MALE ENGAGEMENT

in Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health

Couple Counseling Guide for Health Service Providers

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Male Engagement in Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH)

This tool was developed by Maternal and Child Survival Project (MCSP) in Nigeria in collaboration with Kogi State and Ebonyi State Ministry of Health.

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Maternal and Child Survival Program

Support your wife/partner during pregnancy

Purpose

This Couple Counseling Guide offers health service providers a ready to use tool for counseling couples and particularly men who access reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (RMNCAH) services as clients or as supportive companions with their partner at health facilities.

It is designed to provide couples with comprehensive information necessary to increase men's engagement and participation in RMNCAH services.

The tool is organized along five stages of the RMNCAH Continuum of Care:

Stage 1: Pre-pregnancy
Stage 2: Pregnancy
Stage 3: Labour and Delivery
Stage 4: Post-natal care (PNC)
Stage 5: Infancy and Childhood

Welcoming the couple for a counseling session

PRE-COUNSELING NOTES FOR PROVIDERS

Welcome Tips

1. Welcome the couple with a smile, friendly body language and offer them space to sit.

2. Tell the couple "Thank you for coming here together today. When fathers and mothers work together to improve their family's health, we know that everyone is happier, healthier and more prosperous".

3. Check with each partner how they prefer to be counseled, either as individuals or as a couple and respect whatever choice they make.

4. If they prefer to be counseled individually, then do so.

5. If they prefer to be counseled as a couple, then go ahead with the couple counseling session.

6. Hold this guide in a way that you and the couple can see each other while discussing.

Ensure Balanced Participation

Encourage respectful interactions and balanced participation during the session:

1. Form an alliance with each partner in the couple so they both feel comfortable to contribute their thoughts and feelings.

2. Encourage both partners to speak equally to each other.

3. Ask questions to both partners. If you notice one of the partners is not speaking make her/him feel comfortable.

4. Convey genuine interest in both individuals and be neutral.

5. Convey respect for the couple's relationship by recognizing the bond between them and validating their mutual commitment.

Attend counseling session with your wife/partner

PRE-COUNSELING NOTES FOR PROVIDERS

Emphasize Partnership

Discuss the need for joint decision making in partnership by explaining the following:

- Your purpose is not to make the woman feel obligated to tolerate her partner's involvement during pregnancy, delivery and post-delivery if she does not want to; rather, the point is to educate the couple on the benefits and importance of male involvement during key stages of RMNCAH.

- Men can be a great help to their female partners by sharing family activities like cooking together, caring for their children and keeping the house clean.

- Women should feel comfortable sharing family activities with their male partner if they choose to.

- I am not encouraging you to transfer this responsibility to the male partner. I am encouraging you to share responsibilities together and for you to include men in traditionally female-dominated spaces.

- Emphasize the benefits of male participation for the male partner (e.g. improved spousal communications and relationship, stronger bond between father and children, reduced stress, conflict and violence in the home, improved gender-equitable attitudes, increased contact with health system, allowing men to address their own health needs (HIV and other STIs, communicable and non- communicable diseases).

Provider encouraging equal participation for both partners

PRE-COUNSELING NOTES FOR PROVIDERS

Relationship Dynamics and Power Imbalances

Take note of obvious or subtle power imbalance between the couple that maybe a barrier to participate equally in the session.

Examples of **obvious** power imbalances:

* One partner repeatedly speaking over, or interrupting, the other, raising their voice, making negative comments about the other, and/or speaking and making choices for the other.

Examples of **subtle** power imbalances:

* One partner remaining silent, not making eye contact with you or her/his partner, continuously answering 'I don't know' to questions, and/or continuously looking to the other before answering a question.

* If power imbalances appear to be compromising the quality of the session to the extent that balanced participation is not possible, rather than end the session abruptly, you may continue the session to the end and give the quiet partner the option to remain in the room or come back to speak with you privately.

Managing disagreements between the couple

PRE-COUNSELING NOTES FOR PROVIDERS

Manage Disagreements

The provider can diffuse tension using the following techniques:

- If a decision becomes hostile or one partner blames another, ask them to express what they are feeling through redirecting or reframing questions. Fear and anxiety are sometimes expressed through anger and aggression.

- Calmly name and acknowledge the behavior you see to help the couple address the emotions. For example, say “I understand that you may be feeling upset.” Can we talk about what might be worrying you?’

