

# Becoming Us: 8 Steps to Grow a Family that Thrives



Written by Elly Taylor, AARC

Reviewed by: Dawn Bhat, MA, MS, NCC, LMHC

*“As a partner, I was acutely aware of the stretch marks that were spreading across our relationship. As a mother, I was increasingly aware of how I wanted to me. And as a counselor, my understanding of the gap between these two states—and how to bridge them—was growing too. I wanted answers. What happens to us and our partnership when we become family? What makes or breaks us? What can be done to really prepare us for parenthood?” (Elly Taylor)*

Elly Taylor is sensitive to the joys of starting a family and the challenges inherent in the process. As a relationship therapist, columnist, perinatal researcher, and a mother of three, Taylor has written her first book, *Becoming Us: 8 Steps to Grow a Family that Thrives*. Her heartfelt desire to share her skills and research is evident as a means of transforming and enhancing the initial period of starting a family, which she refers to as “becoming us”. In some ways, what Taylor was not prepared for personally and professionally drove her urge to fill a gap in the literature with her new book. As a new mother myself, I know the period between pregnancy and parenting deserves attention, and Taylor, who provides parenting consultation out of Australia, has rightfully done so.

*Becoming Us* is written in a first-person familiar voice—it reads as if you are sitting with Elly, sharing stories over a cup of tea. It is an easy-to-access resource for therapists and laypersons alike. Drawing from current research and psychotherapeutic theories, Taylor writes with a simplicity that gets to the heart of ordinary experience:

*“Becoming a family, any family, is all about growing, changing, adapting and connecting. At first, it’s the physical changes: the ripening and blossoming of breasts and bellies, the first flutters of movement, the wonder of another life, and then the momentous miracle of birth, which transitions you overnight.”*

Therapists and somatic practitioners, especially those specializing in marriage and family counseling, can assuredly recommend this volume to couples transitioning to parenthood. Along with Elly’s personal reflections, there are plenty of experiential exercises that are based on evidence-based perspectives. Based on my experiences through pregnancy and now being part of an ‘us’, I think this volume is especially perfect for those during the prenatal and perinatal period to prevent issues fairly common when “becoming us”—it brings awareness along with the knowledge and skills to prepare couples for parenthood *a priori*.

Taylor’s admitted overwhelm of new-mother responsibilities and her lack of attention to what was happening to her partner during this time planted the seeds for this book. She noticed personally and professionally that as a couple becomes a family, the partnership undoubtedly changes. While change is growth, change can generate conflict; a new life stage can pull apart the couple’s relationship. Taylor honed in on research that indicated couples seem to have more disagreements the first year and experience a decline in satisfaction in their relationship (she sites work by Cowan & Cowan, 1992 and Gottman & Gottman, 2007). Partners may commonly grow apart with the birth of their child but with the help of Taylor’s experience and her ability to impart her wisdom through writing, they can join hands in this parenting adventure. As Taylor writes:

*“I was looking for answers but I found much more than I bargained for. I discovered this: becoming a family pulls apart the structure of a couple’s partnership; the transition tips them into a new life stage as individuals and a new relationship stage at the same time. Parenthood affects both the mother’s and father’s sense of identity and self-esteem; it can change the balance of power between them and also disrupt their sense of connection” (p.13).*

