

Suzanne Hadley Gosselin

FOREWORD BY DR. GREG AND ERIN SMALLEY



# Expectant Parents

Preparing Together for the  
Journey of Parenthood



FOCUS  
ON THE FAMILY

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*Expectant Parents*

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## FOREWORD



You're about to become parents! Congratulations! We are guessing this is something most of you have dreamt about your entire life—or maybe becoming a parent is bringing up some mixed emotions for you. Everyone is different in their initial reaction to hearing the words “You're pregnant.” We are convinced that pregnancy is ten full months so we can process, prepare, and plan for becoming a new parent.

We are sure many of you have already heard, “Everything is about to change.” This may have been said in a positive light or maybe a negative one. We can remember walking out of our first Lamaze class and thinking, *What have we gotten ourselves into?* We can honestly say now, after having three biological children and one through the gift of adoption, “Yes, everything does change.” But we can assure you, becoming parents set us on a wonderful, delightful, challenging journey—one that we would not change for the world. However, the only way we know to encourage you on this journey is to emphasize the need to be a “lifelong” learner. Educate yourself in each new season—especially the one you are about to embark on!

I (Erin), as a former labor and delivery nurse, have thought back to the number of babies and parents I escorted out the door of the hospital, knowing that I never asked them one question about their marriage, who was going to be caring for the infant, how this has impacted their relationship, and so on. I know this from my own experience as well; they hand you the baby and you walk out the door, without an instruction manual! But when Greg and I were going through the adoption process (prior to receiving approval to adopt our Annie), I

was amazed by how much we were asked about not only our marriage, but our parents' marriages, our plan for caring for an adopted child, and the list went on and on! The preparation time actually gave us an opportunity to really talk through the changes and challenges before us, and that was a good thing.

I (Greg) was struck with what a need there is for a book just like *Expectant Parents*—a guide to thinking through how this child will impact you both individually, as well as your marriage. This book is filled with stories from real moms and dads who've been there; you'll find practical tips and advice as you prepare to dive into this adventure of parenting.

We are so excited you are taking advantage of all this book has to offer. We are confident that you will reflect back on the information, stories, and content you are about to experience. We couldn't put the book down once we started reading and found ourselves thinking, *We sure wish we would have had this book prior to bringing our first daughter home!*

Yes, life will change once your little one arrives. However, as you read this book, you're taking the first step to being well prepared for the changes that will come and for the incredible adventure and journey that lie ahead.

Blessings!

Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley

# INTRODUCTION



My story is just one story.

Well, two stories, to be exact.

The first began on a rainy December day. That's when my first-born, Josiah Alexander, made his entrance, to the sweet strains of Christmas carols.

I “slow danced” with my husband for a good part of the day, my arms draped around his neck. I can still remember his eyes—the kind, steady eyes I'd fallen in love with two years earlier—focused on mine as we labored together. I think we both knew we stood at the threshold of an event that would change our lives forever.

When labor became painful, he stroked my hair and prayed for me. And when my wiggly boy, all arms and legs, was placed in my arms, all I could do was whisper, “I love you.”

My second-born arrived twenty months later, on an August evening long after most people were in their beds. We had chosen not to find out the gender of our baby (so we could “do that once”), but we were convinced we were having another boy.

My water broke that morning, and we checked into the hospital a few hours later. At 5:00 PM, with no contractions in sight, labor was induced. I walked the halls for most of the evening, in labor but with barely perceivable contractions.

Then, suddenly, at 11:15—when I had been given the highest dose of Pitocin possible—hard labor began. (This time I preferred leaning over the bed, swaying and holding my husband's hands—to his relief.)

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“Do you want the good news or the good news?” the nurse said after checking my cervix. “You’re nine centimeters and fully effaced.”

Our OB arrived at midnight; and our *daughter* was born at 12:16 AM.

Having only written down a few girl names arbitrarily, we named our daughter on the spot (after a brief, whispered conference). We named her Sadie Elizabeth, which means “Princess” and “My God Is an Oath.”

Her name was fitting. During both births and our journey into parenthood, God has been our oath—our promise. Through the newness of being parents and the ups and downs of our son’s medical problems, God’s promise to be with us and care for us stood firm.