- Help the couple to realize that their feelings, reactions and concerns are common.

- Remind both partners of their roles, responsibilities, and expectations before the session.

Compassionate counseling following disclosure of IPV

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

If during the session, the couple or one partner discloses s/he has experienced violence in the relationship:

- Verbally acknowledge that you have heard and understood and tell the client you are sorry this has happened.

- Do not attempt to probe into the incident and do not attempt to mediate a discussion with the couple about violence. However do listen to individual or couple compassionately without judgment.

- If it is safe to do so, and if both partners are emotionally able to do so, continue with the session.

- If the partner becomes violent or overly confrontational, end the session and immediately seek help from other colleagues.

- After the session, state that you are required to meet with both partners again individually on a later day. This will ensure that the individual has all of the information, is able to ask questions, and express any concerns.

Compassionate counseling following disclosure of IPV

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

What you should say in the event that an incident of violence is disclosed during a session with a couple:

- "I am so sorry this is happening in your relationship. This is not healthy for either of you."

  (if the woman is not yet pregnant but is planning to become pregnant)

- "Since you are both planning to have children, it is important for me to tell you that violence experienced by the mother during pregnancy can lead to obstetric complications, including miscarriage, stillbirth, disability, and/or the death of the mother."

  (if the woman is pregnant and the couple has come in for an ANC visit)

Attend family planning counseling session with your wife/partner

STAGE 1

PRE-PREGNANCY

PROVIDER NOTE:

1. If the couple is already pregnant and have come to the facility for an ANC visit, move directly to the 'PREGNANCY STAGE'..... Page 21
2. If the couple have just had a baby and have come to the facility for a PNC visit, move directly to the 'POST-NATAL STAGE'.

Pre-pregnancy Points

- Both partners in a relationship have the right to contribute to decision-making. However, if the man and the woman disagree the woman has the right to make decision about her own body.
- Shared decision-making about starting a family is especially important. Both of you must be willing and ready to assume the responsibilities of being parents.
- As the male partner, you can help to strengthen your relationship and build harmony with your partner by communicating openly with her, listening to her, and respecting her opinions.
- Before starting a family, it is important for you and your partner to discuss and agree on whether or not you want to have children, the number of children you both want and can afford, and when you want to have them.
- Contraception is an important part of planning for a family. Even though most contraceptive methods are used by women, it is important for men to understand how they work and support your partner to decide the type of method she will use.
- By participating in FP counseling sessions, you can gain a better understanding of the various methods (how long they work, potential side effects etc.) so you can support your partner in her choice and use of a contraceptive method.

Get tested and know your HIV status with your wife/partner

PROVIDER NOTE

1. For couples who only wish to explore contraceptive options, follow your facility's process for counseling couples on contraception, and then discuss the points below on HIV testing and counseling (HTC) and end the session.
2. For couples who are ready to begin trying to become pregnant, do not provide counseling on contraception but instead discuss the points below on HTC, and then continue on to the remaining stages.
3. For couples who are thinking of becoming pregnant in the near future, follow your facility's process for counseling couples on contraception, then discuss the points below on HIV testing and counseling (HTC) and move on to the remaining stages.
4. Offer the couple information on HTC services available at the health facility (or elsewhere), as well as information on the HTC process.

- Certain methods will still need you to use a condom until they start working fully. Some (like injectables) may require the female partner to stop using them for some time before fertility is restored.
- As the male partner, you can be supportive of your partner's choice of contraceptive by respecting and encouraging her choice of the method that is most appropriate for her body, and not forcing her to choose a specific method.
- To plan a family, both partners must be healthy. Participating in joint HIV testing and counseling before you start a family is important for ensuring a healthy pregnancy and a healthy child.
- Most HIV infections happen within relationships.
- When both partners know their status, they can take the necessary measures to prevent their infection or the infection of their partner, and transmission to the child.
- By understanding how contraceptives work, both of you can avoid unplanned pregnancies and improve your fertility chances if or when you decide to start a family.

REMINDER

It is important to make clear to the male partner that when it comes to female contraceptives, the woman must choose the method best adapted to her body and needs. Explain that the effectiveness of a contraceptive depends on how well suited it is to the woman.

