

Study compares changes in postpartum relationship satisfaction between first- and second-time fathers

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The research suggests that the transition to parenthood can negatively affect the relationship satisfaction of fathers, more so for first than for second-time fathers. Credit: wondermar, Pixabay, CC0 (<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>)

First-time fathers seem to experience a steeper decline in relationship satisfaction in the first two years postpartum than second-time fathers, who appear to recover lost relationship satisfaction by the time their second child is 14 months old, according to a study published August 30, 2023 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Judith T. Mack and Lena Brunke from Technische Universität Dresden, Germany, and colleagues.

Having a strong primary relationship can help couples more successfully weather potentially-challenging transitions like the birth of a child. Most research on postpartum relationship satisfaction has focused on mothers after the birth of their first child; in this study the authors studied [fathers](#) ' experiences of relationship satisfaction before and after the birth of a first or second child. They also assessed how variables like age, education, income, relationship duration, [marital status](#), child's biological sex, or child's temperament might predict relationship satisfaction for fathers over this period.

The authors analyzed [survey data](#) from 500 first-time fathers and 106 fathers expecting their [second child](#), collected over 2017–2020 as part of the ongoing, prospective, longitudinal Dresden Study of Parenting, Work, and Mental Health. The survey asked about relationship satisfaction two months before the birth of the child, eight weeks postpartum, 14 months postpartum, and two years postpartum; the eight weeks postpartum check-in also asked about the child's temperament and biological sex.

The first survey check-in collected the demographic information studied. Having a child was associated with a decline in relationship satisfaction for both first- or second-time fathers. However, first-time fathers showed a higher level of relationship satisfaction before birth, and a steeper decline in satisfaction after birth.

At eight weeks postpartum, first-time fathers still tended to report higher relationship satisfaction than second-time fathers, but satisfaction continued to decline for first-time fathers up until 14 months postpartum. In contrast, second-time fathers tended to report an increase in relationship satisfaction by 14 months that continued through the two year check-in. During both these points, second-time fathers had higher relationship satisfaction scores than first-time fathers—scores which had returned to their original baseline levels.

This study is the first to show this type of satisfaction increase, which has not been reported in studies of second-time mothers. This study found no significant association between reported relationship satisfaction and the other variables studied besides relationship duration: couples in longer relationships tended to report lower relationship [satisfaction](#) initially.

The authors suggest that fathers becoming parents for the first time should be prepared for expected changes in their [relationship](#)—and know that, should they choose to have another child, the changes a newborn brings will likely be easier to weather.

The authors add, "The transition to parenthood can negatively affect the [relationship satisfaction](#) of fathers, more so for first than for second-time fathers, however, this can recover over time. Preparation and anticipation may be key."

More information: Mack JT et al, Changes in relationship satisfaction in the transition to parenthood among fathers, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0289049](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0289049)

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