

the
post-
BABY
conversation

What new parents need to say to each other

ALISON OSBORNE

ROCKPOOL
PUBLISHING



First published in 2006 by
Rockpool Publishing Pty Ltd

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National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Osborne, Alison, 1969– .

The post-baby conversation : what new parents need to say to each other.

ISBN 1 877082 78 3.

1. Parenthood. 2. Man-woman relationships. 3. Parent and infant. I. Title.

306.874

Rockpool Publishing Pty Ltd
1/2 Cooper Street, Double Bay, NSW 2028
<http://www.rockpoolpublishing.com.au>

Cover design by Nada Backovic
Front cover and internal image from Photolibary Pty Ltd
Text design and typesetting by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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As important as your obligations as a doctor, lawyer, or business leader will be, you are a human being first, and those connections – with spouses, with children, with friends – are the most important investments you will ever make. At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more case, or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend, or a parent ... Our success as a society depends not on what happens in the White House but on what happens inside your house.

Former US First Lady Barbara Bush in a speech to the graduating students of Wellesley College, 1 June 1990.
Wellesley is a college for women only.



Preface

When my first child, Heidi, was 20 months old and I was 4 months pregnant with our second child, my husband Stewart and I had a transforming conversation. That conversation marked the end of a period of intense mental and emotional confusion for me, and the beginning of a fulfilling post-baby relationship for us. Until that time, our post-baby relationship had been struggling: there were powerful new emotions, unspoken expectations and relentless demands. I felt that we were two people adrift at sea in the dark, waiting for something or someone to tell us what had happened to our previous life. We were waiting for instructions as to how we could navigate ourselves back to the music and magic of our pre-baby days. Each of us wanted a glimpse of the person we'd married and to remember what was so special about them. We wanted to have fun and laugh together again.

The transforming conversation took place one evening after Heidi had been put to bed. I was nervously and

excitedly sitting on the couch in front of the television. Stewart was reading the paper and also trying to listen to what was on the television. I said that I had something really important to tell him and that what I had to say signified a real change in my life. When he finally looked across at me (and I admit he looked a little fearful), I remember telling him that I had finally accepted my new job – my role as a mother – and all the work that role entailed, and that I was happy (well, mostly) to do it.

It was that exchange which ultimately inspired this book. And although that conversation reflected a major change in *my* attitude and thinking, Stewart recently admitted that his recollection of that discussion was a little hazy; clearly, the event could hardly be described as life-changing for him.

I remember that earlier in the day on which that conversation took place, I had been standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes, and for the first time in 20 months I wasn't resenting what I was doing and wondering why was it me who had to do this. I accepted that this was part of my job now. For the previous 20 months I had been immersed in confusion, mostly about my new status, both in the world and in my relationship. I was confused about having to do so much more of what had previously been shared tasks, but even more about the sudden and abrupt end of my freedom. I was either stuck at home or had a child attached to me on a permanent basis. Everywhere I went I took not only my baby, but also nappies and wipes and changes of clothes for her, and changes of clothes for me, and later on a little esky bag which contained milk and

biscuits and a water cup, all of which had to be prepared every time we stepped out the door.

And what really ate away at me initially was that I was totally sure my husband just didn't get it, as he would kiss me goodbye in the morning and take off for work. I would look through the window after him as I stood holding our baby, full of resentful resignation. For me to do what he just did would take hours of organisation. He couldn't possibly understand how severe the impact of suddenly losing almost total freedom was – just as I couldn't possibly have imagined it before I became a mother. We were both besotted with our new baby girl, but my life had changed dramatically, while the life of the adult I lived with had not.

In that supposedly wonderful and exhilarating post-baby phase, I began to feel not only confused, but also less understood by my partner. The differences between us were growing; our experiences of parenthood diverged dramatically right from the start.

Our conversations became fragmented, emotional and humourless. They became less about understanding and more about logistics. They changed from being supportive and encouraging to being spiteful gripe-fests. When I eventually came to accept my new role and was able to talk about it with him, our lives stopped diverging, the battleground ceased to exist and I started to feel that we were in this together.

