

# SOS Détresse

## From being a couple to being a family

The birth of a child transforms a couple's relationship. Partners have **less time to devote to each other**. New tasks need to be shared, new challenges faced. Further down the line, a common approach needs to be agreed on child-rearing issues. On the one hand, children **enrich** the couple's lives; on the other hand they constitute a **totally new challenge**. Child-rearing is time-consuming; as a result, the couple's relationship frequently suffers if parents are too focussed on their children to the detriment of their own life as a couple. All couples are in the same boat: **starting a family can engender conflict, and this is a most natural state of affairs**. Moreover, if the arrival of children coincides with the career development of either parent, conflict can be exacerbated by professional demands which pay scant heed to employees' family life.

## Too little intimacy

The birth of the first child places stress on relations between many couples. The change involved does not just impact on parents individually, by obliging each one to reschedule time and energy and to give up at least part of the previous lifestyle. The couple as such must do with considerably less time for themselves, especially when children are small. Yet those **moments spent together** are essential: an atmosphere of **closeness and intimacy** is preserved, thereby fostering one-to-one conversation and a mutually enhancing **sexual life**. Spending time together enables a relationship to **continue to thrive**. **Conflict resolution and reconciliation equally require a private space reserved for the couple only**.

## Careful: being a couple is not to be confused with parenthood

It is important to **distinguish clearly between the role of the couple, on the one hand, and the role of the parents on the other**. A couple must feel entitled to carve out the freedom to be alone together, to go out together or to meet their friends. On these occasions, children can be looked after by babysitters, grandparents or childminders. Moreover, the children themselves benefit from a degree of contact with people other than their parents.

To be functional, a couple needs **to surround itself by clear, though not rigid boundaries**. Thus when there is tension between the partners, children should never be drawn in or asked to be the go-between, or message-carrier. Otherwise, not only

will the children's loyalty be pulled in opposite directions, but the couple itself is damaged by the fact that the reasons for the dispute are never openly confronted. If one partner **manifests jealousy on the children's account**, this may indicate that the distinction between the two roles is not drawn sufficiently clearly, and that time spent together *à deux* is not enough. **No one has an unlimited store of affection or attention**: after a day's childrearing, these resources can be totally used up. At such times, men may tend increasingly to withdraw from the family circle and to seek affirmation and gratification outside it. They may spend more time with friends, seek refuge in a disproportionate amount of sporting activities, in their jobs or even in an extra-marital affair.

If - as often happens - a couple fails to look after their relationship properly in this period, both partners will end up feeling neglected in one way or another. What they ought to do is talk it over with each other, acknowledge their own needs, and work out how to manage to have time alone together.

## Old roles, new aspirations

Regardless of whether or not both partners previously enjoyed equal status within the relationship and professionally, once the childrearing stage commences an unintentional result often is that duties may be allocated **according to more traditional patterns**. Unless children are entrusted at a very early stage to childminders, home management and childrearing duties will largely fall to the woman. The man will often have more work commitments than before, because he has become the family's only breadwinner. Consequently, **both partners feel frustrated and dissatisfied**. The woman sees her prospects of career development shrinking, along with her chances of developing her own potential. For his part, the man may feel alienated, excluded, or even considered a nuisance factor, because he no longer takes enough part in family life. Yet there is no doubt that many men want and expect to play their part as fathers to their children. It is often forgotten that if this need is not fulfilled, a father will experience feelings of loss and deprivation.

## Enough is enough

Some couples overtax themselves by trying to keep their lifestyle unchanged from the pre-children stage, and **to achieve total perfection in all areas**. Women may aspire to devoting themselves to their career, while at the same time being excellent homemakers and mothers, not to mention social life organisers, and carers of parents and parents-in-law. This attitude **is a recipe for stress and eventual breakdown**. When reserves reach exhaustion point, the next step may be to blame the partner for the failure of one's own ambitions. Mutual accusations further exacerbate the atmosphere of frustration and inadequacy.

A vicious circle like this leads to conflicts being sparked off for the most trivial reasons. **The underlying issues frequently include a failure to acknowledge the work done by the other; an unequal sharing of duties; the original ideals of the relationship seem to have been forgotten**. Both partners feel confined to the role assigned them, and no longer feel affirmed as having individual needs and worth.

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## Sorry - you can't have everything

Contemporary society provides little by way of role models for any sort of balanced task-sharing across the various areas. It is difficult to reconcile with each other the frequently contradictory demands made by work environment, family and the couple's relationship. Everything must be achieved: fulfilling societal expectations of the couple; complying with the standards of good parenting in tandem with career development; matching the mediatised image of the perfect couple's romantic love in their perfect home. Unfortunately, the conditions necessary for realising these ambitions and reaching these standards simply do not exist.

Every couple, therefore, has to create their own tailor-made model for striking the correct balance between the means they have and the ambitions they aspire to. What matters is that we are able to agree on realistic objectives for raising our children, for running our home and our life together, and that we are able to share the work involved. As often as not, goals and ideals will have to be sacrificed if they are either too perfectionist or too unattainable. The arrival of a baby inevitably brings change with it. We can't have everything: that's life. That sort of sacrifice ultimately leads to a gain: it is a necessary part of building together a shared environment.