



2023

Dyadic Coping in the Transition to Parenthood

Sierra Gray
sierragray2002@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives>



Part of the [Life Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gray, Sierra (2023) "Dyadic Coping in the Transition to Parenthood," *Family Perspectives*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol5/iss2/7>

This Academic Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Family Perspectives by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Dyadic Coping in the Transition to Parenthood

By Sierra Gray

Brigham Young University

Abstract

The Transition to Parenthood (TTP) is a common transition point for couples that is often associated with declines in relationship satisfaction. There are many changes that take place during this transition that can lead to a variety of stresses such as psychological distress, sexual distress, as well as increases in conflict. Parents likely experience these stressors together, and therefore should implement dyadic coping processes. With partner support and responsiveness, parents can counter damaging psychological outcomes. As partners incorporate empathy and communicate effectively throughout the TTP, they can prevent and improve sexual outcomes. Since partner conflict is very common during this transition, constructive conflict management and accommodation promote resiliency. As couples utilize these specific dyadic processes, they will experience resiliency and have greater relationship satisfaction throughout the TTP.

Dyadic Coping in the Transition to Parenthood

The transition to parenthood (TTP) can be a challenging and stressful time as couples adjust to so many changes (Ceballo et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2018). These

changes include hormonal and physical changes, changes in roles (Pistrang et al., 2001; Tutelman et al., 2022), as well as a loss of freedom and flexibility (Levesque et al., 2020). Change can be expected, but these changes associate with relationship challenges for which couples are often not prepared. Research has consistently shown a tendency toward declining relationship satisfaction throughout the transition to parenthood (Huss et al., 2020; Parfitt & Ayers, 2014; Pistrang et al., 2001; Rauch-Anderegg et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2017). Specific outcomes that contribute to this decline in marital satisfaction include increased psychological distress (Ceballo et al., 2004; Huss et al., 2020), lower sexual quality (Huss et al., 2020, Tutelman et al., 2022), and increased negative conflict (Ceballo et al., 2004; Huss et al., 2020; Levesque et al., 2020). These are all problematic stressors that come about and hurt marital satisfaction. This also matters because reduced marital quality and satisfaction predicts separation and divorce (Huss et al., 2020; Tach & Halpern-Meehin, 2012), and may impact parents' relationships with their children (Bravo & Martinez, 2016).

Transitioning into parenthood is a dyadic stressor that affects each parent both directly and indirectly

through a variety of changes that occur; therefore, both husband and wife should be involved in supporting one another in their coping efforts (Alves et al., 2019; McGoldrick & Carter, 2003; Molgora et al., 2022). Dyadic coping is the interpersonal mechanism where coping becomes a couple process whereby couples mutually discuss the stressor, create shared evaluations of the stressor and its effects, and develop goals to manage that stress (Alves et al., 2019; Molgora et al., 2022; Rauch-Anderegg et al., 2020; Tutelman et al., 2022).

Utilizing methods for positive dyadic coping is important as it is related to overall increased couple adjustment throughout the TTP based on scales of positive couple interactions and happiness (Molgora et al., 2022; Tutelman et al., 2022). Although the TTP commonly has negative outcomes, couples can utilize dyadic coping strategies to promote resiliency and help maintain marital satisfaction because they will work together as a team to combat conflict and manage psychological and sexual distress. This essay will provide insight into each common TTP stressor and provide specific strategies to promote resiliency and marital satisfaction.

Transition to Parenthood Stressors

Three of the major stressors in the TTP are increased psychological distress, changes in the sexual relationship, and more frequent conflict (Ceballo et al., 2004;

Hughes et al., 2020; Tutleman et al., 2022). Though these often come up, there are specific dyadic coping strategies that can help counter each of these common outcomes and, in turn, benefit overall marital satisfaction.

Psychological Distress

The TTP is commonly associated with increased psychological distress (Ceballo et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2020; Levesque et al., 2020). The term psychological distress is characterized by mental health issues ranging from the baby blues to more severe forms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and other psychological disorders (Molgora et al., 2022; Parfitt & Ayers, 2014). These issues are important to couples because these forms of distress will have effects on both partners and the relationship (Ceballo et al., 2004; Gillis et al., 2019; Molgora et al., 2022). Though psychological distress is common in the TTP, studies have found that incorporating dyadic coping strategies such as providing partner support and being responsive can help both partners be more resilient and protect marital satisfaction (Levesque et al., 2020; Molgora et al., 2022, Parfitt & Ayers, 2014).