Ensure your wife/partner attend all ANC appointments

STAGE 2

PREGNANCY

PROVIDER NOTE:

1. If the couple have just had a baby and have come to the facility for a post natal care (PNC) visit, move directly to the 'POST-NATAL' CARE..... Page 31

Pre-pregnancy Points

As the male partner, you can contribute to a healthy pregnancy by:

Attending ANC visits with your partner if she wishes. By attending these visits you will be able to:

- Learn about danger signs during pregnancy, how they can be prevented, and what to do if complications occur at any point during the pregnancy.
- Develop a closer bond with your partner and child.
- Learn about milestones during pregnancy and delivery including, expectations about the unborn child.
- Plan with your partner about where to deliver and how to get there.
- Encouraging your partner to register for ANC as soon as she confirms she is pregnant (ONLY FOR COUPLES WHO ARE PLANNING TO BECOME PREGNANT)
- Supporting your partner to respect and attend all ANC appointments by reminding her of dates and providing necessary financial support (e.g. transportation costs; ANC consultation fees; money for medications etc.)

REMINDER

- **Emphasize the need for the female partner to allow the man to be involved in activities (e.g. caring for the child; cooking; cleaning etc.), and access spaces (e.g. maternity clinic; delivery room; kitchen) that have traditionally been assigned to her by culture and society.**
- **The woman should not be made to feel obligated to tolerate her partner's involvement during pregnancy.**
- **Make clear to the male partner that this is not a transference of female responsibilities to him; it is about sharing responsibilities as partners.**
- **Emphasize the benefits of male participation for the female partner (e.g. less stress; improved communication; better ability to balance responsibilities; better health etc.).**

Share household chores with your wife/partner

PROVIDER NOTE

1. If the couple have come to the health facility for an ANC visit, follow your facility's process for providing ANC to couples and then move on to the next discussion point.
   - Develop a birth-preparedness plan with your partner to ensure you have everything in place for delivery.
2. Refer to your facility's guidance on explaining the birth preparedness plan.
3. If the couple has not come to the facility for an ANC visit, do not go into the details of birth preparedness plan and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.

Pregnancy Points

- Violence physical trauma and emotional stress experienced by the mother during pregnancy can also lead to obstetric complications (including miscarriage, stillbirth, disability of the baby, and/or the death of the mother), and contribute to developmental issues later on in the child's life.
- As the male partner, you can prevent physical trauma and emotional stress by being supportive and respectful of your partner, and ensuring her safety.

For example, physical trauma to the mother during pregnancy may include:

- Kicks or punches to the stomach (or using an object to hit the stomach).
- Kicks or punches to the body and/or face that result (or not) in invisible injuries.
- Falling on the stomach.
- Putting pressure on the stomach (e.g. pushing down on the stomach; pushing the stomach against a hard surface; placing heavy objects on the stomach)
- Forced sex, and/or forceful insertion of objects into the vagina

Ensure your wife/partner eat nutritious fruits and vegetables

Support your wife/partner during pregnancy

Pregnancy Points

- During pregnancy, women experience hormonal changes that may result in emotional changes.

- Emotional stress during pregnancy can have an adverse effect on the pregnancy.

  Therefore, it is important for the male partner to remain patient with and be emotionally supportive of his female partner during pregnancy.

  For examples, emotional stress experienced by the mother during pregnancy may include:

  - Feeling sad
  - Feeling depressed
  - Feeling afraid
  - Tension in the relationship due to disagreements and/or arguments

- Poor nutrition can harm the mother and the child during pregnancy. As the male partner, you can help ensure a healthy pregnancy by:

  - Making sure your partner has access to a sufficient amount of food at every meal.
  - Supporting your partner to adhere to nutritional guidelines for pregnant women by making nutritious foods available to her.

- Excessive physical activity during pregnancy may harm the mother and the baby. As the male partner, you can further contribute to a healthy pregnancy by:

  - Helping with household chores that may be too strenuous for your pregnant partner (e.g. lifting heavy objects, cleaning floors, washing clothes etc.).
  - Encouraging your partner to rest regularly and to get sufficient sleep during the pregnancy.

Attend pregnancy sessions with your wife/partner if she chooses

PROVIDER NOTE:

1. If the couple have come to the facility for an ANC visit, refer to national Nutritional Guidance for pregnant women.

2. If the couple have not come to the facility for ANC visit, do not go into the details of Nutritional Guidance for pregnant women and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.

