

Planning for a New Baby: A Creative Approach to Learning

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Article:

Teaching about pregnancy in a childbearing (ie, maternity or obstetrical) nursing course can be challenging because experiences with pregnant families are not easy to find. Educators are aware that active learning is more effective than passive learning,¹ but when hands-on learning opportunities are not readily available, role playing or simulations are useful. While redesigning an undergraduate childbearing family course, the author sought to include a learning experience that would help nursing students understand the complex psychological and physical transition to parenthood that new parents face.

“Then Comes Baby!” is an active learning project through which students take on the perspective of a pregnant parent and become aware of issues and decisions that parents-to-be must make as they prepare for their new baby. An additional goal is to have students gain familiarity with local community resources available to families with restricted financial resources. The simulation realistically illustrates the strong influence that culture, economics, childrearing trends, and tradition have on the pregnant woman and her partner. Though this assignment focused on new baby issues, similar teaching strategies could be developed for other clinical arenas.

ASSIGNMENT

To simulate a scenario where they are expecting a new baby students are given a theoretical budget of \$500 and told to work with a partner, within or outside of the class. Their assignment is to decide how to spend this money to cover basic needs to get them safely through the first month of life with their newborn. Figure 1 lists the specific objectives of the project. Figure 2 illustrates the written instructions students receive for their assignment.

Students are given a budget sheet template and the grading criteria sheet (Tables 1 and 2), and are told to use the grading criteria as a framework for thinking about their project. The grading criteria are designed to provide adequate details to identify certain areas of inclusion but are not so specific as to direct student decisions.

It is important to involve students in discussions about culture to sensitize them to the many cultural influences in their lives that they do not recognize as cultural. For example, most American students do not recognize the commercial focus of their culture, the strong influences regarding feeding choice, and the common philosophy that newborns should be separated from

their parents off and on throughout the day. Providing examples from cultures very different from their own, such as those of developing countries, is useful: Small² is one good resource that illustrates our ethnocentrism regarding parenting issues.

Figure 1: Project objectives.

- Prepare for a new baby and decide what items are needed, and in what quantities.
- Explore the area of childbearing from a consumer perspective early in the course.
- Use critical thinking to set priorities when making purchase decisions within the framework of the budget, safety, culture, developmental level of the newborn, necessary items, and personal preferences.
- Become familiar with community resources available to childbearing families on limited income that will meet a predetermined need and supplement their income.
- Become acquainted with decisions new parents constantly face.
- Explore the parents' own feelings and cultural influences that impact their decision making.
- Work with a partner when making these decisions, as a couple would do during pregnancy.
- Develop some skills for locating and evaluating key product information related to necessity, safety, and cost amid the vast marketing promotions and consumer advertising focused on parents-to-be.

Figure 2: The written instructions for the assignment.

You and your partner are pregnant. You are given a theoretical budget of \$500 for you and your partner to spend on the necessary expenses for your new baby preparing for birth and its first month of life. Assume that your own needs were met prior to birth and do not need to be included in the budget. You need to find two community resources whose function is to help couples with financial challenges meet their new needs: one prenatal service and one for infant care. Submit your budget sheet with the expenses outlined for all of your purchases and choices. Creativity is encouraged but none of the necessities can be given to you as a gift from family and friends. Describe the thinking that you and your partner had while making your choices. Be clear how you determined your priorities and resolved your areas of disagreement. Note that your critical thinking has the single largest point value in this project. Based on your stated priorities, find two resources in our community that would expand or supplement your resources to meet your needs (1) during pregnancy and (2) as a family with a new baby. Are you eligible for these resources? How did you determine this?

Table 1: Grading Criteria

Content	Criteria	Points
Budget	Stay within \$500 budget; explain where you found your items and why you purchased from there. Include all necessary items for first month of baby's life (eg, food, clothing, diapers, bed, car seat, medical care, hygiene).	15
Safety Issues	Describe the safety concerns and guidelines related to each item.	10
Developmental Appropriateness	Provide evidence of developmental appropriateness of items for the baby and the parents.	10
Cultural Issues	Identify cultural issues that influenced your decision making and describe their impact. Be specific and clearly identify the issue as a cultural one in your paper.	10
Community Resources	Identify one resource in the community that will help you prenatally; identify one different community resource that can help you in the first month of the baby's life.	10
	Each resource must be described, and eligibility requirements detailed, state the family needs that each meets.	10
Critical Thinking	Cite evidence of how you made your purchasing decisions, what the issues were, and why you made the choices you did (include the pros and cons that you considered).	30
Professional Presentation	Complete sentences? Neat? Legible? Appropriate language? Organized?	5
Total Score		100
Comments:		

Table 2: Budget Template

Item (Include Quantity)	Where Purchased or Obtained	Price (per item X Quantity)	Tax	Total

The use of contrasts is often helpful in the classroom to inform students' thinking regarding parenting decisions within our culture. Religion can be a strong cultural influence for some; ethnicity for others. Purchasing a christening gown is a priority in some cultures; family involvement in decision making is a necessity in others. Pacifiers are often taken for granted as part of routine baby equipment but the debate among experts about their advantages and disadvantages is ongoing. Educators might consider soliciting viewpoints of students with varying backgrounds in their classrooms in order to capitalize on their rich diversity. Foreign students, students with young children, and minority students often contribute valuable alternative perspectives that differ from mainstream American culture.

