

# 3 in the bed:

## how to baby-proof your relationship

Facing up to the challenges of parenthood and working as a team are just some of the steps new parents can take in baby-proofing their relationship

WORDS RACHEL SMITH

**I**t was like any old Friday night at the pub, except married friends Millie and Jack, whose baby Isabel is nearly a year old, were along for a rare night out. They'd dressed up, hired a babysitter and made a run for it – and the sparkle in their eyes was evident.

Topics such as sleepless nights, endless nappies and cleaning mashed pumpkin out of the rug never made it into the conversation as we all drank champagne, caught up on news and played a few games of pool. As the hours passed, it was easy to see how Millie and Jack flirted and laughed with one another. When they passed the pool cue, they made a point of touching. When a friend commented to Millie at the bar how happy and relaxed she seemed, she revealed her hubby had packed her off for some pampering the day before to give her a break. "He does little things like that all the time," she said. "Don't worry, I know how lucky I am."

She was blasé about their enviable bond – after all, bad days, no doubt, were part of their relationship too. But they seemed to have found the secrets to staying close, despite the 24/7 baby whirlwind that can suck so much time and energy out of you, not to mention

putting your relationship on the backburner.

It's no secret: parenthood is one of the most trying times you'll face as a couple. How you get through it depends on a number of factors, says Melanie Roberts-Fraser, co-author of *No Sex Please, We're Parents: How Your Relationship Can Survive Children And What To Do If It Doesn't*.

"Alongside the highs [of being a parent], you'll experience some hefty lows and it helps if you can brace yourself," Roberts-Fraser explains. "It's about arming yourself with a range of ideas on how to make things better."

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Psychologist Jacqui Manning, who runs the Mind Advantage for Mums program in Sydney, believes it's about making time for one another – and not feeling guilty. "Happy parents make for a happier child. If you're connecting as lovers as well as parents, your child will be more secure for it," she says.

#### **Sharing the load**

Even if you were both career go-getters before your baby, parenthood can easily slot you back

into almost traditional roles where dad goes out to work and mum says home. "I don't think any of us really understand beforehand how much you'll feel like you're in a 1950s sitcom," explains Roberts-Fraser who, along with her co-author, brother Oliver Roberts, interviewed over 150 parents. They found many mums felt their lives had changed radically compared to the partner going to work each day. Parents who shared the load more equally were more content.

"It came through quite strongly that couples sharing the baby work – where dad might work four days and mum two to three – were the happiest," says Roberts-Fraser. "They were still juggling everything, but there was greater understanding because they both experienced how hard it was to care for a child."

#### **Prioritise each other**

Creating a support network – whether it's your parents, friends with babies who'll swap babysitting favours or a person you trust who can look after your kids – is crucial when you're a parent. "Think of the babysitter as an investment," suggests Melanie. "Be creative with your time, too. If you're too tired to go out at night, get a babysitter on a Saturday



morning for a few hours and go out during the day. You're also fresher during the day. At night we're all worn away. One couple we talked to used to go out for coffee once their son started pre-school – dad would go into work late, they'd have coffee and suddenly there was that reconnection."

Being aware that you can drift apart from one another is another way to ensure it doesn't happen. Older couples who'd watched friends' relationships slowly unravel often took steps to ensure that didn't happen to them, says Melanie.

"I remember one woman said how her husband had organised a nanny at five to six weeks to come in for two hours in the middle of the day so they could go out together. She freaked at the thought of leaving the baby but he was insistent and down the track she was so grateful to him. They never experienced that drifting and that's why."

## Let's talk about sex

Not swinging from the chandeliers like you used to? You're in good company. Virtually all the couples interviewed for *No Sex Please, We're Parents* admitted things had changed in the bedroom since their baby was born. "Men missed sex, but women missed wanting sex," says Roberts-Fraser.

Keeping your partner in the loop if you're not physically up to it is important – and don't underestimate the power of a cuddle. "Don't stop cuddling. If you're on the couch together, touch! Hold hands when you walk down the street. It's immensely important in keeping you both connected," says Manning.

Resurrecting your sex life as soon as you feel able is crucial, too, she adds. It's easy to let sex slide to the bottom of the to-do list, but write it on the calendar – and stick to it. That may seem clinical, but setting goals will help get you back into the groove. "Leave the house messy, let the washing pile up for a day, don't worry if the toys aren't packed away – don't prioritise a clean house over your relationship," she laughs.