Pregnancy Points

- Safe sex practices are very important during pregnancy because HIV can be transmitted to the baby, and STIs can adversely affect the pregnancy. As the male partner, you can reduce your partner's exposure to HIV and STIs by:

  - Getting regularly tested for HIV and STIs and disclosing your status to your partner.

  - Not engaging in any sexual activity with a person other than your partner.

Sexual activity includes:

Oral sex (contact between the penis and the mouth; contact between the mouth and the vagina; contact between the mouth and the anus)

Anal sex (inserting the penis, objects or fingers into the anus)

Vaginal sex (inserting the penis, objects or fingers into the vagina); rubbing the penis against the vagina or anus; rubbing the penis against another penis; rubbing the vagina against another vagina.

  - Using a male or female condom during every sexual act with a person other than your partner.

Accompany your pregnant wife/partner to the health facility for delivery

Support your wife/partner by being physically present and support her emotionally during delivery

STAGE 3

LABOUR AND DELIVERY

PROVIDER NOTE:

1. If the couple have just had a baby and have come to the facility for a post-natal care (PNC) visit, move directly to the 'POST-NATAL' STAGE..... Page 31

Labour and Delivery Points

- As the male partner, you can help to ensure a healthy delivery by remaining alert to labor signs and ensuring your partner gets to the health facility in a timely manner.
- Be sure to arrange transport in advance.
- Men can help their partners have a smooth delivery by:
  - Being physically present (if the woman wishes), and emotionally supportive during labor.
  - Being physically present in the delivery room (if the woman chooses),and being supportive during the delivery.

REMINDER

1. **If the couple have come to the health facility for an ANC visit, refer back to your facility's guidelines for ANC counseling and discuss the risks of a home birth, and remind the couple of the labor signs.**
2. **If the couple have not come to the facility for an ANC visit, do not go into details about labour signs and risks of home birth and instead move on the remaining discussion points.**

Participate in feeding the baby and changing diapers for the baby's care.

Conduct kangaroo care (skin-to-skin contact) for a close bond with your child.

STAGE 4

POST-NATAL CARE

Post-natal Care Points

- Caring for children is the joint responsibility of both parents.

- Both parents are responsible for showing their child love and care. As a father, it is natural for you to love your child, and to express that love by participating in your child's care, even if that means doing activities that society may not deem appropriate for men (e.g. bathing and feeding your child; changing diapers etc.).

- By being involved as a father, you will be able to develop a close bond with your child, and this bond will help them to develop into a healthy individual and productive member of society.

- One of the most important ways of developing a close bond with your child is to hold them close to your skin following delivery! This is called skin-to-skin contact or kangaroo care. This is also an effective way to care for premature babies to keep them warm.

- Participating in the care of baby's umbilical cord to prevent infection by applying chlorhexidine 4% gel as recommended.

REMINDER

1. Emphasize the need for the female partner to allow the man to be involved in activities (e.g. caring for the child; cooking; cleaning etc.), and access spaces (e.g. maternity clinic; delivery room; kitchen) that have traditionally been assigned to her by culture and society.
2. The woman should not be made to feel obligated to tolerate her partner's involvement post-delivery if she does not want him there.
3. Make clear to the male partner that this is not a transference of female responsibilities to him; it is about sharing responsibilities as partners.
4. Emphasize the benefits of male participation for the female partner (e.g. less stress; improved communication; better ability to balance responsibilities; better health etc.).

Attend PNC visit with your wife/partner

Take your child/infant for immunizations for the child's health

PROVIDER NOTE

1. If the couple has come to the health facility for a PNC visit, follow your facility's process for providing PNC to couples and then move on to the next discussion point.
2. If the couple has not come to the health facility for a PNC visit, do not provide PNC and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.
3. Refer to guidance on skin-to-skin contact and describe it to the couple.
4. If the couple has not come to the facility for a PNC session, do not go into detail about skin-to-contact and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.