A number of factors got me to the point of accepting my role as a mother:

- Stewart, (a farmer) had been tremendously supportive during my 10 weeks of morning sickness with my second pregnancy, and I believe he really tried to empathise with my situation. He has always been very involved and extremely helpful. He was my sole carer in the week following the birth of each of our children (we chose to homebirth on both occasions). I don't think I changed a nappy for the first few days after Heidi was born, and I vividly remember when she was a week old, being freaked out as he told me he really should 'get outside and do a few jobs today'. I eventually discovered that the issues, for me, were less about how much he was doing (although I needed him to be involved and contributing) and more about me coming to terms with the changes in my life.
- We arranged for me to have some financial independence. I had been used to having that and wasn't coping with feeling that I needed to justify any personal expenditure. The 'I am working too, I'm just not being paid' thing just didn't seem to work. And I was getting sick of having to hide any purchases that I couldn't think up a reason for. I was tired of feeling like a naughty child every time I bought something. I had become the child and my partner had become the parent in our relationship, and this accentuated my feelings of inferior status and inequality.
- And third, acknowledgment that what I now did was my new 'job'. This acceptance was fundamental, and in speaking with other women while researching this book, I noticed that it was something most women seemed

to eventually experience. Most women get to a point where they stop seeing their partner as the solution and start to take responsibility for their own happiness. I had resented suddenly having to do all the cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, grocery shopping, and most of the child-minding and parenting, but eventually I recognised that these tasks were part of my new 'job'. While Stewart was out fencing or drenching cattle, I was also 'at work'.

Being a mother is a 24/7 job; it demands many more hours than a full-time paid job. In my view, it isn't fair for one parent to take on that complete burden. Parenting is a shared domain, and Stewart and I do share the 'out of work hours' childcare. He has always been 100 per cent in agreement with that. I do most of the 'during the day' stuff, but Stewart helps through the nights, in the mornings and in the evenings and also on the weekends. He works all day, but so do I. Occasionally we get a babysitter and I help him with some cattle work for the day, which is a wonderful treat for both of us (I think!).

The other fundamental is that he also has a role in our family. His role is to be the primary financial provider, and I do not envy him that responsibility. I appreciate that if I ask too much of him, his ability to do his job will be compromised. So when I start resenting the fact that he is not helping me more, I now respond to that inner dialogue with, 'Well the more time he spends helping me, the less time he has to devote to our business and ultimately our financial wellbeing.'

Stewart cooks every Wednesday night (at least). That's a night off for me and a chance to use some different skills for him. It has also been his choice to wash his own clothes (apparently I dye things or don't get things clean enough or don't check for tissues or something), empty the dishwasher each morning (and again, when he's really busy, I'm happy to do it) and we share the kitchen cleaning up after dinner.

The other major element in the two of us getting the parenting experience we want is that we each have time away from parenting for at least a few nights each year.

In hindsight, he has not changed much since our 'transforming' conversation. He is pretty much doing what he has always done. What has changed since that conversation is that our relationship is converging rather than diverging; we are enjoying being parents and we are re-experiencing the sparkle of our pre-baby days. We enjoy the time we spend together – and we make spending time together a priority.

The essential factors which have enabled us to get to that point are: his significant involvement in parenting; our frequent ad hoc conversations and negotiations about tasks and routines; and my feeling that things between us are basically fair. The fact that we are sharing the responsibility for our children means I feel understood. We still have the occasional tiff – if he turns up three hours late or I overlook his needs or contribution – but we both understand why those things are an issue for the other person.

When I first started talking more openly with friends about the changes in my life post-baby, they all agreed that

it was a transforming time not only for themselves, but also for their relationships. It became overwhelmingly apparent that we had all gone through a similar experience post-baby and most of us were still struggling with it. Our generation of women is used to opportunities and equality, so it comes as a shock when decades of women's liberation seem to vanish with the birth of our first child.

While we all adore our new babies, we don't expect having a baby to cost us our freedom and equality. Perhaps the greatest humiliation (and it is humiliation!) is suddenly having to ask our partner to help if we want even a few minutes to do something without the baby – housework or cooking a meal or having a shower. Suddenly we are dependent and restricted beings.