Partner support is an important way to implement dyadic coping as both husband and wife can work together to improve the psychological outcomes of each partner. It is important to understand the gender

differences in psychological distress during the TTP in order to provide effective support and focus the dyadic coping efforts. For example, currently many mothers take on the greatest mental burden of childcare; therefore, fathers can help their partner cope with TTP stress by working towards a better division of labor in the home (Levesque et al., 2020). As partners perceive equity in their efforts, each partner feels more supported by the other (Molgora et al., 2022) thereby increasing the ability of each to cope with parenting stress. One study found that for both fathers and mothers, their levels of distress are predicted by their partner's levels of both distress and support (Gillis et al., 2019) -- a great representation of why dyadic coping is so important as each partner's stress is influenced by the behaviors of the other.

While efforts to help each other cope with stress can be particularly difficult when both partners are experiencing stress, there are often differences in timing of psychological distress for each partner during the TTP. Research has shown that while mothers are expecting, they experience greater psychological distress than their husbands (Hughes et al., 2020). Another study found that after the birth of the child, the father's anxiety increases while the mother's decreases (Molgora et al., 2022). Therefore, while both parents experience moments of psychological distress, partners often are experiencing distress at different transition points. Husbands and wives should seek to understand their

partner's unique experiences in the different junctures of transitioning to parenthood, so that each can support the other when it is needed most, thereby preventing dissatisfaction and promoting resiliency.

Responsiveness is an additional element of dyadic coping that helps show partner support and in turn, prevent psychological distress and maintain marital satisfaction. Perceived responsiveness is the common term used in research which is defined by a partner who feels that their partner is understanding, caring, and behaviorally supportive (Reis et al., 2004; ter Kuile et al., 2021). When partners perceive responsiveness and recognize that their spouse is willing and reliable in responding to their needs, they tend to have decreased anxiety and improved sleep (ter Kuile et al., 2021). On the other hand, partner avoidance, which is when someone tries to create and maintain distance during stressful events (Alves et al., 2019) is linked to less collaborative coping which increased spouse's parenting stress (Alves et al., 2019). A similar study found that when men were more avoidant, they reported providing less support and had more depressive symptoms (Simpson et al., 2003). Though there are many factors that influence an individual's proclivity to be responsive vs. avoidant to their partner in times of distress, the research cited here highlights each partner's responsiveness as a possible point of intervention to increase dyadic coping and reduce dyadic stress. The effect of the dyadic coping that happens when each partner

effortfully becomes more responsive to the other is seen in improved relationship satisfaction during the TTP (Reis et al., 2004; ter Kuile et al., 2021).

Conflict

The TTP has been correlated with an increase in conflict and negative interactions between partners (Ceballo et al., 2004; Christopher et al., 2015). It is common for new mothers to engage in more verbal aggression and less constructive behaviors (Huss et al., 2020; ter Kuile et al., 2021). These changes can be problematic as conflict affects the couple's relationship satisfaction across the TTP (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Ramsdell et al., 2019; ter Kuile et al., 2021) and may lead to negative outcomes for their infant's development if it persists (Negrini, 2020; Rosen et al., 2017). Given that conflict significantly influences marital outcomes in the TTP, dyadic coping processes such as joint conflict management and accommodation may be effective in helping couples to resolve and/or avoid conflict.

Couples should approach conflict management as a joint process so that the couple can be on the same page and marital satisfaction can be preserved. The types of behaviors that are being utilized when managing conflict play an important role in marital outcomes. Destructive behaviors such as verbal aggression and criticism have been associated with lower relationship satisfaction, but when couples incorporate a constructive approach, it is positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Huss et al., 2020; Leonhardt et

al., 2022; Li et al., 2018). Joint conflict management should be characterized by constructively approaching, preventing, and resolving conflicts in a healthy way (Li et al., 2018). It is helpful to incorporate strategies such as direct communication, soothing and making compromises (Li et al., 2018). It was found in a study of Chinese couples that husbands' and wives' use of conflict resolution skills was associated with their later marital quality (Li et al., 2018). This study helps demonstrate that skills for conflict resolution matter for marital satisfaction. As couples seek to manage conflict during the TTP, they should work toward resiliency by maintaining and improving their relationship through implementing constructive behaviors and conflict resolution strategies.

