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Pregnancy, childbirth, a new baby — few experiences in life have as much impact on someone as becoming a parent. A new child brings new worries, new challenges and new stresses.

Yet it also can bring new feelings, new understandings and new joys. So, what do you need to do to prepare for parenthood?

Preparing for Parenthood

Becoming a Parent

Some have suggested that parenting is the hardest job any person will ever have. It also seems to be the job we are often the least prepared to begin.

Becoming a parent means our lives are changing and we must prepare for those changes. For example, an expectant mother must learn about and prepare for the physical changes she will experience during pregnancy. Perhaps even more important for those becoming parents is to think about and prepare for the mental and emotional changes or challenges that occur when a child is born.

Becoming a parent is marked by a series of changes in the life of a mother or father. These changes can be wonderful and challenging. Some of the positive aspects of a child's entrance into a family can include the following:

- **Uniqueness of a child** – Babies are each special and unique. Parents can learn to enjoy each new word, little step or cute expression.
- **Dimensions of love** – The birth of a child offers parents a whole new experience in love that can be deep and powerful.
- **Feelings about oneself** – Although some new parents may have doubts, many parents also come to feel more mature and responsible with a child. Successfully raising a child is a source of accomplishment and meaning.
- **Sense of family** – Children often help create a new sense of family connection among family members.
- **Personal growth** – Parenthood provides the opportunity to guide, teach and pass on values to the next generation.
- **Closeness to parents** – Having a child may help new parents understand their parents' love and perspectives.

In addition, you can face some changes that require you to assume more of the responsibilities of adulthood. These might include being financially responsible, providing direct care for your child, changing some of your social involvement, and balancing parenting and work demands.

The Role of Parenthood

Becoming a parent involves taking on a new role in life. You may never have played the role of “parent” on the stage of life before. What will it be like? How will it differ from being in the role of “spouse/partner,” “student” or “worker”? Typically, you will have some sense that roles are changing in your life when a child is born. This may differ somewhat for men and women.

Research on becoming a parent has shown that the importance of roles related to a sense of yourself will change with a child’s birth. How do things change?

Men and women were asked to describe how much different roles contributed to their sense of themselves before and after parenthood. On average, a person’s “partner/spouse” aspect of self after a child is born goes down for men and women. A person’s “parent” aspect goes up significantly for men and women. A person’s “worker/student” aspect goes up for men and down for women. This may vary individually for specific men or women.

Activity 1

List below what you think will be important for you to think about or develop in yourself in becoming a parent.

Becoming a Parent

- (Example) Ability to care for my child if he or she is feeling sick or upset.
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New parents should expect and plan to adjust to these role changes in their lives and relationships. You may be spending much less time in the “worker” role and much more time in the “parent” role. Or you may find yourself thinking less about your “partner” role and spending more time worrying about your “parent” role.

In thinking about the transition to the role of being a parent, explore two key questions:

1. What will you be doing as a parent?
2. What changes can you expect to occur in your life and relationships?

We can compare the job of parenting to other jobs. If you apply for a job, you are expected to develop specific skills related to the job. What skills do you need in parenting? What can you do to prepare yourself for the job? Use Activity 2 to explore the process of preparing for the job of parenting.

Thinking about the demands of this new job of parenting might include considering your role as a parent before and after the baby is born. What are the differences? An understanding of past experiences, personal strengths and sources of information that can aid you in preparing for the job of being a parent also is valuable.

Taking the time to understand the changes that occur in your life with becoming a parent and how to prepare yourself for parenthood can ease the stresses that come with being a parent. As with any journey, knowing where you’d like to end up and how you’d like to perform in your new role as a parent will help determine the route you take and the preparations you make to succeed.

What I Can Do to Prepare for Parenthood

Here are some useful lessons to remember for your own growth and development in becoming a parent:

- Your anxiety about parenting reflects how you might manage a child’s distress. Are you currently feeling overwhelmed? Children need to feel a parent’s patience and personal confidence. See yourself as a parent and develop your skills.
- Learn about child development so you can approach parenting your child with positive and realistic expectations.
- Parenting becomes difficult when you are focused on the negatives. Develop a positive approach toward raising a child and look for positive things to appreciate each day.
- Develop practices that will carry over to your interaction with your child, such as playing music, singing softly or speaking to your child.