If you’re reading this book, you are probably expecting your own little miracle. You are stepping closer to what is sure to be one of the most radical and sacred events of your life. Beyond the birth itself, you are about to embark on the astounding—and humbling—task of shepherding the soul of another. One who has been specifically entrusted to you.

My story is mine—unique from the others you will hear about in this book—sweet graces and details woven together by God. Plans dreamed up in His mind before time began. And your story is yours. It may share similarities with mine, or it may be completely different. But one thing will be the same. In the same way that God walked with Kevin and me as we traveled a path full of unknowns, He will be with you also. He has begun a good work in you and in the life of your child, which He has every intention to complete (see Philippians 1:6).

Your birth story will be exquisite. It will also be messy and awkward at times. There will be tears, laughter, pain, and unspeakable joy, all rolled up in one amazing bundle. You will encounter God’s love and care in ways you never imagined. You will be stretched (in every

way possible), and you will be filled with more love than you ever anticipated.

God already knows your birth story, every detail. And He will be with you every step of the way.



If this is your first baby, you are probably excited—though at times anxious—about bringing a new little life into the world.

Will he look like you or your spouse? Will she have chubby cheeks or an abundance of downy soft hair on her head? What will his skin feel like? The excitement of a new baby has the tendency to inspire wonder and a special kind of joy.

My friend Kelly describes sneaking into the nursery days before her daughter’s birth, and picking up the tiny outfits and pressing them to her nose.

“I would breathe in the smell of those little clothes,” she says, “and dream of what it would be like when she was finally here. It seems silly now, but I was just so excited.”

My own first pregnancy came after I had been single for many years and wondered if having a family would ever happen for me. When I became pregnant six months after getting married, waiting for the baby was like waiting for Christmas Day! (Literally, since my son was born on December 17.)



Maybe your pregnancy was unexpected or happened sooner than anticipated, and you have some anxiety about what you’ve gotten yourself into. Or maybe you’ve waited and prayed for a baby for years, and similar to Sarah and Abraham in the Bible, for you, this child is the fulfillment of long-held desires and hopes. Perhaps the timing was

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exactly what you were hoping for, and you're confident that *now* is the perfect time to start a family.

Regardless of how you entered the journey of pregnancy, you are here. And I hope this book will provide you with encouragement, practical advice, and motivation to start out strong. More than that, I hope it will show you how to build a foundation of faith in your family from your child's earliest days.

If you're feeling some fear and apprehension, you're not alone. Almost all of the expectant parents I spoke with during the course of writing this book had fears and concerns, such as, Will the baby be healthy? Will my labor and delivery go as planned? What will work and finances look like after the baby comes? Will my relationship with my spouse change for the worse? How will pregnancy affect my body?

Within these pages, all of those questions will be addressed, and more. As you read, you will discover insights from other parents, advice from experts, discussion questions to deepen your relationship with your spouse, and even suggested activities to enrich your pregnancy and prepare you for parenthood.

You will also find some additional help in the appendices on various topics, including miscarriage, adoption, and welcoming a baby to a blended family.

My prayer is that this will be a truly meaningful and memorable season of life as you begin your family . . . and discover your story.



# When Two Become Three

“Everything’s going to change.”

People seemed delighted to tell us this when they found out we were expecting for the first time. To my husband, Kevin, and me, these words seemed more like an ominous warning than the wondrous prediction I’m sure they were intended to be. The very idea of such a life-altering change stirred up resistance in my spirit. I knew things would change a little, of course, but certainly *everything* wouldn’t change.

One thing I was confident would not change was my relationship with Kevin. He and I met in a fairy-tale fashion one Sunday evening (as he made my latte at Starbucks), and our courtship and marriage swiftly followed suit.

We both love children and were hoping to have a family, so six months into marriage, when we learned a baby would be joining us, we were overjoyed. We were also still solidly in the honeymoon phase. Though we had heard stories about how a baby changes things, I stubbornly refused to believe that pregnancy and the birth of a child would disturb our “perfect” marriage.

While not every couple starts a family as soon after marriage as we did, every couple will face their own relational adjustments

as they negotiate the season of pregnancy and the one following the baby's arrival. Although God's plan for each couple and family is different, my belief that absolutely *nothing* would change in our marriage was . . . well, mistaken.