Post-natal Care Points

- You can also develop a closer bond with your child by participating in their healthcare.
  - By attending PNC visits with your partner, you can learn about your child's health needs, and essential newborn care. This information will enable you to better protect your child's health.
- Taking your child for her/his immunizations is important for protecting your child's health.
- Being an involved father will also help to Improve harmony in your home and in your relationship with your partner because there will be less stress as a result of shared parental responsibility; and your communication may improve as you coordinate your parental roles.
- Caring for your child after delivery also means supporting your partner in her recovery so that she is able to provide necessary care to the baby (i.e. breastfeeding). You can support your partner by:

Help to care for newborn while the mother sleeps

Help the baby to latch on to the breast of wife/partner

Attend guidance about sexual activity after child birth with your wife/partner

Post-natal Care Points

- Helping to care for the baby while the mother rests.
- Managing family members/visitors while the mother rests.
- Helping and encouraging your partner to exclusively breast feed for the first six months of the baby's life because it can help improve the baby's nutrition and immunity.

- Give your partner time to physically recover from the birth. Follow the providers guidance about how long to avoid sexual activity after birth. Make sure your partner agrees to sex before you engage in it.
- Emotional stress or physical trauma experienced by the mother after delivery can compromise her recovery, and limit her capacity to provide the child with needed care (i.e. breastfeeding).

REMINDER

1. If the couple has come to the facility for a PNC visit, refer back to your facility's guidelines for PNC counseling and remind the couple of the importance of exclusive breast-feeding during first 6 months.
2. If the couple has not come to the health facility for a PNC visit, do not go into details about exclusive breast-feeding and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.
3. If the couple has come to the facility for a PNC visit, refer back to your facility's guidelines for PNC counseling and the remind the couple of the medical guidance regarding sexual activity post-delivery.
4. If the couple has not come to the health facility for a PNC visit, do not go into detail about guidance regarding sexual activity Post-delivery and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.

Both parents should be supportive and caring for their child

PROVIDER NOTE

1. If the couple has come to the facility for a PNC visit, follow your facility's process for initiating counseling with couples about contraception following delivery.
2. If the couple has not come to the health facility for a PNC visit, do not provide counseling on Post-natal contraception and instead move on to the remaining discussion points.

Post-natal Care Points

- Any tension or conflict between mother and father after delivery can have a negative influence on the healthy development of the child, and can contribute to developmental problems later on in the child's life.

- As the male partner, you can prevent physical trauma and emotional stress by being supportive and respectful of your partner, and ensuring her safety.

For examples of physical trauma to the mother after pregnancy may include:

- Kicks or punches to the body or face that result (or not) in injuries.
- Forced sex and/or forceful insertion of objects into the vagina.

For examples of emotional stress experienced by the mother after pregnancy may include:

i Feeling sad
ii Feeling depressed
iii Feeling afraid
iv Tension in the relationship due to disagreements and/or arguments

- You should never take out your anger and frustration on a child. It is abuse, and child abuse is illegal in Nigeria. Using violence against an infant can lead to serious injury, and/or death.

Take your child for routine medical visit

Both parents playing with female and male children

STAGE 5

INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD

PROVIDER NOTE

1. Refer to the guidance on positive discipline for children and review the various techniques with the couple.

Infancy and Childhood Points

It is important to continue your care giving past your child's first year of life by:

- Taking your child for routine medical visits.
- Ensuring your child has adequate access to nutritious foods so she can maintain an optimum weight.
- Ensuring your child, regardless of whether a girl or a boy, has access to education so that she/he can become a well-rounded and productive member of society.
- Avoid using violence to correct/punish your child/children. There are other, more positive ways to teach your children without harming them physically and emotionally.
- It is important to model healthy behaviors for your female and male children so that they have a positive male example in their lives. By being respectful towards your female partner, your son(s) will learn to be respectful of women, and your daughter(s) will grow up to value herself and men who respect her.

REMINDER

1. **Emphasize the need for the female partner to allow the man to be involved in activities (e.g. caring for the child; cooking; cleaning etc.), and access spaces (e.g. maternity clinic; delivery room; kitchen) that have traditionally been assigned to her by culture and society.**
2. **The woman should not be made to feel obligated to tolerate her partner's involvement post-delivery.**
3. **Make clear to the male partner that this is not a transference of female responsibilities to him; it is about sharing responsibilities as partners.**
4. **Emphasize the benefits of male participation for the female partner (e.g. less stress; improved communication; better ability to balance responsibilities; better health etc.).**

Male Engagement in Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health

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