Accommodation is a specific dyadic coping skill that helps increase resiliency through promoting conflict resolution and benefiting marital satisfaction. The process of accommodation involves a partner's willingness to counter their partner's engagement in destructive strategies with constructive behaviors (Rusbult et al., 1991; ter Kuile et al., 2021). This is important during the TTP, because there are many changes that may lead to small arguments (Huss et al., 2020). Accommodating is an important skill for ensuring that the common everyday irritations during the TTP do not become extensive destructive conflicts or destructive to relationship satisfaction (ter Kuile et al., 2021). It is difficult to manage conflict appropriately when one

partner engages in destructive patterns of conflict, but accommodation is an important step for progress when this issue arises in the dyadic relationship (ter Kuile et al., 2021). One study found that women were more inclined and willing to accommodate than men (Rusbult et al., 1991). Though this may be true, it would be beneficial for both partners to strive to respond well when a partner resorts to destructive conflict so that the destructive strategies do not continue to spiral out of control. Conflict can decrease relationship satisfaction in the TTP unless couples approach it together with a constructive and accommodating approach.

Sexual Quality

Disruptions to the sexual relationship are common during the TTP which can impact a couple's overall relationship satisfaction (Ceballo et al., 2004; Huss et al., 2020; Parfitt & Ayers, 2014; Rosen et al., 2017; Tutelman et al., 2022). Some of the common disruptions to the sexual relationship include feeling pain in sex, impaired sexual arousal, and lower sexual desire, quality, and frequency (Huss et al., 2020; Parfitt & Ayers, 2014; Tutelman et al., 2022). Some of these disruptions are related to other common changes during the TTP such as hormonal changes, lack of sleep and energy, decreased time as a couple, and changes in the body from pregnancy (Rosen et al., 2017; Tutelman et al., 2022). Couples can cultivate resilience in the midst of these stressors through incorporating the dyadic cop-

ing strategies of empathy and communication (Rosen et al., 2017; ter Kuile et al., 2021).

Empathy is important for helping couples to create shared evaluations of their experiences, which promotes resiliency and improves some of the negative sexual outcomes that are common in the TTP (Rosen et al., 2017; ter Kuile et al., 2021). Empathy is what happens when a person tries to put themselves in someone else's shoes, through a process of trying to understand someone else's experiences (Pistrang et al., 2001). Dyadic empathy is when these actions are made toward a romantic partner (Rosen et al., 2017). In a study of couples in the UK, relationships that had high partner empathy exhibited patterns of acknowledging concerns, articulating meaning, summarizing, offering solutions, and creating a mutual experience (Pistrang et al., 2001). These strategies would be useful during the TTP as sexual differences and issues arise, because they help couples listen without judgment and better understand the changes the other is going through (ter Kuile et al., 2021; Young et al., 2021). In a study of first-time parents with a 3 to 12-month-old child, when a partner exhibited more empathy, they reported greater sexual satisfaction and adjustment, and women reported higher sexual desire (Rosen et al., 2017). These outcomes show that dyadic empathy is helpful for preventing common sexual problems in the

TTP and promoting healthy sexual relationships which is closely tied to marital satisfaction.

Communication should also be a major dyadic focus during the TTP as it can help recover from or prevent sexual disruptions and improve relationship satisfaction. It is important to implement communication by making plans and goals for intimacy. During the TTP, it is common for couples to experience a shift in focus from their role as partners and lovers to the role of being parents (Huss et al., 2020; Levesque et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2017). As couple time decreases, partners may feel they are less of a priority to one another, which can create tension and damage relationship satisfaction (Levesque et al., 2020; ter Kuile et al., 2021). One study described that fathers' level of sexual desire remained the same during the TTP, yet there was reduced frequency of sex and lower sexual satisfaction (Rosen et al., 2017). This is an important finding as it demonstrates that despite sexual desire for fathers staying consistent, sex often becomes less frequent, which hints at a need for more communication as a dyad. Through communication, couples can discuss and work through different sexual needs and improve sexual satisfaction during the TTP for both husband and wife (Olsson et al., 2005; Rosen et al., 2017). The previous strategy of dyadic empathy is critical to implement within the communication processes because when partners pay attention and care about the experience of their partner, they are better able to have open