I began the research for this book when instinct told me that my experience was extremely common, and yet undocumented. I developed questionnaires and began interviewing friends. When that became too uncomfortable I went further afield, sourcing details of couples with children from numerous colleagues and friends. The questionnaires I used are included in the appendices of this book. I also interviewed stay-at-home dads, separated men and women and relationship counsellors and psychologists. This book is based on formal and informal interviews with nearly 100 people. Apart from the professional psychologists and relationship counsellors, all identities have been concealed and real names have not been used.

This book is about the impact of children on a couple's relationship. It is *not* about babies and how to get them to sleep or what to feed them or how to prepare them for

the arrival of a new sibling. All those issues are major, and a lot has been written about them. This book is about the changes that take place in us and the changes that occur in our relationship with our partner when we become parents. It is *not* a self-help book written by a professional therapist. It is written by a wife and mother, and draws on the wealth of experience of mums and dads all around the country. This book is *not* about men-bashing. In fact, many dads have been interviewed during the course of my research.

My intention is to create a book that is helpful for couples, a book that explores and explains the personal and relationship changes that take place after a baby is born and provides some useful information about how couples can avoid the personal and relationship traumas that go with parenthood. It does this largely by drawing on the experiences of couples and finding out what they have done to improve things post-baby.

And finally, this book is *not* about wanting sympathy. It is about wanting empathy and understanding from our partners, and giving the same back to them. It is about trying to recreate, in the post-kids phase, the equality in the relationship that existed in the pre-kids phase.

A few months into working on this book, I was listening as my husband explained to a friend exactly what it was about:

Well, you see, what happens is ... you marry this great girl and she's really fun and independent and earns lots of money and she's relaxed and spontaneous and is no more

or less hormonal than the next person and wants lots of sex ... and then she has a baby ... and wow ... suddenly she has hormones going crazy and is in a foul mood a lot of the time and never wants sex and has no money and whinges about that and makes lots of demands ... and is never happy ...

That was when I decided I needed to include men in the book. I had no idea that from his perspective, our relationship had changed quite so much!

Statistics show that nearly one in three Australian couples gets divorced; many of these are couples with young children. I have also included their stories to show what can happen when one or both partners lacks the awareness, commitment or desire to invest in their parenting partnership. The book would not be complete without hearing from them, about that painful end to a dream. While it has been the most difficult part of the book to write, I owe them especially. I hope that what they have to say will snap all of us out of our relationship complacency and remind us to honour and cherish our family ideal. Many relationships die through pure neglect. In the post-baby phase, chaos with children can make us blind to the slow deterioration of our personal life. The wake-up call is often sudden, cold and final. There is no such thing as a happy separation. Many people in this book have regrets about what they didn't do in that post-baby phase or what they would do differently if they only had a second chance. While it is too late for many of them, their insights are golden eggs for the rest of us.

My husband stepped into the primary carer role for three weeks while I finished the first draft of this book. As the days proceeded, I adored going into the living room for a few precious moments of play with my children while they were in his care, knowing I could get up and leave at any moment without having to say a word to anyone. I dipped into their lives while still being firmly bound to the outside world. I was stepping in for as long as I wanted and then I was free to go. For three weeks, I experienced what it is like to be a father, a man with kids! For the first week I thought, ‘Wow, it is blissful being a father – to have all the joy and no responsibility (at least during work hours), to be able to slip in and out without negotiating, to have my freedom back.’

But as the weeks passed, I began to miss my mother role. I missed the constant chatter and questions. I missed being educated by my 3-year-old (‘Mummy, did you know that dogs eat feathers?’), the giggling, the singing, the dancing. When we get through all the post-baby agony and begin to fully value ourselves and cherish our roles, motherhood is the best job in the world. I couldn’t be a full-time mum, but I do need to spend way more than half my week with my children. Much to my surprise, I don’t want an au pair in the house playing with my kids. I don’t want a nanny. I want my kids to look back and remember me playing with them, me taking their concerns seriously, me knowing their likes and dislikes, me knowing those little things about them that nobody else in the world knows. I want to be a totally present mum. My children are simply scrumptious, and that is more than I can say about any telephone

or notebook. No matter how great my urge to write is, my kids and my partner come first and I want them to know that. As Joanne Fedler writes in *Secret Mothers' Business* (2006), 'What else is more worth doing in this lifetime than loving little people?'