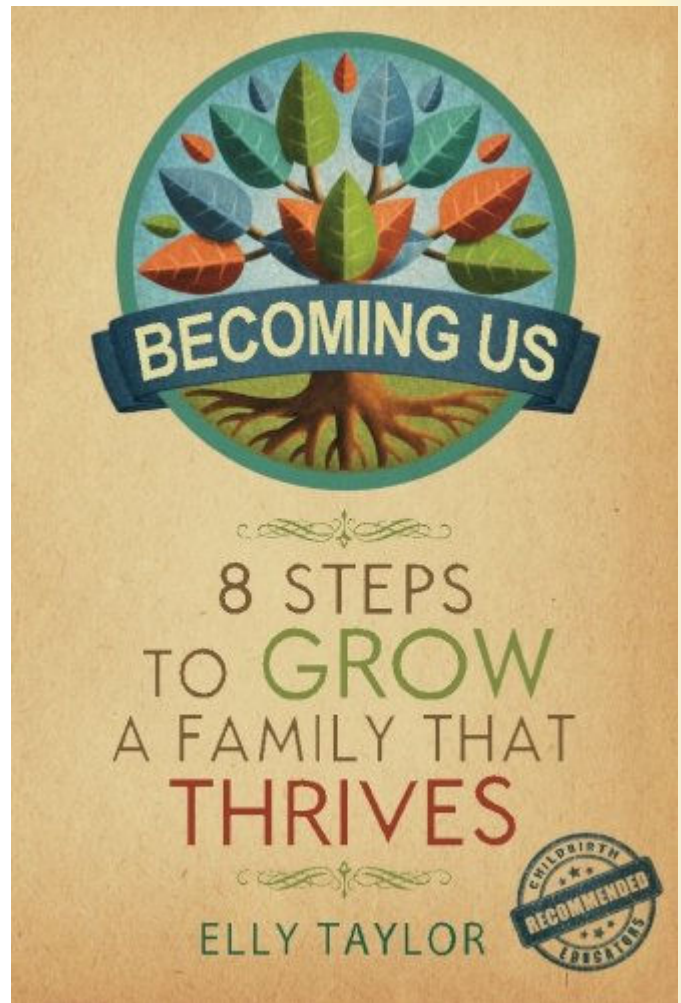
While this volume opens with Taylor’s touching personal story, she inspires the reader to create a self-narrative. She gently and softly encourages couples to connect through rituals, discussions, and learning new ways to communicate. In addition, couples are encouraged to partake in exercises, such as writing and starting a journal. Taylor reminds parents to take time to rest and relax while prompting them to reexamine, reassess, and revise expectations, plans, and goals. Taylor points out that simply embracing change is key to becoming a family that thrives.

*Becoming Us* consists of three parts: The Skills, The Parts, and Extra Support. In Part One, The Skills, there are four chapters entitled *Loving, Learning, Growing, and Relating*. Part Two, The Steps, involves eight, steps to guide parents. Lastly, Part Three, Extra Support offers readers help through extraordinarily difficult times.

### ‘The Skills’

**Loving, Learning, Growing, and Relating.** The first chapter, ‘Loving’, discusses the different types of love and times in which you grow together and apart. According to Taylor, long-term love goes through three stages: coming together, growing apart, and growing together. The latter is a balance between personal growth and that within the relationship. With a focus on connected partnership and parenthood, Taylor offers ideas for rituals to restore and reconnect to continue to move forward personally, as a couple, as a family, and within a community. For the couple, daily rituals such as kissing hello, sharing a meal, etc., when done mindfully and lovingly, can help connection deepen, especially when parting. Likewise, self-care, family celebrations, and engaging in community events or activities with like-minded individuals are rituals that protect against isolation and loneliness, which is especially important during transitions.

**Contrary to myths that parenting is easy and natural,** in the second chapter, ‘Learning’, Taylor shares that there are five lessons of creating a family. Aspects of becoming a family are stressful. It’s how we react to the stress that counts not the stress per se. This could be one of the most important contributions of this volume—giving readers practical ways to identify, cope with, manage, and



regulate stress to promote ways in which parents can work together. When parents head in the same direction they are more likely to be connected. Parents can reinvent their partnership. Lastly, parenthood, Taylor positively advises, is the perfect opportunity to do this. Moreover, these lessons learned by parents get transmitted to their children, the next generation.

**In ‘Growing’, Taylor recapitulates the psychologist Erik Erikson’s stages of life cycle development,** which are referred to in this volume as Trust, Independence, Initiative, Competence for child development and Identity, Intimacy, and Generativity in adult development. Each stage is applied comprehensively and is comprehensible to any reader. Parents gain awareness in child psychosocial development and a general sense of what it takes to ‘become me’. Meanwhile, the couple can ‘become us’ and grow with the understanding that each partner may do so at a different rate. Taylor teaches partners emotional intelligence, how to communicate about feelings and express emotions, and how to work with emotions, such as joy, anger, hurt, fear and disgust. This can affect the next generation by raising emotionally intelligent children.



Prenatally ,and 2) Build a Nest, help readers from the time they start thinking about having a baby to the newborn phase of the first few months, the fourth trimester. Taylor provides tips for both new mothers and fathers to support each other while taking care of one's self and the newborn baby.