Activity 2

Think about and fill out the sections below related to the “job” of parenting and what can help you prepare for it.

Parenting Job Description

What skills do you need in parenting?

- (Example) Ability to plan and manage a family budget that includes baby needs.

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What tasks will you do as a parent?

- (Example) Respond to a baby's cries for attention in the late evening or early morning.

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What past experiences have prepared you for parenting?

- (Example) Taking care of a pet and providing it with regular care.

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What are personal strengths that will help you in parenting?

- (Example) Reaching out to others and getting ideas when you need information.

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What can you do to enhance your parenting skills?

- (Example) Take a parenting class at your local community education center.

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- If you are parenting with a spouse or partner, focus on having a mutually positive relationship with your partner and decrease any hostility. Discuss how to give each other support.
- Increase your social support network that can help you, as a new parent, with your spouse, parents, relatives, friends, etc. Learn who you can look to for help, understanding and advice.
- If prone to depression or anxiety, seek appropriate medical assistance and get social support for dealing with challenges.
- Consider your past experiences. Take advantage of opportunities to learn positive ways of interaction if you have had negative experiences, such as mistreatment or abuse as a child.
- Read available materials or view educational videos on preparing for parenthood or caring for a newborn child.
- Check if your local health agency, hospital or other parenting resources or programs have materials that discuss becoming a parent in specific ways. Local health care or parenting programs often offer classes to help you prepare for a child.

Recommended Resource List

■ Books

Belsky, Jay, and Kelly, John. (1994). *The Transition to Parenthood*. New York: Dell.

This book details the results of a landmark study of the transition to parenthood and how having a child affects family life. It is very practical and insightful.

Brott, A.A., and Rudick, J. A. (2021). *The Expectant Father: The Ultimate Guide for Dads-To-Be* (5th ed.). New York: Abbeville Press.

Written by a respected author and scholar, this book offers practical and helpful advice for expectant fathers on becoming a new dad and making the most of parenthood.

Murkoff, H. (2016). *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (5th ed.). New York: Workman Publishing Co.

This well-known resource provides detailed information on numerous aspects of pregnancy, gestation and delivery for the expectant mother and her partner. It is an excellent guide and resource.

Simkin, P., Whalley, J., Keppler, A., Durham, J., and Bolding, A. (2024). *Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Newborn: The Complete Guide* (6th ed.). Balance.

This is a popular, practical guide for expectant parents that furnishes detailed information on prenatal development, birthing options and the many issues associated with preparing for parenthood.

Wick, M. J. (Ed.). (2024). *Mayo Clinic Guide to a Healthy Pregnancy* (3rd ed.). Mayo Clinic Press..

This resource follows the process of pregnancy and an unborn child's development through each week and provides detailed knowledge, insights and tips for a healthy pregnancy and delivery. It is an excellent guide and resource for expectant parents.

■ Websites

- **The Association for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health (APPAH)** focuses on birth psychology. Birth psychology refers to understanding the mental and emotional issues involved in pregnancy, prenatal development and the process of becoming a parent. The organization has many resources.

<https://birthpsychology.com/>

- **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, sponsored by the U.S. government, has a variety of educational resources for parents, including on pregnancy, infancy and child development.

www.cdc.gov/parents/index.html

- **Just in Time Parenting** has prenatal, newborn, and other parenting newsletters for the first 5 years available by email from the Cooperative Extension Service. These are terrific, easy-to-read, useful materials for parents.

<https://jitp.info/>

- **Pathways** is an educational organization designed to assist expectant and new parents, who can access regular, detailed information and tips during the pregnancy and parenting process. Read tips, watch videos, and prepare better.

<https://pathways.org/>

- **What to Expect** has a variety of tools and educational resources to assist expectant parents and new parents in navigating the processes of pregnancy and parenthood.

www.whattoexpect.com

- **Zero to Three** is a national, nonprofit organization focused on providing education, resources and support to parents and professionals on nurturing early development in children. Many educational resources (videos, podcasts, articles) are available.

www.zerotothree.org/

■ References

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Cowan, C.P., and Cowan, P.A. (1999). *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples* (Rev. ed.). New York: Routledge.

McMahon, C. (2022). *Becoming a parent: Contemporary contexts and challenges during the transition to parenthood*. Cambridge University Press.

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