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## Baby Makes Three

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# FAMILY TIES

## Baby Makes THREE

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**W**hen couples are fairly new in their awareness or practice of thinking we rather than me, a new baby calls for thinking three. A major challenge for parents is to balance me, we, and three (or more as the case may be) without losing the identity or integrity of anyone in that threesome.

The changes a new baby brings cause many marriages to become less satisfying and even more vulnerable to divorce. While a new baby brings wonderment, joy, and a profound love for that child, it also sets off a number of discoveries that can profoundly influence a marriage. Couples say their marital happiness dropped and they hadn't thoroughly understood the immense responsibilities of parenting. There are fewer shared activities and communication decreases, with some saying their communication satisfaction has never increased to the place it was before having children.

Other challenges for new parents include increased conflict, and sharing and receiving less affection from one another. Moms say they don't feel emotionally supported by their husbands or receive help with household tasks from them. Also, many moms haven't fully recovered physically from childbirth, thus creating increased stress at home and added marital tension.

So should couples stop having children? Is it all bad news? No, not at all! Deciding to make sense of your marriage after childbirth can actually strengthen your marriage. I invite you to consider these ideas:

- ▶ **Recognize that change—good or bad—can be stressful to a relationship.**
- ▶ **Commit to working on your marriage relationship, even when there's the least amount of time and energy to do so.**
- ▶ **Accept that you will face marital challenges. Avoid the tendency to turn away from one another, and fine-tune your communication and negotiation skills.**

- ▶ **Make your marriage your full-time priority. Your baby should not be more important than your couple relationship.**
- ▶ **Assess the atmosphere in your home. Is it one of criticism or one of acceptance?**
- ▶ **Find ways to regularly have fun together.**
- ▶ **Be involved in your spouse's life and activities.**
- ▶ **Set up some "time off" opportunities for each parent, each week.**
- ▶ **Trust other people to care for your child.**
- ▶ **Remember that when you take good care of yourself (not to be confused with being selfish), you can better care for your baby and for your marital relationship.**

When baby makes three, couples have many opportunities to learn, grow, and enjoy a positive marital relationship together. A look, a gesture, a touch, or an action can communicate your support, agreement, or the need for further conversation. Focus on what's good about your spouse; avoid negative criticism and angry exchanges.

Together, determine to stay committed to experiencing God's faithfulness and plan for your family. You will both find freedom and fulfillment in a setting where too many new parents find themselves anxious, uncertain, and feeling trapped.

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