communication about their sexual relationship and make plans according to changing needs (Rosen et al., 2017). With empathy and communication, the negative sexual outcomes of the TTP can be diminished when couples implement them as dyadic coping strategies throughout the changes taking place.

Conclusion

As parents go through the TTP, there are a variety of changes that take place throughout the phases of pregnancy, childbirth, and then having a new baby in the household. Dyadic coping skills are key to promoting resiliency and ensuring that these changes do not have damaging outcomes on relational outcomes and marital satisfaction. Conflict will likely increase, but parents can learn constructive strategies and accommodation tactics to prevent short and long-term damage (Huss et al., 2020; ter Kuile et al., 2021). Psychological and sexual distress are common but do not have to be detrimental if couples prioritize the dyadic relationship through support, responsiveness, communication, and empathy (Gillis et al., 2019; Rosen et al., 2017). Couples should become educated together to start the dyadic processes and implement these relationship skills earlier rather than later, with the goal of maintaining or even improving their marital satisfaction throughout the TTP.

Research consistently shows that marital satisfaction is in danger during the TTP; however, couples should

recognize that with a review of research, not every study found the same results for marital satisfaction in the TTP. In one study, they had a larger number of couples than expected that were maintaining high satisfaction during the TTP (Leonhardt et al., 2022). In another study only a small subgroup in the TTP experienced strong declines in relationship satisfaction (ter Kuile et al., 2021). Most new mothers and fathers in this specific study experienced high relationship satisfaction during pregnancy and stability across the TTP (ter Kuile et al., 2021). While more research is needed to understand the characteristics of couples who are able to maintain marital stability across the TTP, these findings support the notion that at least some couples utilize strategies that help them cope with the common challenges associated with this life transition. With the dyadic coping tools provided, more couples can follow these positive trends and hopefully have high satisfaction during the TTP.

References

- Alves, S., Milek, A., Bodenmann, G., Fonseca, A., Canavarro, M. C., & Pereira, M. (2019). Romantic attachment, dyadic coping, and parental adjustment across the transition to parenthood. *Personal Relationships, 26*(2), 286-309. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/pere.12278>
- Ceballo, R., Lansford, J. E., Abbey, A., & Stewart, A. J. (2004). Gaining a child: Comparing the experiences of biological parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents. *Family Relations, 53*(1), 38-48. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2004.00007.x>
- Christopher, C., Umemura, T., Mann, T., Jacobvitz, D., & Hazen, N. (2015). Marital quality over the transition to parenthood as a predictor of coparenting. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 24*(12), 3636-3651. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0172-0>
- Gillis, A., Gabriel, B., Galdiolo, S., & Roskam, I. (2019). Partner support as a protection against distress during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Issues, 40*(9), 1107-1125. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0192513X19832933>
- Hughes, C., Devine, R., T., Foley, S., Ribner, A., D., Mesman, J., & Blair, C. (2020). Couples becoming parents: Trajectories for psychological distress and buffering effects of social support. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 265*, 372-380. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.01.133>
- Huss, B., & Pollmann-Schult, M. (2020). Relationship satisfaction across the transition to parenthood: The impact of conflict behavior. *Journal of Family Issues, 41*(3), 383-411. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0192513X19876084>
- Kluwer, E. S., & Johnson, M. D. (2007). Conflict frequency and relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 69*(5), 1089-1106. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00434.x>
- Leonhardt, N. D., Rosen, N. O., Dawson, S. J., Kim, J. J., Johnson, M. D., & Impett, E. A. (2022). Relationship satisfaction and commitment in the transition to parenthood: A couple-centered approach. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 84*(1), 80-100. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jomf.12785>
- Lévesque, S., Bisson, V., Charton, L., & Fernet, M. (2020). Parenting and relational well-being during the transition to parenthood: Challenges for first-time parents. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 29*(7), 1938-1956. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01727-z>
- Li, X., Zhou, N., Cao, H., Ju, X., Lan, J., Zhu, Q., Fang, X., Li, X., Cao, H., Zhou, N., Ju, X., Lan, J., Zhu, Q., & Fang, X. (2018). Daily communication, conflict resolution, and marital quality in Chinese marriage: A three-wave, cross-lagged analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 32*(6), 733-742. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/fam0000430>
- McGoldrick, M., & Carter, B. (2003). The family life cycle. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed., pp. 375–398). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