**Taylor opens the chapter on** preparing prenatally by changing common language about 'expecting' during pregnancy to include 'exploring' and 'preparing.' During this period, Taylor emphasizes that there is also an evolving sense of self. Often partners have to let some things go to make space inside so that they can be ready to be filled with new experiences. It may be new priorities, clearer values, deepened spirituality, heightened emotional awareness, and a more rounded sense of self. Taylor points out that women find their inner strength while men find their inner softness. She stresses that your relationship with your partner is as important as your relationship with the baby. Taylor repeatedly delivers a message to go inside and connect with yourself and your partner.

**The fourth and final skill of Part One** is 'Relating', which is vital in any couple's relationship. Relating to, communicating with, and talking about sensitive topics may be the most challenging for most couples. Taylor offers guidelines and steps for intimate connection between the speaker and listener to ultimately come to a place of understanding. Taylor goes on to talk more in-depth about the four steps for intimate communication: *1) Go inside; 2) Find the words to express yourself assertively; 3) Reveal yourself using 'I' language; 4) Listener responds with reflective listening.* She gives practical solutions to resolve conflict, which include how to give feedback effectively, negotiating through differences in hopes, thoughts, and

goals, and eventually problem solving. Instead of moving toward triumph from heated arguments, Taylor directs readers to avoid heated arguments and escalated conflict to experience greater satisfaction in their relationships. Since heated arguments can cause rupture a relationship, Taylor shares how to give a healing apology to repair damage, build trust, and strengthen connection.

#### **'The Steps'**

**In Part Two, The 'Steps', readers** learn how to love, learn, grow and relate through the eight different stages of parenthood today. There are eight chapters that represent each of the eight steps. Steps 1) Prepare

**What happens during the next few years?** Steps 3 – 8 deal with the passage into parenthood today and are entitled: 3) Manage Expectations; 4) Know Your Family's Needs; 5) Expand Emotional Intelligence; 6) Welcome Your Parent Self (and Your Partner's); 7) Grow Together Through Differences; 8) Connect and Reconnect Through Intimacy. These processes may, at times, require careful, deliberate thinking, feeling and doing; yet, at other times, things may shift or happen more spontaneously or unexpectedly. Taylor helps prepare, guide, and support the reader for the adventures of parenthood and offers over 200 examples of common challenges of parenthood.

The chapters in Part Two include what Taylor calls ‘seeds’ and ‘ways to grow.’ Taylor helps readers plant seeds or develop new skills or ways of thinking, which is followed by guidance and direction to cultivate these new steps forward. As a new parent, I thought this section was organized to appeal to people like me with hardly any time to engage in self-care practices like reading a book. There are heading and labels for important points to help the reader focus.

### ‘Extra Support’

In part three, Taylor addresses birth trauma, grief, anxiety, and depression in addition to affairs, addiction, and abuse. These are issues that bring individuals, couples, and families into therapy and when untreated lead to a whole array of issues. Taylor offers hope in healing and growing from these challenges.

### Personal Reflection

While I was reading Taylor’s book for this review, my then ten-month-old daughter was climbing all over me and pulling herself up to stand by using my knees for support. I felt Taylor’s words speak to me, as if she were a dear companion on my journey of motherhood from the onset. Taylor knew all about what I experienced during the newborn phase from breastfeeding to a messy house. What shocked me the most was Taylor seemed to know what this meant for my partnership, as we were experiencing the changes both together as one and separately as individuals. It is no wonder that Taylor is an expert and well-seasoned clinician whose work focuses on transforming couple’s experiences during the critical period between pregnancy and parenting. I was lucky that SPT’s editor, Nancy Eichhorn, PhD asked me to review *Becoming Us: 8 Steps to Grow a Family that Thrives!* I doubt I would have known about it otherwise. I hope you find my review a small representation of how informative and formative *Becoming Us: 8 Steps to Grow a Family that Thrives* is.

**Dawn Bhat, LMHC** is in private practice in Hicksville, NY. She holds graduate degrees in General Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Dawn is a National Certified Counselor and a Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT-500). Dawn has been researching somatic psychotherapy under the guidance of Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D. of the USABP since 2010 and has presented scholarly papers and professional workshops regionally, nationally and internationally. Feel free to contact her: [www.dawnbhat.com](http://www.dawnbhat.com)

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