Coping with a new baby

Making the change from being a couple to being parents isn't always easy. It can be difficult to find time for yourselves, your sex life can change, you have to juggle the commitments of work and family and find a way of agreeing on how to bring up the children.

This factsheet aims to help you if you've just had a baby but the Relate book Babyshock! explains how your relationship can be affected from the first decision to try for a baby, through pregnancy, birth and babyhood, up to the stage of caring for toddlers and young children.

**When the baby comes home:**

- Don't keep it all to yourself. Talk to your partner, and other parents - you'll find that many of them are experiencing the same mixture of conflicting feelings
- Work with your partner to support each other through it. Take turns with the baby. When it's not your turn, don't hover - get away from the noise. Go out, if need be.
- Be kind to yourself and each other, knowing that lack of sleep causes lowered tolerance and frayed tempers.
- Sleeping separately can help to keep at least one of you from falling apart, but don't do it for too long. Sharing a bed is an important part of being a couple.

**Living with your new family:**

A new person in the home, however small they are, has an impact on the relationships of everyone who already lives there as well as on extended families. Keeping an eye on how things change can help you to be sensitive to your partners feelings and those of others around you.

Some things to look out for are:

- Is someone feeling left out in your family group?
- Is someone intruding in to your family set-up? How can you tackle this?
- Is anyone's past experiences causing them difficulty in coping with the new situation?

**If a new baby has upset your relationship:**

- Make time to talk. Agree on a time. It needn't be long, but choose a moment that suits you both, when you're not hungry or especially tired.
- Take turns to listen to each other, uninterrupted, for a certain amount of time. One of you might talk for five or ten minutes about any particular problems and anxieties, while the other listens carefully without interrupting. Then the other partner has an equal amount of time to do the same.
- It is very important not to use language that blames or criticises the other. The object is not to attack or undermine each other, but to try and understand what the problems are. Say, "I feel abandoned when you go to the pub after work instead of coming home to me and the baby", rather than, "I'm furious that you spend so much time at the pub. You've never bothered to come home on time, and since we've had the baby things have got even worse".
• When you have heard each other, go away and think about what has been said. Your first reactions may be "hot" thoughts - anger, resentment. You might feel like crying. Let these feelings pass, and focus on what your partner actually said, so that you end up with a clearer understanding of his or her feelings. Then, when you're ready, use your insights to talk the problem through again calmly. Try to move towards a solution that satisfies you both.

• Don't give up. It takes practice to learn to communicate better. Don't expect everything to be solved immediately, but keep at it and bit by bit you will start to see changes.

If your sex life has suffered:

• Be very aware of your partner's feelings. Don't accuse - "You never spend long enough on foreplay." Try making gentle suggestions - "It feels so nice when you stroke me all over. I'd like you to do it for longer next time."

• Don't feel you can only talk about sex when you're actually in bed. It can be easier to talk about it away from the scene of the action.

• Get used to talking about sex in a more general way by watching TV programmes about it together or cutting out magazine articles to show your partner.