Not only were others intent on telling us that everything would change, but they were also fond of telling us their parental "horror stories." For example, they would recount the chilling tale of their thirty-eight-hour labor experience or Junior's epic blowout on the airplane.

Sleep in, they would tell us. Go to the late movie. Look deeply into one another's eyes, because those days are coming to an end . . . forever (or at least the next eighteen years). Soon the most interesting thing in your life is going to be the bodily fluids emerging from a being the size of a burrito. And before you know it, your greatest desire won't be for a tropical vacation or a new car but for an hour of uninterrupted sleep . . . or a shower.

Mercifully, those days will pass, the naysayers would continue, only to be replaced by years on end when you'll completely lose your own identity (particularly in the eyes of the child's grandparents, formerly known as your parents), your days will revolve around naptime (Baby's, not yours, unfortunately), and all your worldly goods will be systematically destroyed by your little "blessings" and/or permeated by Cheerios, raisins, or unidentifiable crumbs.

It's enough to panic any expectant couple. Like us, you may begin to wonder if all your former happiness as a couple is about to slip away.

What those well-meaning naysayers neglect to tell you is that *it's worth it*.

Let that sink in for a minute. *It's worth it*.

And as you follow the development of your little one inside the womb and plan for the joys of welcoming him or her, you are likely

more in tune with the miraculous nature of parenthood than those in the throes of child rearing.

The truth is, the thrill you are experiencing as expectant parents is more in line with reality. And whether you feel it right now or not, you *will* be better off for having a child. Ask any parent you know: There are certain inalienable rights and joys that come along with being a mom or a dad.

Ashley, a mother of two, says, “There is absolutely no way—*zero*—that you can understand how much you will love your child until you have a child. It’s the last great, unopened chamber of your heart that doesn’t unlock until you have a baby. People can (and love to) tell you how hard it is to care for kids. They don’t tell you enough about that secret, unopened chamber. They should.”

So while things are going to change (and we’re going to look at that in depth and offer tips on how to navigate the journey), let me assure you that entering into the adventure of parenthood is not the end; it’s only the beginning. And it is *so* worth it.

#### WHEN BABY MAKES THREE

I went into pregnancy naïve about how the addition of a baby might affect Kevin’s and my relationship. There was no way for me (or him) to anticipate how hormones, sleep deprivation, the stress of caring for an infant, and just adjusting to a *huge* life change in general would test our marital bliss. I’m thankful that we concentrated on good communication during pregnancy, which allowed us to anticipate, and prepare for, some of the challenges ahead.

When Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley learned they were pregnant with their first child, they weren’t expecting to start a family for another five years. Though the birth of their daughter radically changed the couple’s

immediate plans for the future, “This pregnancy was not unknown to God,” Erin says. “Our daughter was such an incredible blessing.”

In addition to having to change their immediate plans—which included calling off a study-abroad opportunity in England—the couple says they also experienced a shift in their relationship. Dr. Smalley, author and vice president of Family Ministries at Focus on the Family, and his wife, Erin, a counselor and former labor and delivery nurse, identify three areas where expectant couples may experience changes in their relationship:

**1. Communication.** When a baby is on the way, a couple’s conversation can become *all* about the baby. “You’re preparing your home and relationship for this baby to join your family,” Erin says. “Of course you’re going to talk about it!”

This kind of conversation is healthy and natural, but couples should also be sensitive to what their partner needs.

“There’s something magical and amazing about dreaming about parenthood together and deciding on names and thinking about who this child will be,” Greg says. “But your spouse may also want to talk about other interests.”

“You need to see yourself as a couple, not just a couple of parents,” Erin adds. “That’s something you’ll need to do over the rest of your parenting years.”

While it’s important to remain sensitive to the needs of your spouse, there’s no need to eliminate conversation about the baby altogether. Some of my best memories from my first pregnancy involve talking about the baby with Kevin, as well as special outings we took to the baby store and staying up until all hours of the night scouring baby-name websites.

As your topics of conversation expand to stroller brands and cloth or disposable, just make sure you’re engaging your spouse in conversation that makes him or her feel loved and valued.



### ***Gary's (and Lisa's) Date-Night Questions***

by Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred Marriage*

Go out for dinner or coffee, and use these great questions to avoid making it all about Baby!

