

Strong marriage helps couples deal with temperamental baby

Couples with infants who are particularly fussy or difficult typically do just fine as parents – as long as they have a strong marital relationship.

A new study found that a couple's relationship with each other was key in determining how they reacted as parents when faced with a temperamental baby.

"When couples with a supportive marital relationship have a difficult baby, they tend to rise to the challenge," said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Couples who don't have a strong relationship with each other are more likely to undermine each other and get into conflicts when they have to deal with a particularly challenging baby."

Schoppe-Sullivan conducted the study with Sarah Mangelsdorf and Geoffrey Brown of the University of Illinois, and Margaret Szewczyk Sokolowski of Minneapolis. Their results were published in a recent issue of the journal *Infant Behavior & Development*.

Schoppe-Sullivan said there has been surprisingly little study about how the characteristics of an infant can affect how couples interact as parents – what researchers call the "coparenting relationship."

While there have been studies examining how mothers themselves deal with difficult babies, this study focused on how mothers and fathers work together as parents.

"We wanted to find out how coparenting is affected when a couple has a child who cries a lot, cries intensely, and has trouble adjusting to new situations and new circumstances," she said.

The study involved 97 couples from Illinois who were expecting a baby (two-thirds of them were having their first child).

About three months before the child was born, the couples participated in a 2-hour home assessment. They completed a series of questionnaires, and were videotaped participating in a discussion with each other. Researchers later viewed the videotapes and rated how the couples related to each other, looking for items such as how often they smiled at each other or showed irritation.

From the videotape, researchers rated the quality of each couple's marital relationship.

Researchers conducted a second home-based assessment when their infants were about 3.5 months old. The parents completed questionnaires rating their child's temperament, and the researchers also rated temperament based on their home visit. In addition, the parents were videotaped interacting with their infant, including free play and changing their infant's clothes together.

Researchers watched the videotapes and rated how well the couples cooperated with each other when playing with their infant and changing his or her clothes, and how well they seemed to get along while dealing with the baby.

The results showed that couples who showed a good marital relationship before the birth seemed to do better when dealing with a fussy and uncooperative baby when compared to those couples whose relationship was not as good.

Couples who did not have a strong relationship were more critical of each other when dealing with a challenging infant, according to Schoppe-Sullivan.

"They are more likely to say things to their partner like 'Don't hold the baby that way.' Or they will compete with each other to get the baby's attention. They tend to undermine each other's efforts," she said.

In previous research, Schoppe-Sullivan and her colleagues found that the quality of coparenting has long-term effects on children. When couples are poor coparents, they are more likely to have children who show aggressive and inappropriate behavior at home and school.

"It is not just what the mother is doing, or just what the father is doing, but how they handle parenting together," she said. "Even if you have one parent who is very good with their children, if the other parent is undermining their partner, or not being supportive, the outcomes for their children may not be as good."

In addition, the researchers have found that the marital relationship and the coparenting relationship, while related, are not the same thing. In other words, some couples may have a good relationship with each other, but still not be as good as coparents – and that could hurt their children in the long run.

In addition, the researchers have found that coparenting relationships affect later marital quality, Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"The quality of a coparenting relationship is important for both the children and for the couple's marital relationship," she said.

Source: Ohio State University

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