

# Fatherly advice: Therapist helps first-time dads experience the joy of fatherhood

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(Medical Xpress) -- The transition to fatherhood can be one of the most difficult, yet rewarding, journeys for dads today, says a Kansas State University marriage and family therapist.

"Having a child is more of everything," said Jared Durtschi, an assistant professor of marriage and [family](#) therapy who studies the transition to [parenthood](#) among [married couples](#). "It is more happiness. It is more joy and more [laughter](#). But it is also more work, more diapers and more time."

It's true that fatherhood can be a difficult [life transition](#), said Durtschi, a father of three children. Even statistics are not always in dad's favor.

"It is widely documented that on average, couples' relationship quality declines at a steeper rate when they have kids compared to couples who don't have kids," Durtschi said.

The biggest decline occurs in the first 12 months after birth, when first-time parents are adjusting to having a baby. After two years, the relationship quality between parents begins to look more similar to the [relationship quality](#) between nonparents because the couple has adjusted to children, and parental demands decrease. In Durtschi's research, he observed 260 couples for four years and found parenthood can amplify negative aspects that were present before children but were not a problem in the relationship before children.

Despite all the doom-and-gloom, Durtschi said fatherhood offers many rewards. It is just important for first-time fathers to expect parenthood to be challenging and realize they must choose to be involved parents and to maintain a strong relationship with the mother. It takes time and effort.

"It's a choice to engage in behaviors that lead to becoming a good husband and a good father," Durtschi said. "Parenthood has the potential to bring couples closer together and it can make a stronger [marriage](#). It can make us better people, if we are willing to sacrifice for each other. However, how couples respond to the additional roles and stresses of parenthood can predict how happy a couple may be."

Durtschi offers the following advice for all fathers, especially those experiencing parenthood for the first time:

- \* **Be a part of pregnancy.** A father's involvement during pregnancy is related to his involvement after the child is born. Fathers can bond with their children during pregnancy by talking to the child or attending prenatal appointments, where they can see the ultrasound and hear their child's heartbeat. From the first day the baby is born, it can be especially helpful for the father to spend time holding the baby and bonding with the child.

- \* **Have realistic expectations.** In general, if our expectations about an event are violated, we tend to be less satisfied with the result. The same can hold true for fatherhood. Many first-time fathers expect that parenthood will be easier than it is -- that their child will rarely cry and will always be easily soothed, and that their social and leisure lives will continue on as they did before having children. It is important for new fathers to be realistic and flexible in their expectations of parenthood.

- \* **Practice patience.** Durtschi encourages fathers to practice responding to

their wives in a kind and gentle manner even when they are very stressed and upset. It is good practice for fatherhood, Durtschi said, because there will be more stress when a child is crying in the background.

"If we give into all the extra stress, pressure and sleep deprivation, we can end up yelling at our spouses or saying hurtful things we might not have said in other conditions," Durtschi said. "How we respond in those moments plays an important role in whether we are going to maintain close romantic relationships, or if relationships deteriorate."

\* Be involved. When a child arrives, fathers often end up working more hours to pay for extra expenses, but often do less housework, Durtschi said.

"It's like parents can start going down different roads if mom's world becomes her child and dad is not a part of that," he said. "Even if the mother is working full-time, she is usually the primary caregiver. A good indicator of a mother's happiness is if she perceives that the father is doing enough child care and housework. For every couple, that is different for what 'enough' is."

Men often feel as if they are doing more housework and child care than they actually are, which can be very frustrating for the mother, Durtschi said. Fathers can find out how they are doing by simply asking the mother.

"The relationship changes when he is no longer the center of her attention," Durtschi said. "Before parenthood, she might have made many sacrifices for him, and now most of her time and energy are for the baby. But if the father is also making sacrifices for the baby and the mother, they are making the transition to parenthood together. They are still unified as a couple."

\* Have couple time. For first-time parents of an infant, it may not be possible to go on dates as often as they prefer. But it is still possible to do activities together, even it means bringing the child or talking about the child the whole time. This can actually be healthy because it cements that they are both in it together, Durtschi said.

\* Spend time with your child, no matter the gender. It is an unfortunate statistic: Dads are more likely to spend time with a baby boy than a baby girl, Durtschi said. Yet, both babies need a father. Dads can still play peekaboo games and spend time with baby girls in the same way as baby boys. The more involved he is, the happier the mom usually is.

"If you aren't involved when the child is a baby, you likely won't be involved when your child is 24 months old either," Durtschi said.

For fathers with multiple children, it is important to spend quality time with each [child](#). Activities like getting ice cream or going to the park give dads a chance to play with their children.

"Men usually form relationships with other male friends by doing fun things together," Durtschi said. "Fathers can bond with their kids in the same way -- by playing and having fun with their kids."

Provided by Kansas State University

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