Because product safety is an issue for parents, students are directed to look at safety standards on the Internet and product packaging. Items as simple as baby powder can be a danger to newborns and are often accepted as a necessity without critically considering the hazards inherent in their use. We ask students to justify the safety of their major purchases: to explain their thinking, the positives and negatives of each choice, and the rationale for their final decisions.

OUTCOMES

The average length of a student paper is three to five pages, including a budget page. Some are quite creative when telling the story of their fictitious pregnancy, their partner, and their decision making. Others approach the assignment more objectively and put their items and rationale into a large table. Those who question all of their assumptions about newborns and their needs excel (grades of A) with this assignment, but nearly all students have been successful (grades of B to C) in meeting the objectives for the project. Thus it serves as a positive first graded assignment in the course and is a nice introduction to the clinical specialty.

Feedback from students who have completed this project over the past 5 years has been generally positive. The majority of students find the assignment to be fun, informative, but more difficult than they initially expected. A limited budget is the first challenge they report, thinking about the culture in which they live is the second, and the last key challenge is accessing information about community resources.

Students are also amazed and overwhelmed by all of the products displayed and promoted in baby aisles and stores. Products are packaged in appealing ways and students are attracted by the merchandising. The influence of technology in our culture is very evident. Baby monitors are a common purchase, even when a student has stated that she lives in a small apartment! A few students have purchased devices that play an audible heartbeat to soothe the baby. Students often view strollers as a necessity when newborns are likely more content in a sling or front carrier strapped on to the parent and listening to an actual heartbeat. Most students use the Internet for information and guidance in sorting through the myriad products and brand choices; others speak

to employees who work in the baby sections of stores such as Wal-Mart and Babies-R-Us. Students learn the importance of reading labels about safety issues and federal safety guidelines for all baby carriers and furniture.

In addition to doing their own investigative work, many students call their mothers for advice. This advice is often taken as factually accurate, rather than being critically evaluated for its safety and efficacy against current standards of care. Frequent examples of this uncritical acceptance are the use of baby oil and powder, both of which are not recommended for newborns.

One of the most difficult parts of the assignment for many students is identifying cultural influences on their decision making. One's culture is often taken for granted so it is difficult for students to see that nearly every choice they consider—whether it be breastfeeding, where their baby should sleep, or the perceived need for a baby monitor—is influenced by the culture in which they live. Broad examples of cultural influences, such as religious rituals, norms for parent-baby proximity, interdependence with the baby, and family influences are explored when the project is first assigned. One student's critique of the assignment illustrates how challenging it is for students to recognize that everything around them is their culture: "I found it difficult to do the culture part. Culture is very important for some people and not at all for others."

Some students are surprised at the maze they had to go through to obtain community assistance. Others are impressed by the number of resources available to meet a variety of needs for parents with low incomes. Supplementing their \$500 budget with appropriate community services becomes an important issue. Two consistent comments on this project have been: 1) it made students aware of the world of expectant parents, and 2) it made students realize the difficulty of working with a limited budget. As one articulate student stated, "The best part of the assignment is the task of using a budget to negotiate choices in the marketplace that devolve upon the notion of necessities, and acquisitions that will promote the newborn's health, safety, and security."

Interaction with another person also leads to significant student learning. Working with a partner requires communication, compromise, and joint decision making. The blending of two points of view on necessary items, money issues, and personal expectations about having a baby are all addressed. Critical thinking requires examining salient issues for each topic (eg, feeding choice), setting priorities, and determining a rationale for final decisions. While certain students reported that debating the issues and reaching agreement was sometimes a time-consuming and frustrating process, each student's thinking was broadened and enriched by the exchange of viewpoints.

Students acknowledged gaining valuable new perspectives from completing this assignment. "To think openly, outside ourselves, in order to relate to a wide range of thoughts and experiences," in one student's words, was the most important lesson learned. "There are many choices that are influenced by cultural and social situations of the mother. Often we think [only] about the decisions we would make, but it was good to try out several different scenarios and step into another woman's situation."

Finally, this project has demonstrated broader impact and ongoing benefits for students in their nursing education. At the end of one semester, a male student stopped after class to comment,

“You remember that ‘Then Comes Baby!’ thing we did in the beginning of the semester? I just wanted to tell you that that was a great learning experience and very creative. I have gone back to what I learned from that assignment several times across my clinical experiences. I liked it.”

CONCLUSION

The “Then Comes Baby!” project provides an enjoyable, active learning experience for nursing students. Key learning occurs in the areas of critical thinking, interpersonal skills and joint decision making, cultural sensitization, introduction to early child rearing, and community awareness. After completing this assignment students are familiar with several issues related to parenting as well as specific resources in the local community, so they are comfortable discussing these matters with the families they encounter in their later clinical rotation. Rather than memorizing information, students are able to apply what they learned when families ask questions about resources or baby care. The insights they gain from the “Then Comes Baby!” assignment make students more sensitive to cultural and socioeconomic issues. This has indeed been a successful learning tool.

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