Agreement that mothering our children is a privilege and a blessing doesn't, however, mean that we also consent to becoming subservient beings, conforming to the desires of those around us and losing ourselves in the process. We can happily accept the changes that children will make to our lives, but should we also blindly accept the stereotype that accompanies that role? If we let ourselves slip into that stereotype when we become mothers, without questioning what it says about us and what we do, we will end up doing it all, becoming a slave to our partner and children – and they will value us as we value ourselves.

Julia Baird, in her column in the *Sydney Morning Herald's Good Weekend* on 3 June 2006, wrote that the feminist movement resulted from women suffering economic dependence, restlessness and the frustration of talents unused. Surprisingly, almost every mother today can relate to those feelings. Most of us think that feminism's battles have been fought and that the war is over, but with the birth of our first baby we discover that in fact that is not true.

But this new battle is as much a battle within ourselves as with our male partner. Are we better mothers if we feel oppressed or stifled? Clearly not. If we want to be great parents, but we're not happy in ourselves or within our relationship, we have some work to do.

And finally, writing is both a creative endeavour and a form of action. I find it incredibly difficult to satisfy my personal standards as far as the former is concerned when my desire to be with my children pulls at me constantly. So I, like everyone, arrive at a compromise: the creative element of this work is not entirely satisfactory to me (I can live with the imperfections), but the action element may be. Through this book I hope to inspire and create change. I believe that couples need to be made aware of what the post-baby pitfalls are and how to climb out of them, so for me, if just one couple can get something from these pages, it will have been worth it.

What conversation?



In my research for this book I interviewed many women and men, some new to parenting and some with several children and therefore several years under their belts, about their experiences of relationship issues post-baby. I included city and rural couples and people from a diverse range of professions and careers. I interviewed parents who stayed at home full-time, and parents who were in paid work either part-time or full-time.

Perhaps the most astonishing revelations were: first, that in the majority of situations, couples assume the traditional roles of the male provider and the female carer; and second, that the majority of couples do not have conversations about their new roles and responsibilities – about who will do what, what support they might need, or the many other issues that arrive with children – either before the baby is born or afterwards.

Until children, the lives of men and women are similar in many ways. There is not much the boys do that we girls

can't attempt. Many of us begin married life or a relationship having fun, enjoying our carefree life and thinking that things will only get better. We often have very independent lives, lives that are busy and full.

Many of us yearn to become parents and we are excited when it finally happens. We envisage that having a baby will be a beautiful bonding, a united endeavour.

It comes as a surprise to many that parenthood takes some getting used to. Not only do we need to learn the ropes of caring for our new baby; also, there is the double whammy of personal and relationship transformation. Both our personal identity and our relationship go through a post-baby crisis, as the traditional gender stereotypes we have only read about in history books begin to not only define who we are becoming as women and men, but also recast the balance of power in our relationship.

While a massive biological and culturally imposed transformation occurs for women with the birth of a child, no comparable change occurs for men. Female biology comes into play during pregnancy, labour and breastfeeding, and as a result, a woman's experience of that time is radically different from that of her male partner.

Couples need to develop a relationship that respects and appreciates these differences. Couples may need to accept that many of the peaks they climb in the future may be peaks they'll climb alone. While bungy jumping and scuba diving might have been experiences a couple shared pre-baby, all the stellar moments post-baby – and there will be many – will be experienced from different zones: the mum zone and the dad zone.

Our perspective, our experience, our emotions begin to change and diverge in the post-baby phase. We spend less time together and often start to feel that we have less in common. Most often, Dad goes to work and Mum stays home for at least a few days a week, so we become estranged in terms of the detail of our daily lives. We get caught up in our own worlds, and connecting takes time and effort. All these factors limit a couple's ability to completely understand each other. A father cannot know what it is like to be a mother, and a mother cannot know what it is like to be a father, and this is often a shocking realisation for a new parent.

It is this crisis that forms the foundation of this book; a crisis which necessitates the reconnecting of our male and female worlds and the development of processes that enable us to understand and acknowledge each other.

Before they have children, most women are somewhat blasé about matters such as what time their partner gets home from work. If his work takes him away for days at a time, she just gets on with her life and takes the opportunity of time without him to catch up with friends or curl up with a good book.

