

Couples with Young Children

Jill L. Kays, Tabitha Sierra, and Tiffany Erspamer

[Regent University Hope Focused Couples Project](#)

Every couple comes to therapy in a stage of family life that plays a role in the development of the couple's relationship that the counselor must give consideration to. One such life stage is when the couple is beginning their family and in the earlier stages of raising their children. Couples with young children in the home may seem common place; however, they face some unique challenges that can have a significant impact on their relationship as well as their experience in therapy. It is important that the therapist empathizes with the couples and their difficulties and tries to work with them, rather than assuming they are unmotivated or not committed. This module will review some of the unique stressors that couples in this phase of life may experience, how they may impact the couple's relationship, and how the therapist can work with them to overcome these challenges. Some of the primary areas which these couples seem to struggle in is adjusting to their role as a parent, communication, intimacy, problem solving, child-care, and leisure time.

Stressors and Suggestions on How to Address Them

Expectations and shifting roles. One of the stressors that couples in this stage of life may experience is difficulty adjusting to the challenges of being a parent and the drastic changes this brings to the relationship. The couple goes from being able to focus all of their attention on each other to having to share much of their time, attention, and energy and this can create conflict. If this conflict is not addressed it can lead to a disintegration of their relationship (Lower, 2005). In fact, research has found that marital satisfaction often decreases once couples have children. This can be a surprise to many couples who expect it will be one of the greatest times of their lives (Lower, 2005). Additionally, the couple may be struggling with finding their place in their new family and adjusting to their new role as a parent. There may be disagreements over the role each spouse will play, as couples often bring expectations and "scripts" from their family of origin (Carter, 2005; Lower). This may include conflict over parenting responsibilities, power imbalances, parenting styles, discipline, employment or who will work vs. stay at home, and even household responsibilities (Carter). Couples may not even be aware of these feelings and underlying tensions, but they in fact be adding to the overall stress and tension in the relationship. They may grow resentful of their spouse if they don't feel like their expectations are being met.

One way therapists can help the couple deal with this sort of issue is by giving them space and time to express their fears, disappointments, and frustrations with the challenges of

being a parent and the expectations they had. It is important for the couple to gain an understanding for one another's perspective, offer one another support, and come together to create their own script for their family (Lower, 2005). The therapist can take time to process this with the couple in session. Research has shown marital therapy can help couples decrease conflict around child rearing over time, so it can be an important area to address these topics in session (Gattis, Simpson, & Christenen, 2008).

The following interventions from the Hope Focused Approach book (Worthington, 2005) may help address these value differences.

- *7-2 Reflecting on Competing Values*
- *7-3 Discussing Values*
- *7-4 Reflect on Challenge to Values*

These interventions can be helpful for the couple to facilitate communication around these issues:

- TANGO can be used to help the couple share with one another their feelings, expectations, etc.
- LOVE can be used to help the couple problem solve around roles, responsibilities, and parenting issues.
- Creating a concrete solution, such as chore list/schedule may be a helpful way for couples to find agreement over shared responsibilities and resolve any unclear expectations.

Intimacy. A major area of the relationship that may suffer in couples with young children their level of intimacy, including emotional and sexual intimacy (Lower, 2005, Rosenau, 2002). Couples become so wrapped up in their role as a parent that they neglect their marriage relationship. Couples may complain of feeling like roommates and their sex-life may decrease in frequency. As Lower states, "The busyness of child raising easily distracts partners from their primary relationship, with couples falling into a routine that focuses on roles not relationships. Constant activity masks serious relationship issues that are never recognized or attended to, simply because no one has the time to notice" (p. 49). Additionally, parents often complain of having no time or energy to spend time with one another or connect sexually after spending all day working, raising the children, or taking care of the house (Rosenau). It is important for couples to re-ignite their relationship and find ways to re-connect both emotionally and physically. Couples may be resistant to making this a priority; however, it is critical that the therapist stresses the importance of spending time together and connecting with one another. It is important that couples understand the value of making their marriage a priority, in order for their family to flourish. Therapists may need to help the couple brainstorm creative ways to help the couple have time together in realistic ways. Scheduling this time is often needed to help couples meet their goal. Some practical ideas for increasing intimacy include:

- *Quality Time.*

- Emphasize the importance of date night and brainstorm creative ways couples can have a date night while overcoming challenges they may express (e.g., low energy, lack of childcare, financial strain, etc.).
- Get creative with the couples in finding times during their day to connect, even if it is for a short time. Some ideas include having day-dates while the kids are in school, spending time together before the children get up or after they go to bed, and even having stimulating conversations in the car (Lower, 2005).
- If the couple identifies finances or babysitting issues that stand in the way of date night, then give them the handout *Date and Babysitting Ideas for Couples with Children*.
- *Sexual Intimacy*
 - Set realistic expectations and goals for their sexual relationship, which may include settling for “imperfect sex” (Rosenau, 2002).
 - Some couples may benefit from scheduling times to be sexually intimate; although this may not work for all couples. Other couples may need to simply take advantage of any along opportunities they get.
 - Help the couple develop a sexual script, which may include “code words” or signals that help them communicate their desire.
 - Encourage the couple to discuss their sexual needs and desires.
 - Set boundaries with children, which the couple may need help with. Some boundary suggestions include having the couple lock their bedroom door in order to ensure privacy, telling children that this is “Mommy & Daddy time,” and having children sleep in their own beds. For couples who need extra help with this, refer them to books on parenting listed in the annotated bibliography.

