples without kids and business partners and offers one-to-one coaching to parents and leaders. Since 2012, Rhona has worked with perinatal professionals via workshops, provided keynotes to organizations like CAPP and NACEF, and webinars, e.g., InJoy Health Education. Rhona and Tina Stanley's book, [Fight Right for Your Baby: The How-To Guide for Expecting and New Parents to Shift from Conflict to Connection](#) (2023) is [available on Amazon](#) and from independent booksellers in stores and online. For more information visit: [www.rhonaberens.com](http://www.rhonaberens.com).*



<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kristin A. Moore et. al., “Parental Relationship Quality....” 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, James McHale et. al., “When People Parent Together,” 2007.