Post-baby, this somewhat indifferent attitude to her partner's routines and whereabouts changes dramatically, as women struggle with a series of lifestyle shocks. The first shock is that babies and children are a lot of work: the workload is constant, and never-ending. The second is that it is women who end up doing most of that work. Women inherit the domestic workload – unconsciously, and usually without negotiation. Suddenly, we feel tethered.

Our world becomes smaller: we can move no more than 15 or so metres from the baby. Our ability to sleep, exercise, and undertake any activity whatsoever for ourselves is dependent on either being accompanied by, or outsourcing the care of, the baby.

And that brings us to the third major shock. For a woman to have a good quality of life post-baby, she needs an enthusiastic partner who will pitch in, share jobs and give her a break. If she doesn't have that, it is up to her to either negotiate changes or make alternative arrangements. Why? Because her partner is usually blissfully unaware of the first two shocks that have occurred in her life.

This divergence in the lives of men and women post-baby and the profound changes in the relationship are unexpected. Very few couples realise what is happening and proactively talk and listen before things boil over. Mostly, what happens is ongoing and escalating frustration, anger and resentment. The lack of understanding that begins as a small flicker when a woman gets pregnant can escalate to a frightening rage and leave the couple at war for months, or years.

Often, the post-baby relationship issues take shape in our own childhood. Many of the people I interviewed talked about what was normal in their family of origin and what expectations they developed as a result. What roles did your parents play? Did Dad always shine your school shoes and mow the lawns? Did Mum get out and kick a ball with you or was she too busy to play? When we become parents, many expectations created in our own childhood silently follow us and take up residence in our hearts and minds.

So when a couple become parents, both have expectations of what their partner should do and provide, based on often unconscious models of what a perfect mother or father should be and do. The fact that we have expectations and don't talk about them means that conflict is inevitable.

Kerry Brown, a relationship counsellor, illustrates the effect projecting expectations can have:

They are out of our awareness unless something triggers them. And having a baby is just an enormous trigger. For example, she might say, 'My father always put the garbage out and never had to be asked.' Her partner might respond, 'Well, I'm not going to be like your father.'

Nichola Bedos, a parent/infant counsellor, confirms that our perception of our partner changes when we have a child:

Well the fundamental shift, I believe, is that instead of looking at each other as a lover, best friend, partner, soul mate, couples look at each other as a mum and a dad. And that brings up all the aspects of their own childhood and their own parents. So the husband or male partner is suddenly looking at his wife or partner as not just that, but as a mum like his mum. And that brings up a lot of difficult issues around his own childhood – his relationship with his mum, what he thinks of mothers, his experience of a mother – and he will project bits of the relationship his mother had with him onto his partner. And the converse is also true.

The result is a very severe change in how they deal with each other. What I see happen – and it happens almost overnight – is that they start to treat each other with these huge expectations of what the other person is supposed to provide. Rather than it then being a relationship of love and understanding and getting your own needs met, suddenly these huge expectations of what mums and dads are supposed to do comes into it. They may have allowed their partner to do very little for them because that was OK, but suddenly as a mum or dad that partner is expected to do so much more, and that partner may not be ready to take on that, or may not have that view of what he or she should do anyway.

So when a couple has a baby, two forces collide. First, both partners' silent views about what mums and dads are supposed to be like move in with you, and they often exert opposing influences in the relationship; and second, couples don't make time to talk about how their relationship will work post-baby. Both are operating according to some unconscious framework that neither has made explicit. Invisible rules and expectations set off landmines through a relationship. They require disclosure and examination; couples need to sit down and consciously develop a new set for their parenting relationship. This takes a high level of awareness and good communication, neither of which is usually available in those fuzzy, tumultuous post-baby days.

The enormous stresses of the post-baby phase often present significant challenges to effective communication and dialogue. Very often couples avoid risking further conflict

or tension or are simply too tired or overwhelmed to talk about problems.