Self-care. In order for couples to be able to invest in one another they need to also invest in themselves. These couples will often complain of not having enough energy for their relationship, so it is imperative that they take time to re-juvenate themselves (Lower, 2005). The couple again may need suggestions and coaching in coming up with some ideas and these activities may need to be scheduled if the couple is having a hard time finding time.

- First coach the individuals in identifying what is restorative and self-care to them. For example, some people may want “down time” in front of the TV while others may enjoy spending time with their kids or going for a walk.
- Examine all extracurricular activities and eliminating ones that drain too much time away from the spouse or family and taking short five minute breaks during the day to relax and relieve stress with a cup of coffee or tea. These breaks can be taken at the office or at home while the kids are napping.
- In addition, children should have a set bedtime so that parents have “down time” before they have to go to bed. For couples who need extra help with setting boundaries with their children, refer them to parenting books listed in the annotated bibliography.
- The couple should work together to make sure each spouse is able to carry-out their self-care activities, which will likely include taking care of the kids while the other pursues self-care and then switches.

Child-care. A practical issue that will likely influence therapy at some point or another is that of child-care. It may impact therapy directly in the fact that the couple may have difficulty scheduling or attending their appointments. In fact Lester and Harris (2007) found that couples with young children are less likely to show up for their therapy appointments. Child-care may also impact therapy indirectly, by preventing the couple from being able to spend time together or complete some of their marriage-work. The key here is to remain flexible, empathetic, and work *with* the couple to overcome these challenges in order to move forward in therapy. It is important not to reprimand the couple, as they are already over-stressed and may not respond well to criticism. However, emphasizing the importance of making their therapy and time together a priority is important.

- Be flexible in session. If the child is the right age (i.e., sleeping infant), and will not be disruptive or stressed by the meeting, it may be possible to have the child sit in the room on occasion for a session.
- If a clinician sees a large number of families, consider co-locating with a child care center willing to provide drop in care to assist in ease of child care for couples seeking counseling
 - Work with the couple to assist them in resolving issues surrounding childcare.
 - Consider whether lack of social support is one of the difficulties in the family causing problems in their relationship.
 - Consider whether couples may be struggling with various aspects of the counseling and using babysitting problems as a way of avoiding other problems that can be addressed more directly.
 - Refer to *Date and Babysitting Ideas for Couples with Children* for additional childcare ideas

Communication and problem-solving. Couples who are overworked and stressed often sacrifice communication. They no longer take the time to effectively talk about their issues, much less spend time having an intimate and re-connecting conversation (Lower, 2005). While this is often an important part of most marriage therapies, it may be particularly important for these couples. In actuality, the hour in your office may likely be some of the only time they are able to spend time together and have discussions about their relationship. The therapist should help the couple utilize their time as such and encourage the couple to increase their vulnerability and really converse with one another. The primary interventions already being used for communication and problems solving can be used to address these issues; however, it may be helpful to focus them on parenting and family issues if this would be helpful for the couple.

Assessment

In working with couples with young children the therapist will need to do a great deal of assessment in the beginning of therapy to determine if their life stage is impacting their marriage and in what ways. For example, some couples may not be adjusting well to having young children and may see it as a detractor in their marriage. Other couples may struggle with

intimacy, but have good communication and problem solving. Therefore, the therapist should use the intake and feedback sessions as opportunities to determine how the couple is adjusting to having young children in the home and how the therapy needs to be adapted to meet their needs.

Case Example

Chris and Kasey are a young couple in their mid 20's with two young children, ages 4 and 8 months. They have been together for four years and married for 3. Kasey became pregnant early on in their dating relationship, and this caused significant stress from the onset of their relationship. They come to therapy because of complaints that they are feeling "distant" in their relationship. They also notice that they are fighting a lot more; they explain that they are under a lot of stress and often find themselves taking it out on one another. However, Chris and Kasey entered therapy committed to making their relationship work.

Chris is the primary breadwinner in their marriage. His full-time job has unpredictable hours, which often left Kasey alone with the kids. When Chris comes home, Kasey is ready for Chris to jump in and help her with the children. However, Chris reports that he needs some time to "wind down" after a long day at work. Kasey is beginning to resent Chris's work because she feels that he never has time for his family. Chris feels extremely guilty about his time away from home and lack of motivation to help as much as Kasey needs, but he also feels that he is working hard to provide for the family. He wishes Kasey would appreciate that more.

Kasey and Chris seldom get quality time because they are rarely at home together and when they are, they are often consumed with doing things around the home or spending family time together. Chris says he would like to spend more quality time together but is not sure about finding childcare. Kasey says she wants to spend time with Chris but feels guilty leaving the kids at home. Overall, their life feels chaotic and stretched thin; they both report feeling tired and at their "wits end."