- If money wasn't an issue, what would be your dream vacation in the next ten years? With kids? Without kids?
- What is the one thing that is most frustrating about your life right now?
- How would you describe your ideal day off?
- What part of your day do you most look forward to? Why?
- What makes you feel closest to me as your spouse?
- How do you feel about the church we attend? Where is the best area to invest in our church family during this season of our lives?
- Let's imagine our child is grown and going through premarital counseling. The counselor asks him or her to describe our marriage. What do you hope he or she will say? What can we do to create a marriage like that?

Greg says listening—especially on the part of the guy—is key to good communication during pregnancy. “Men like to communicate when there’s a problem to solve,” he says. “When hormones are raging and it’s hard to know if her feelings are rational, the worst thing I can do is debate whether her feeling is right or wrong. I’m going to be a listener.”

**2. Care.** Pregnancy is a season where tenderness between partners can expand exponentially.

Not long ago, I was at the gym working out on an elliptical machine. A few minutes into my workout, a woman stepped onto the machine next to me, and not long after that, her husband came and stood next to her. He lingered there for the remaining twenty minutes of her workout, which I found a little strange.

Only after she finished did I notice the telling “bump” protruding from her middle and the signature pregnancy swagger as her husband accompanied her—his hand on the small of her back—to the watercooler. I smiled, remembering how attentive and protective my husband was during my pregnancies.

“Our perspective of each other changed,” Greg says, recalling Erin’s first pregnancy. “You find a new variation of your love for each other. I remember looking at Erin and watching her belly grow and thinking, *She’s carrying my child. Wow.* I gained a whole new level of appreciation for who she was. There’s an amazing beauty to your wife when she’s pregnant with your child.

“And for a woman, having her husband take care of her and do chores that maybe he hasn’t done before or work extra shifts to prepare for the expenses—all of that really adds to a deepening love for each other.”

**3. Conflict.** It would be great if every relational change during the journey of pregnancy was a positive one, but with big changes ahead, new relationship difficulties can surface.

“Whether this baby will bring spouses closer together or drive them apart has everything to do with the pre-baby relationship,” Greg says. “Having a child is going to intensify everything in the relationship. The good will be even better, but the bad will be magnified by 1,000 percent. When you factor in sleep deprivation, the hormones, the exhaustion, even tiny things spark. What may have been a small disagreement before can turn into a major issue.”

Erin adds, “The couple may be dealing with some new frustra-

tions with each other. There are a lot of women who assume that their spouse should know about and be meeting these new needs she has. Sometimes even the intense mood swings—the highs and lows of pregnancy—can lead to conflicts and disappointments that are new for a couple.”

The Smalleys suggest that couples seek counseling for any significant issues that arise. “Shore up your relationship *before* the baby comes,” Greg says. “How are you handling stress? How are you dealing with conflict? If there are any past issues you haven’t dealt with, deal with them now.”

In addition, he advises, “Keep short accounts. When conflict happens, give each other space, the benefit of the doubt, and grace. Be quick to offer forgiveness.”



### ***View from the Nursery***

by Jennifer DeBrito

When I was pregnant with my son, it seemed like everything I read contained the message that my husband should be spoiling me rotten.

I was really hopeful for a special gift from him at my baby shower, or a nice little getaway at some point during my pregnancy. When neither of those things happened, I expected that he’d at least give me a gift the day our son was born. That also did not happen.

All these expectations I had (which he knew nothing about because he hadn’t read any of the books or magazines that gave me these ideas) led to disappointment and hurt feelings.

I later realized that if I had never read those books and

magazines, I probably would not have expected the grand gestures I was hoping to receive. My husband hadn't intentionally let me down; the problem was my expectations.

Looking back seven years later, I am able to see all the things my husband did for me that I overlooked.

He took me to every garage sale in town until I found the perfect baby furniture, and then he carefully cleaned and set up every last piece so the nursery would be ready. He attended childbirth classes with me after very long days at a job he didn't enjoy. He cleaned the bathrooms for the duration of my pregnancy to protect me and the baby from harsh chemicals. He rubbed my feet daily and even went shopping for maternity clothes with me (twice!).

No wonder he seemed upset when I complained that he hadn't done anything for me! He had supported me and offered kindness after kindness, but I was too wrapped up in my own expectations to take notice.

If I could change anything from my pregnancies, I would recognize the extra time, attention, and effort my husband gave for the gifts they truly were.