This was my experience initially, and the only explanation I have for it is this: for men, the changes that occur when a baby arrives are less traumatic and the impact on their lives is less severe, so they are unlikely to initiate these discussions. They usually still go to work each day and the only major changes for them are what happens before and after work, what they might or might not do on weekends, and expectations that they or their partner place on them. For women, the change is *so* dramatic and unexpected that we go into survival mode for a while. While we are breastfeeding (or bottle-feeding) and getting used to our new life, patterns are established in the relationship, and they very quickly become 'the norm'. And they are supported by what we see happening with other couples. By the time we realise that we are perhaps a little dissatisfied with the way things have panned out, the patterns have firmly established themselves as habits.

One mother of two explains the difference between herself and her partner post-baby:

I say, 'I'm going to have a shower – can you watch the kids?', but if he goes to have a shower he doesn't ask me to mind the kids.

And this from a mother of three, the oldest 6 years old:

I feel I've got to ask, whereas he doesn't have to ask. The mother job is full-time around the clock, but the father

job, they can clock on and off a bit. I'd like to be able to clock off sometimes.

Kerrie James, a family therapist, states:

The woman is the putty, the gap filler: she's always got to be there.

This very pervasive distinction between men and women post-baby is an unwillingly inherited trait. As these patterns become ever more deeply entrenched, women try to convince themselves that the joy and fulfilment of motherhood makes up for all the negatives. But resentment and frustration often bubble to the surface and boil over in a fit of emotion. She is angry and he is defensive. She blames and he withdraws. She becomes hysterical and he walks away or yells back. Nothing is resolved, so the issues are left to simmer until the next eruption. And so it goes on. This way of being becomes our new life.

Our relationship begins to be defined by misunderstandings, resentment and guilt. Children often see their parents as two frustrated, angry, grumpy people who rarely have anything nice to say to each other. Surrounded by dirty clothes, dishes and nappies, we forget what we love about our partner, and why we are with them. Resentment and frustration take over and we forget how to laugh together and listen to one another.

Men feel similarly misunderstood, particularly around the issues of freedom and being the main provider.

Richard (three children) misses the time he used to spend with his wife:

Suddenly, after number two, that time's gone in the evenings, and when they go to bed, she goes to bed, and I don't need so much sleep so I can't understand why she needs so much sleep. No one prepares you for the impact. You automatically stop thinking about yourself. You're putting somebody else first all the time. And you're not going out much, but when you do go out ... there's nappies, bottles ... Quiet evenings are gone and my wife's exhausted. When Rowena came along, and then Alex came along, I felt like I was a wage packet, because all of her time was taken up with two kids and she used to give all that time to me. I did resent that, yes.

Tim and his partner see his freedom differently:

I think she resents the freedom that she perceives me in all respects to have. But mostly I don't just jump in the car and do whatever; I jump in the car and go and do what I need to do in my role as a provider. She can go into town and look in a shop, or go to playgroup. I can't remember the last time I just wandered around doing a few things I wanted to do in town. I just don't do that. I never do that. I don't think there's a lot of freedom in going to work every day; it depends on what sort of work you do.

The women I interviewed were immediately interested in and instantly identified with the main theme of the book

– understanding between partners post-baby. They talked easily and openly about their situations. Many spent some time filling in the questionnaire even though I insisted it was merely to get them thinking and I would interview them formally by phone or face to face. Many commented that the interview or process of completing the questionnaire was cleansing, refreshing and releasing. One woman commented that, ‘Your spiel [the addendum to the questionnaire] could have been written by me.’

So it came as a surprise when I started interviewing men and mostly got a completely different response. One morning when I was speaking to one man in Melbourne and fruitlessly trying to arrange an interview time with him, he said, ‘Look, it’s just not a subject that interests me a great deal.’ This comment proved to be enormously helpful. It brought me to the understanding that issues for men post-baby are different from those for women, and often less severe. Men simply do not experience a similar degree of shock and confusion.

Something both men and women seemed to agree on was that being at home with children all day was hard, demanding, and often tiring and boring work. Men admitted this by frequently making such comments as, ‘I couldn’t do what she does.’ However, this does not translate into men helping out sufficiently, as far as women are concerned. Men often justify how much or how little they do at home by highlighting the time and effort they put into paid work and bringing in the majority of the income.

What makes all this even more complicated is misunderstandings about what constitutes ‘helping out at home’.