## Six tips for staying close

**Establish routines** "One mum I know makes sure their child goes to bed at 7pm so she and her partner can have adult time – to talk, share a glass of wine, watch some trash TV –

## WHAT IF THINGS REALLY AREN'T WORKING?

You're almost certainly not alone. The statistics are sobering: four out of five relationships suffer during the first year of your child's life, and around one in five couples will split by the time their youngest is five – but many later regret it. According to Relationships Australia, 37 per cent of people regret their divorce five years later, while 40 per cent believe it could have been avoided altogether if they'd done things differently.

Yet more evidence that bad patches happen – and aren't necessarily cause to cut and run – is revealed in a 2002 University of Chicago survey. Researchers found that two thirds of unhappily married couples who stuck it out

reported their marriages were happy five years later. The key, says Melanie Roberts-Fraser, is recognising that parenthood will take its toll on you as a couple, but that you can come through stronger and even more in love – so don't make the break until you've tried everything. "Relationships go through tough times and having children is one of the toughest," she explains. "[But] so many couples who split look back with regret and sadness and acknowledge that if they'd done things differently, had more support, tried to understand one another or step into each other's shoes, they could've made it."

whatever it is that connects you and whatever you used to do in the evenings before bubba came along," says Manning. Setting up an agreement where dad will look after the kids to give mum some me-time is ideal, too, says Roberts-Fraser. "A lot of couples we talked to took turns sleeping in on weekends. Sometimes the simplest things can really help."

**Be aware of PND** Experts vary on exact numbers but some sources say post-natal depression could affect 10 to 15 per cent of new mums. "It doesn't have to be so severe that it overcomes you, but it can be lapping at your heels and being aware of that could save a lot of relationships," says Roberts-Fraser.

**Dads, help out** "We found that in couples where the man was willing to take on housework and child care, they were having more sex and were happier," says Roberts-Fraser. "It might sound trite to say, 'Guys, pick up the vacuum cleaner, it's good foreplay', but it's true. I think if men get more involved at home, the woman feels more respected and understood which leads to a closeness. She also feels more rested and more desirable."

**Let dad bond with bub** You'll avoid territorial parenting and ensure he has just as special a relationship with your baby that you do, which will further foster closeness between you. "Set up times when dad can be on his own with the child so he grows in confidence," says Manning. "And remember you're going to have different ways of doing things – as long as the baby's safe, does it really matter if he doesn't do things like you do? Learn to let go."

**Have fun!** In one study that split couples into two groups and sent one lot off to dinner and the other on dates such as dancing or white

water rafting, the second lot of couples were happier because they'd had fun and an adventure together, says Roberts-Fraser. Manning agrees that date nights are something to put in place. "I think by the time your baby is three to six months old, or even earlier, you should be having regular dates with your partner. Get a standing arrangement with a babysitter so there's no backing out!"

**Be nice to one another** It sounds silly, but it's the little things that keep the fires burning, says Manning. "Compliment each other. Leave cute notes where your partner will find them. Bring home your partner's favourite chocolate. Get into the mindset that you're a team and the rest falls into place." Roberts-Fraser adds that many women who feel like they give all day love to get a little bit back. "Order takeaway and run her a bath – for some women that's all it takes." ■

## RESOURCES

### ORGANISATIONS

- **Mind Advantage** For info on the Mind Advantage Mums Program, visit [www.mindadvantage.com.au](http://www.mindadvantage.com.au)
- **Beyond Blue** For info and advice on post-natal depression, visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- **Tresillian Family Care Centres** Practical and positive advice on caring for babies, with an emergency helpline [www.cs.nsw.gov.au/tresillian](http://www.cs.nsw.gov.au/tresillian)

### FURTHER READING

- *No Sex Please, We're Parents*, Melanie Roberts-Fraser and Oliver Roberts, ABC Books, \$29.95. Full of practical advice for understanding one another.
- *The Big Book of Us*, Nina Grunfield, Short Books, \$29.95. Relationship exercises you can do together.
- *Best Romantic Ideas*, Mara Goodman-Davies, Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$12.95.