## STAYING CONNECTED DURING PREGNANCY

While many couples will experience a deepening of their relationship through their shared anticipation of Baby-on-the-Way, pregnancy can also be a time when a couple drifts apart slightly. In the past, it's been "just the two of us." Now the wife's mind may be focused on the baby growing inside her and how her life is about to change, while the husband's daily routine continues on much the same. (Except maybe for those late-night grocery runs to satisfy pregnancy cravings.)

There are many things couples can do to foster togetherness during this season. Think about the things you would like to do, “just the two of you,” and do them—kind of a pre-baby bucket list.

My first pregnancy was very romantic; Kevin and I traveled, attended childbirth classes together, and went on some special dates (one of them to celebrate our first anniversary!). We tried to be intentional about celebrating the closing of the chapter of “just us.”

Another way to minimize conflict, Greg says, is to avoid making other major life decisions during pregnancy. “Try not to change jobs, make a major move, or even buy a home,” he says. “There’s such an enormous amount of stress as you’re preparing for the baby. Be cautious about adding more.”



### ***The “Babymoon”***

A fun way to connect as a couple before the arrival of your baby is to take a “babymoon”—a getaway with your spouse to enjoy some romance and downtime before the baby comes. This vacation can be a memorable experience as you savor your last days exclusively as a couple.

For our babymoon, Kevin and I drove to a mountain town five hours away and stayed at a bed-and-breakfast. We spent a few days exploring the local attractions, dining in cute eateries, and enjoying one another’s company in a calm, beautiful environment.

If finances are tight, plan a simple overnight trip or even create a “getaway” feel at home. If you have a little more time and money, explore a new city. Much like your honeymoon, the babymoon can be a time for enjoying one another and dreaming about the future.

Here are a few ideas to make the most of your babymoon:

**Pamper.** Plan a luxury or two, such as a romantic dinner, hotel room service, a couple's massage, or a pedicure.

**Pictures.** Take photos; it will be fun to look back on the special times you shared together preceding your baby's birth.

**Plan.** Keep your schedule light and leave lots of space for quiet time and impromptu naps. At fourteen weeks pregnant, I began to cry when Kevin encouraged me to continue on an easy uphill hike. A feat that normally would have been easy for me was just too exhausting and sparked an emotional spill. We took a drive through the mountains instead.

**Primp.** Purchase a new outfit, clothing item, or accessory to make you feel lovely and remind you of your special getaway. This doesn't just have to apply to Mom, either. Something new can make Dad feel special, too.

#### MAKING YOUR MARRIAGE A PRIORITY

With parenthood just around the corner, now is a good time to decide together how you will make your relationship a priority. While your true goal will be to have a Christ-centered home, the marriage itself is a foundational, God-ordained block for the family.

Studies abound on the benefits for children of having parents engaged in a strong, loving marriage. In his article for *Scientific American Mind* in 2010, psychologist Dr. Robert Epstein revealed the results of a study he conducted with Shannon Fox. The study compared ten ef-

fective parenting practices and ranked them. The top result (the most effective parenting practice) was giving the child love and affection. However, the next two surprised Epstein: managing stress in the parent's own life and having a good relationship with his or her spouse.

“In other words, your children benefit not just from how you treat them but also from how you treat your partner and yourself,” Dr. Epstein concludes. “Children benefit when their parents share a loving, affectionate relationship marked by forgiveness and respect.”<sup>1</sup>

Joshua Rogers, writer and blogger at JoshuaRogers.com, makes another important point on the impact of the husband-wife relationship in a blog post he wrote upon the birth of his second daughter:

As I ponder the life ahead for my two-day-old daughter, it hits me all over again: If I'm going to be a good dad, I've got to be a good husband first. Because whether I like it or not, my daughters will look at the way I love their mother, and it will teach them what kind of man they deserve.

Think of it—I'm going to be the first man my daughters love, and I will set the precedent as to how a man should treat a woman. If I am respectfully direct when I communicate with their mom, they will probably avoid a passive-aggressive man who gives them the cold shoulder. If I criticize and pick at their mom, they will tolerate a man who puts them down. But if I strive to love, serve, honor, and cherish their mom, they will look for the qualities of Christ in a man.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping your marriage strong in the midst of the chaos of caring for a baby may seem like a daunting, or even impossible, task. Don't worry. Throughout this book, we're going to consider practical ways to help your marriage thrive not only during pregnancy but also in the seasons

to follow. This foundational element of your family is so important, and with God's help you *can* do this! The first step, however, is deciding together that you're going to make your marriage a priority.

