

Mother Nurture

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Sex After Children

Our baby just had her first birthday, and my husband and I are getting along OK, but the problem is he's really frustrated that we almost never make love because I usually feel too tired and "touched-out" when we finally get to bed.

This is a BIG topic, so please consider this column a summary of the summary of what could be said about it, and for much more information, please see chapter 8 of our book, *Mother Nurture*. Here are the headlines:

- Understand your differences – In most couples, the man is interested in more frequent lovemaking than the woman is, and this difference usually increases dramatically after children arrive. The hormonal perturbations and physical issues of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing combined with fatigue, being pulled on all day by children, stress, and physical depletion all tend to lower a mother's libido, and if she also feels let down by or emotionally distant from her partner, sex is at the bottom of her list of preferred ways to spend the next half hour.

On the other hand, a father is usually still quite interested in his wife as a lover (though some men also experience a drop in sexual interest after becoming a parent). While he misses sex itself, the principal loss for a man is typically that it starts to feel that his partner doesn't care enough about him as a person to approach him as a lover or stretch herself to engage him for a little while – especially when he sees her stretching herself much more for the children or even for a friend who calls on the phone.

The solution is to not take these differences personally, but to recognize them as normal and rooted in utterly impersonal biological imperatives of men and women. Try to have empathy and compassion for each other, which will help you feel better and get closer, and will be the basis for addressing your differences in practical ways.

- Take care of your personal well-being, teamwork, and emotional intimacy – Many fathers can shift into lover mode even if they don't feel that well, and even if things are somewhat tense with their partner. But in order to be comfortable with lovemaking, most mothers need to have a basic amount of energy and wellness, a sense of not being let down by their mate, and feelings of being cared about and connected. We've written about these extensively in our book and previous columns, so 'nuff said here, other than we REALLY encourage you to make sure these pieces are in place.

- Make fondness and affection a part of daily life – Look for opportunities to acknowledge each other for everything you do. Whenever you can, deliberately express your liking, warmth, caring, and concern for your partner – even if it's just a look or a

smile. Try to touch each other, non-sexually, several times a day. Carve out times, from merely a few minutes to a date night or a weekend away, that are for just the two of you, with no interruptions from children. Try to go to bed at the same time, even if one of you gets up to watch some TV after the other one drifts off. Hold hands, hug, kiss, snuggle on the couch or in bed – all the sweet things you used to do before kids.

- On this foundation, come to an understanding that works for both of you as to about how often you'll make love – For some couples, especially during the first few months postpartum, they'll agree to no lovemaking. But for many others, they'll come to something closer to once a week or so.

Yes, that frequency is probably closer to the natural preference of many dads with young children (two to three times a week) than it is to that of many moms (once every month or so). But to be frank, for many fathers the prospect of indefinitely, with no end in sight, meeting their wife as a lover just once a month would be quite troubling, and could ultimately be a major factor eroding the marriage. A loose analogy is conversation: it would also be troubling to many mothers to be told that they can expect their partner to talk with them in any depth only once a month.

The truth is that there is a middle ground in sex between hot-to-trot (ahh, those were the days . . . !) and are-you-crazy?! (And there is probably an equivalent middle ground for many men when it comes to sitting down on the couch to talk with their wife about something that's upsetting her.) We consciously reach down inside to find an authentic willingness to do something even if it is not our first preference. And as we engage the process, a natural interest or presence with the activity is usually kindled, and when it's over, we are usually glad we took the time, and there's a nice glow in the relationship.

Whether it's sex – or a deep and meaningful conversation - we're talking about taking half an hour or so a week to keep re-knitting the ties that bind a couple together and create a solid family framework in which to raise precious children. (And of course it's wise to have more than one good conversation a week!)

If there is clarity about a fairly predictable frequency of lovemaking, that also eliminates many upsets. If they've agreed to make love once a week or so and it's been about that long, if she says no tonight because she had a hard day with the kids or at work, he probably won't feel helplessly frustrated, but will figure there's a good chance he'll get lucky tomorrow night. If they've recently made love and he puts his hand on her hip, she doesn't have to stiffen to make sure he doesn't get the wrong idea that sex is in the offing. They can kiss passionately or fondle each other for a few minutes before rolling over to go to sleep – sweet pleasures for many men and some women that are one more way to evoke loving feelings – without fearing that now they have to go all the way.

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In our experience, if you take care of the basics above, you can always work out the practical details – like you've gotten out of the habit, the baby's in the bedroom, setting up a time for sex seems unromantic, lovemaking has grown routine or even boring, and so

on. And more than anything, try to let lovemaking deepen your love for each other, touching with a cherishing in your lips and fingertips, the giving of your bodies opening your hearts.

(Rick Hanson is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 13 and 15. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)