In conceptualizing this case, there are several things that the therapist may want to consider. Having children so early in their relationship may have caused additional strain. While they are committed to each other, their stress is clearly affecting their relationship. Additionally, they may also be experiencing difficulties with role expectations. Kasey reports that she is beginning to resent Chris's work and Chris feels underappreciated. They may have different expectations about parenting and employment responsibilities. As the therapist, it may be helpful to give the couple space to express these frustrations, challenges, and expectations. Both Chris and Kasey also reported feeling "distant" in their relationship and therefore, the therapist may want to emphasize the importance of connecting both emotionally and physically.

Increasing levels of intimacy and time together may seem like challenging goals, but the therapist can help the couple get creative in finding quality time to spend with one another and

child care. For example, spending time together after the kids go to bed or having lunch dates while the kids are in school.

In addition to spending time together, Chris and Kasey may also want to increase their level of self-care. If they are able to rejuvenate individually (e.g., having time to “wind down”), they will be better equipped to invest in one another and their children. The therapist should help Chris and Kasey identify their individual self-care strategies and encourage them to help each other accomplish them.

Communication is another essential part of a marriage relationship, and the therapist can facilitate discussions that may soften emotions and help the couple increase their vulnerability. Kasey may be able to share the guilt she feels and the reasons behind it and Chris could potential express his feelings of being unappreciated. It is also important to help them communicate without devaluing one another and using each other as “punching bags” to relieve their stress. In this case, as with any other, the therapist should remain flexible and assess both the needs of the couple and what interventions may be the most beneficial. The therapist had to be flexible in allowing the infant to remain in the sessions at times when it was needed, as long as she wasn’t a disruption. This helped the couple not have to worry about childcare for at least one of their children and helped build rapport with the therapist, as they appreciated the therapist effort in making therapy a feasible task.

Annotated Bibliography:

For the Couple:

Gottman, J. (1998). *Raising an emotionally intelligent child*. New York: Simon & Schuster

This book is based on solid research on the emotional bond between a parent and child. Parents are taught in practical ways how to coach their child’s emotions through the ups and downs of childhood at various stages of development, with special chapters on parenting and marriage, and fatherhood.

Cockrell, S., O’Neil, C., Stone, J., & Camacho-Koppel, R. (2008). *Baby proofing your marriage: How to laugh more and argue less as your family grows*. New York: Collins Living.

This book gives practical advice on how couples can stay connected in the midst of child rearing. The authors approach issues from both the husband’s and the wife’s perspective, allowing each of them to understand and empathize with the needs of their partner.

Rosenau, D. (2002). *A celebration of sex* (2nd edition). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

A great resource for both couples and therapist to help couples increase sexual intimacy. The book covers multiple areas of sexuality, but has a specific chapter for maintaining intimacy during the child rearing years.

For Parenting Help:

Cline, F., & Fay, J. (2006). *Parenting with love and logic*. Menasha, WI: NavPress Publishing.

This book explains parenting styles and teaches parents how to use natural consequences to help their children to learn to obey. It gives tips and practical advice on how to implement consequences without becoming emotional or angry.

Phelan, T. W. (2004). *1-2-3 magic: Effective discipline for children 2-12*. Glen Ellyn, IL: Parentmagic, Inc.

Dr. Phelan outlines a three part plan of reducing unwanted behavior, encouraging desired behavior, and strengthening the relationship between children and their parents. He also identifies and gives parents tips on handling the six methods children use to test and manipulate their parents. In addition, he gives advice on how to prevent children from having public temper-tantrums.

For the Clinician:

Carter, B. (2005). Becoming parents: The family with young children. In B. Carter & M.

McGoldrick (Eds.) *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives* (pp. 249-273). Boston, MA: Pearson.

This book chapter focuses on the various issues and special concerns that families with young children experience. Current research and issues of diversity are discussed.

Gattis, K.S., Simpson, L.E., & Christensen, A. (2008). What about the kids? Parenting and child adjustment in the context of couple therapy. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 833-842.

The study examined how couples with and without children improve with couple therapy and whether they also report improvements in parenting and child adjustment. Overall, they found couples with children were able to decrease their conflict and maintain these gains for an extended period of time.

Lester, S. & Harris, S.M. (2007). Factors associated with first session nonattendance at a university-based family therapy clinic. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 35, 363-376.

The study examined factors related to nonattendance in therapy. Having children along with many others was a significant factor in nonattendance, raising the importance of therapists taking this into account when they are working with couples with young children.

Lower, L. M. (2005). Couples with young children. In M. Harway (Ed.), *Handbook of couples therapy*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The author addresses the unique stressor faced by couples with children. She starts with stress the birth of the first child creates and explains how the clinician should proceed. Next she speaks to working couples and discipline problems. Then sexual issues are laid out. Finally, the author ends with a case example.

Worthington, E.L., Jr. (1999). *Hope-focused marriage counseling: A guide to brief therapy*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity.

The primary text explaining the theory and techniques of the Hope Focused marital therapy approach. The book has multiple interventions that can be utilized and adapted to meet the needs of all couples, including those with young children.