

For anxious spouses, a baby may be a rival

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A new child can spark feelings of jealousy in a person who already fears being abandoned by his or her partner, research suggests.

A new study found that partners who showed signs of [relationship](#) anxiety before the birth of their first child were more likely to be jealous of the child after it was born.

"You might think, who could be jealous of a baby? But if you already have fears of rejection, it may be scary to see how much attention your partner showers on your new child," said Anna Olsavsky, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

This [jealousy](#) can make an already difficult period for couples' relationships even more stressful.

The study found that when either partner was jealous of the baby, couples experienced a decline in their satisfaction with their relationship after becoming parents.

"This jealousy can erode a couple's relationship," said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, study co-author and professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"There has been a lot of research that shows couples' satisfaction with their relationship goes down after the birth of a baby, and this could be part of the reason for some people," said Schoppe-Sullivan, who is a senior research associate on the board of the Council on Contemporary Families.

The study was published online today (March 3, 2020) in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

The researchers used data from the New Parents Project, a long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time. In all, 182 couples, most of whom were married, participated in this study.

During the third trimester of pregnancy, mothers and fathers completed a variety of questionnaires, including one that examined "attachment anxiety." They were asked how much they agreed with statements like "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love" and "I worry about being abandoned."

Three months after their baby was born, the couples completed a measure of jealousy of the partner-infant relationship. They reported how much they agreed with statements like "I resent it when my spouse/partner is more affectionate with our baby than s/he is with me."

As they predicted, the researchers found that people with relationship anxiety before the child's birth were more jealous of the child three months after arrival.

But it wasn't just the anxious partner who felt jealous of the baby—even their spouses felt higher levels of jealousy.

The reason may be that spouses of anxious partners are used to receiving a lot of attention from their partner, and that responsiveness may lessen when the baby arrives.

"There may be two things happening to the spouses of people with relationship anxiety," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"It is not just that you aren't receiving all the attention that you used to receive, but also that the [child](#) is receiving that extra devotion that once was given to you."

The researchers went into the study believing that anxious fathers may be most vulnerable to feeling jealousy of the [new child](#), because dads tend to spend less time with infants than moms do, Olsavsky said.

But that's not what they found. Anxious moms and dads were equally likely to be jealous of the time their partners spent with the new baby.

The results suggest that expectant parents should be aware of their relationship style before their first baby is born.

"There are a lot of programs for expectant parents, and [attachment anxiety](#) might be a good thing to assess beforehand," Olsavsky said.

"If you make people aware of their relationship patterns, it may help them deal with the feelings more constructively."

More information: Anna L. Olsavsky et al, Adult attachment and jealousy of the partner–infant relationship at the transition to parenthood, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407520908336](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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