- Molgora, S., Acquati, C., & Saita, E. (2022). The role of dyadic coping for the individual and relational well-being of couples during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Issues, 43*(5), 1364-1385. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0192513X211022394>
- Negrini, L. S. (2020). Coparenting supports in mitigating the effects of family conflict on infant and young child development. *Social Work, 65*(3), 278-287. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/sw/swaa027>
- Olsson, A., Lundqvist, M., Faxelid, E., & Nissen, E. (2005). Women's thoughts about sexual life after childbirth: Focus group discussions with women after childbirth. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 19*(4), 381-387. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2005.00357.x>
- Parfitt, Y., & Ayers, S. (2014). Transition to parenthood and mental health in first-time parents. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 35*(3), 263-273. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/imhj.21443>
- Pistrang, N., Picciotto, A., & Barker, C. (2001). The communication of empathy in couples during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Community Psychology, 29*(6), 615-636. <http://erl.lib.byu.edu.byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://search-ebscohost-com.byu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=flh&AN=FLH3868580387&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Ramsdell, E. L., Franz, M., & Brock, R. L. (2020). A multifaceted and dyadic examination of intimate relationship quality during pregnancy: Implications for global relationship satisfaction. *Family Process, 59*(2), 556-570. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/famp.12424>
- Rauch-Anderegg, V., Kuhn, R., Milek, A., Halford, W. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2020). Relationship behaviors across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Issues, 41*(4), 483-506. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0192513X19878864>
- Reis, H. T., Clark, M. S., & Holmes, J. G. (2004). Perceived partner responsiveness as an organizing construct in the study of closeness and intimacy. In D. J. Mashek & A. Aron (Eds.), *Handbook of closeness and intimacy* (pp. 201–225). Erlbaum.
- Rosen, N. O., Mooney, K., & Muise, A. (2017). Dyadic empathy predicts sexual and relationship well-being in couples transitioning to parenthood. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 43*(6), 543-559. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0092623X.2016.1208698>
- Rusbult, C. E., Verette, J., Whitney, G. A., Slovik, L. F., & Lipkus, I. (1991). Accommodation Processes in Close Relationships: Theory and Preliminary Empirical Evidence. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 60*(1), 53–80. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.1.53>

- Bravo, S. C., & Martínez, W. A. (2017). Profiles using indicators of marital communication, communication styles, and marital satisfaction in Mexican couples. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 43(4), 361-376. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0092623X.2016.1168332>
- Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., Campbell, L., Tran, S., & Wilson, C. L. (2003). Adult attachment, the transition to parenthood, and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 84(6), 1172. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.6.1172>
- Tach, L. M., & Halpern-Meekin, S. (2012). Marital quality and divorce decisions: How do premarital cohabitation and non-marital childbearing matter? *Family Relations*, 61(4), 571-585. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00724.x>
- ter Kuile, H., van der Lippe, T., & Kluwer, E. S. (2021). Relational processes as predictors of relationship satisfaction trajectories across the transition to parenthood. *Family Relations*, 70(4), 1238-1252. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/fare.12546>
- Tutelman, P. R., Dawson, S. J., Schwenck, G. C., & Rosen, N. O. (2022). A longitudinal examination of common dyadic coping and sexual distress in new parent couples during the transition to parenthood. *Family Process*, 61(1), 278-293. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/famp.12661>
- Young, C., Roberts, R., & Ward, L. (2021). Enhancing resilience in the transition to parenthood: A thematic analysis of parents' perspectives. *Journal of Reproductive & Infant Psychology*, 39(4), 358-370. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02646838.2020.1724916>