

Parenting with Confidence
When Baby Bliss Betrays the Marital Bliss

Dear Dr. Kay,

My sister had a baby, Max, two years ago, after years of infertility and some rough marital problems. Since my nephew came into the world, my sister has been entirely wrapped up in “the baby,” to the point her husband feels invisible. Max had some frightening medical issues early on and it seems like my sister has never come out of her panic. I see real trouble ahead, especially for Max, who is in the middle. Can parents take their ‘love’ for their child a little too far?

Dear Sister,

Yes, parents can love a child too much and in the wrong manner, with respect to putting too much energy into a child and neglecting their marriage. A child can be caught in the middle of an imbalanced marital dynamic. This appears to be the case for your sister and the ‘red flags’ are up.

It is quite common, in fact, for couples with marital discord, coupled with fertility difficulties and/or infant illness, to be at risk for post partum depression as well as significant marital problems. Fertility problems take an emotional toll, and any medical complication can add significant stress that results in excessive worry and anxiety.

It is natural for new parents to be enthralled and “in love” with their baby, but this is a shared joy. When one parent remains “in the bubble” with the child while the other parent feels left out, this can lead to marital estrangement.

Often, it is the father who must return to “work as usual,” and the mother who is in recovery from labor and birth while also managing her baby’s medical needs. This can leave a mother feeling isolated in a cycle of survival that feels like “me and my baby against the world.” Even as time passes and the worst of the medical problems are resolved, one parent can remain enmeshed, particularly when the marriage is at risk.

Couples typically share in the “new baby” bliss and settle slowly back into a marital reconnection whereby they cherish adult time together, whether it is the miracle of a complete conversation, sharing the Sunday newspaper before baby arises, or a date while grandparents care for the baby. This mutual wish to reconnect is key to rebuilding a new marital dynamic that remains in tact, with the additional new role of parenting.

When parents are unhappy prior to having their baby, when a child is not equally “wanted,” or when an infant has significant illness, the normal dynamic of marital

reconnection may be interrupted. In this case, one parent may turn all attention to the child. Gradually, the parent may grow into the habit of unintentionally meeting their emotional needs with the child rather than with their spouse.

This kind of displaced intimacy, whereby a parent's love grows beyond what is typical, may also occur when there is a major loss just prior to the baby's birth, such as the loss of a parent's parent. The emotions of grief get merged with the arrival of the new baby. The bond can be profound for the parent who has had a painful loss. This is especially powerful when the marital bond is weak, and the grieving parent is searching for a sense of comfort and renewal.

When a parent is overly attached to a child, this puts undue pressure on the child. Further, when siblings are involved, such overinvestment can add to excessive sibling rivalry. Over time, when the bubble between mom and son, for example, continues, there can be a kind of jealousy between father and son that sabotages their relationship. In essence, the mother may be using her son to gratify her needs. The son may become her confidante, which makes the natural separation process of adolescence more complicated, as the son may feel he is betraying his mother. The same may be true when a father is overly attached to his daughter.

When family members or friends notice an unhealthy balance in the marital dynamic, due to the fact that one parent is overly invested in a child, do not hesitate to address the imbalance, with affection and humor, in effort to wake the parent up. Typically, the enmeshed parent is in denial and unaware of the unhealthy dynamic, often until it is way too late.

The key is to get into some marital counseling in order to reestablish and build a stronger marital connection in order to free up the child's dilemma. This may initially be hard on the child who is accustomed to being the 'chosen child,' but, in the end, this will enhance normal emotional and social development.

For couples recognizing that early difficulties have led them to an imbalanced family dynamic, here are a few tips to help you find your way back to a healthier marital connection.

- First off, forgive yourselves. You did not consciously choose to become distant in your marriage while turning to your child. The fear and stress of infertility or medical trauma often result in a mismanagement of emotions.
- Find a safe and caring place to begin to dialogue and sort out feelings. This often requires an investment of weekly sessions for months, if not a year or two, for reparation and reconstruction of marriage. The investment of time for rebuilding your marriage is well worth it.
- Be patient. Recognize that changing family dynamics comes with resistance, so it is "one step forward and two steps backward."

- When you work to reshape family dynamics, symptoms may get worse before they get better. There may be some really difficult arguments, painful sharing, and misunderstandings. Think of this as “breaking through the wall” or crawling through a tunnel. There is light at the end of that tunnel.
- The “chosen child” who has a special relationship with one parent is going to be at risk for anger and confusion. He may need some extra support, especially from the parent who has been left out. The parent who was previously overly involved needs to gracefully bow out, ever so slowly, while the estranged parent builds a better bond and more involved role with the child.
- Securing love and affirmation from a baby is far easier than securing love and affirmation solely from an adult partner. Be sure to be realistic about the how to secure love and broaden your relationships with friends, neighbors, community and family.
- Find a therapist that can be there for you.
- Take an inventory of relationships in your life and work to build more satisfying relationships in order to resist being overly involved with your child.

Marriage is about learning, stretching and practicing new dynamics. It takes energy and effort. Undue stress results in negative behaviors and defenses rising up and taking over. Walls go up, but they can be broken down. Do not give up!

To be together, committed, is “for better or worse...in sickness and in health.” Parents are certainly human, and to become overly involved to the point of putting our spouse on the shelf is an age-old dynamic. Parents deserve time and space to grow and change. Children also deserve to thrive and grow in a family dynamic that allows them the freedom to do so.

When parents turn to their children for intimacy that goes beyond the normal parent-child boundary, the child becomes trapped in the middle. Take your time as you rebuild and transform how you love your partner and how you love your child. When baby bliss betrays marital bliss, have faith that there is something better you and your partner can create!