It's no secret that a thriving sexual relationship is a key component to a strong marriage. Some couples may experience great sex during pregnancy, while others may discover that pregnancy symptoms put a damper on bedroom activities. Similarly, for some couples, resuming intimacy after the baby arrives comes easily and naturally, while others may face some obstacles. Either way, psychologist and author Dr. Juli Slattery says couples need to be proactive about sex, both during pregnancy and following the baby's birth.

As co-founder and president of Authentic Intimacy, a Christian organization that ministers to women on topics related to intimacy in

#### ROMANCE TIP:

Try making the first time special by going on a special date, creating a romantic atmosphere, and minimizing distractions.

marriage, Dr. Slattery has spoken to many couples about making time for intimacy even during this time of transition.

“There's a balance between saying, ‘This is a tiring stage of life, and we can't put as much energy into sex as we did before the baby’—that's just a reality—and putting it on the back burner, saying, ‘We'll get to it someday.’ You have to make sex a priority.”

While the following suggestions relate to bringing back intimacy following your baby's birth, they are helpful to keep in mind during pregnancy as well.

**Pay attention to one another's physical needs.** The man will likely be ready for sex before the woman is. I heard of one husband who circled the six-week date on the calendar (and I'm sure many husbands are well aware of that magical day). While the man may be raring to go, the woman may feel the opposite. Combine what she's been through

physically with post-pregnancy hormones, and she may be finding it difficult to “get in the mood.”

“The mother is full of oxytocin, which creates a strong infatuation with her baby,” Gary Thomas says. “She’s bonding with her child, which is healthy, but she may be neglecting to do that with her husband. Some husbands can feel like their wives are having an ‘affair’ with the baby.”

A woman can be sensitive to her husband by seeking to meet his sexual needs (once she is physically and emotionally able). And a man can be sensitive to his wife by waiting patiently until she is ready for sex while helping provide for some of her greatest needs, such as sleep, food, and relief from full-time care of their infant.

Sandra and Jake had been married for just a little over a year when their baby arrived. “I wanted to be sure we kept the newlywed flame alive,” Sandra says. “Before the six weeks were up, we took showers together and tried other ways of being intimate. Not only did I feel like I was encouraging my husband, who was going through a big transition himself in becoming a dad, but it actually made me more excited for when we could start having sex again.”

**Make privacy a priority.** While couples may choose to implement different practices for where the baby sleeps, protecting intimacy by creating a secluded area for Mom and Dad to be together is crucial. “We chose not to have our babies share our room or our bed with us,” says Mary. “So we didn’t struggle with privacy.” Parents who choose to keep the baby in their room may consider placing the baby’s bassinet in an area away from the bed. One couple moved the bassinet into their walk-in closet for small periods of time to create a feeling of privacy. Couples can also indulge in baby-free snuggle time, while the baby is sleeping or in the swing.

**Make time for sex—schedule it if you have to!** Dr. Slattery recommends that couples schedule sex at least one or two times a week (if they’re not already having intercourse that frequently). “For a woman

to enjoy sex, she has to be mentally and physically into it,” Dr. Slattery explains. “It can feel like a marathon to take care of a baby all day and then immediately go into wanting to have sex. Choose a time based on the woman’s schedule and energy level, as well as a time when you’re most likely to not be interrupted.” (Hint: This time may not be at the very end of the day when you are both exhausted.)

Jenna says that after having a baby, it took her a long time to get back into the mood for sex. “My hormones were crazy, and I felt like my body was no longer mine and my breasts were for the baby,” she says. “At night I would lie in bed, stiff as a board, wondering if Chris wanted to have sex. I wouldn’t relax until I heard him breathing and knew he was asleep. We went through a season of scheduling sex because that’s what I needed. Scheduling let me relax on our nights off and build up to it on our nights ‘on.’ It took the fun, spontaneous nature out of it, but it was just for a season, and it worked for us.”

Mary says, “I secretly set a goal for myself to initiate sex with my husband once a week. I would choose a day and think about it, beginning in the morning, to help prepare me for the night. By the time I put the baby to bed, I would be more than ready.”

**If you’re finding it difficult or uncomfortable to have sex, seek medical attention.** Dr. Slattery says, “Intercourse can be painful for some women, not just because of childbirth, but also because of the hormones involved in childbirth.” Feeling some discomfort during the first few weeks after you resume intercourse is normal, she says. However, some women may develop a condition where the vaginal muscles tense up involuntarily and cause sex to be painful. A doctor can diagnose and treat most physical conditions that cause persistent pain during intercourse.

In a small percentage of women, childbirth can also bring up emotional trauma associated with past sexual abuse, rape, or abortion. Dr. Slattery suggests being proactive about seeking treatment for any physi-

cal or emotional conditions that arise so you and your spouse can get back to having sex regularly.

### KEEP YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME

Despite the many joys of welcoming your bouncy bundle of joy, if your relationship feels a whole lot harder once the baby arrives, don't panic.

I was astounded by how needy and weepy I became during the first few weeks of parenthood (probably due in large part to post-pregnancy hormones). There were days when I felt extremely unlovable and ungrateful. Although the early trials of sleepless nights, out-of-control hormones, and feeling like a prisoner in my own home passed, new challenges replaced them. And I can't say it ever got easier, exactly. (I did get more proficient at dealing with those eight poopy diapers a day, though.)

During the relational lows of parenthood, it's important to remember that spiritual forces are at work. In *Devotions for a Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas writes:

A married couple's relationship is the inner fortress in a cosmic spiritual battle. That fortress is not limited to just a man and woman; it also protects the children who result from that union. Even more than that, it protects generations of grandchildren and great grandchildren who will be influenced by their ancestors.

With so much at stake, can we afford to be lackadaisical? Dare we forget that a powerful, pernicious being has made it his aim to wreck what God is trying to build? Even worse, are we cooperating with his agenda? By our actions, whether physical (flirting with an office mate, viewing pornography, getting so busy you have little or no time to work on your marriage)

or spiritual (refusing to forgive, holding a grudge, neglecting to build spiritual intimacy), are we foolishly and recklessly putting our marriage at risk?<sup>3</sup>

As believers we should not be surprised when our marriage relationships hit rocky terrain—especially around the birth of a child. This sacred relationship is a prime target for the enemy, who is “looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8), because he knows that destroying a marriage destroys a family. Crucial to keeping our marriages strong is maintaining intimacy, even when life changes come.

#### BETTER THAN EVER

Adding a baby to your family *will* change your relationship. But with good communication and attention to one another’s needs, that change can actually strengthen and deepen your marriage.

“Get closer to God than you ever have been before,” Gary Thomas suggests. “You need more grace, kindness, the servant heart of Jesus, strength, and discernment than ever before. Step up your marriage. Don’t just stay married—stay connected.”

Joshua Rogers says his biggest advice for new parents is this:

Whatever happens, take care of your marriage after you have a baby. When you’re in the midst of nursing, swaddling, changing diapers, and rocking a baby to sleep, it seems like those things are the most important in the world—you feel like your baby is going to fall behind the rest of humanity unless you get it right. People tell themselves that they will take care of their marriage when things slow down.

But here’s the thing: Life doesn’t really slow down that much. Your baby grows up, becomes needy in new ways, and

then you have more kids that multiply the demands children place on you. And having a messed-up nursing schedule isn't the thing that could damage your kid for life—it's having a mom and dad with a messed-up marriage.

My belief that nothing would change in our marriage when Kevin and I had a baby may have been mistaken. But the richness and joy added to our marriage relationship through having children is impossible to describe. It does take more effort to keep passion burning hot. But the effort is well worth it—for us and for our children.

#### TIME TO TALK

- On a scale of one to ten, how do you feel your marriage is weathering pregnancy?
- What do you feel your primary needs are right now? Discuss them with your spouse.
- What is something you would like to do—“just the two of you”—before the baby arrives?
- What are some ways you can make your home a marriage-centered home?
- How do you plan to keep passion and sex alive in your relationship once the baby comes?

*Set aside some quiet time as a couple to talk about your relationship and the reasons you are thankful God brought you together. Pray and ask God to bless your marriage as you take on your new role as parents.*

