

Why do we need a Gentle Beginning?

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Some excerpts from Gentle Birth Choices

Human birth is the most miraculous, transformational, and mysterious event of our lives. It is an event shared by every single member of the human race. The birth experience imprints itself indelibly upon the lives of the mother and the baby she is bringing forth.

In recent centuries, humans began to explore and experiment with science and the development of high technology. A combination of natural human characteristics such as curiosity, a desire to control, fear of that which seems beyond human control, and concentrated focus upon the application of technology, has crept into and diverted cultural perspective and respect for the sacredness of the birth experience. The result of this technological focus and experimentation is apparent within the dominant cultures, in the form of entire populations sharing high levels of stress, fear, and emotional dysfunction.

The Industrial Revolution in America accelerated a trend for exploration in managing birth. Lifestyles changed, cities became quickly crowded without immediate understanding of disease control. Maternal and infant mortality rates climbed and hospitals were erroneously seen as a new and safer place for all to give birth, rather than homes. Driven by the competition of the free market, a strong emphasis was placed on themes of independence. It was believed that fostering close emotional ties between mothers and babies would foster dependency, and unproductive people. John Watson, a well known behaviorist in his time, led a convincing campaign for teaching new parenting theory, suited to American progress in the late 1920's. He strongly discouraged holding babies, kissing or touching babies or children. He encouraged parents to ignore the cries of their babies in order to regiment sleep and feeding schedules, and in order to prevent mothers from becoming "slaves" to demanding children forever.

Western culture has begun to acknowledge that this way of parenting is not ideal. Slowly, we are beginning to recognize the severe consequences of such practices. Scientific research on brain development is leading us back to the realization that we have been blind to essential components of birth which profoundly influence the entire lifetime of those involved. A branch of anthropologic study, now termed ethnopediatrics, has also noted through close to a century of cross - cultural research, that the well being of mothers and their babies reflects the core health and function of the community in general. Mothers and their babies, supported in their early adjustment, bonding and breastfeeding, provide the community with reliable, emotionally secure and productive participants, benefiting all. Westernized culture lost sight of this critical information with the advent of Industrialization. Interestingly, science has begun to rediscover this ancient wisdom, and science is currently the voice most often heard.

Birth, like death, is an innate part of life, unique to the individual, and in most cases does not require the medical interventions and control we have been told is necessary. It is high illusion to imagine that we, as humans, can control this process. To instead show deep respect, awe, and trusting surrender is more appropriate and in alignment with this amazing rite of passage.

Philosophy of Gentle Birth

Gentle Birth does not dictate a list of rules that must be followed. It is an approach to birth that incorporates a woman's individual values and beliefs. Every birth is a powerful experience – sometimes painful, always transformational. Each birth is as unique as the mother and baby experiencing it.

The elements that make up a gentle birth are certainly nothing new or revolutionary. Many have been a part of childbirth for thousands of years. A gentle birth relies on the understanding that labor is a part of a mysterious continuum of physiological events, beginning with conception and continuing well into the first years of life. Mother and baby, inseparable and interdependent, work together as a unit from the fertilization of the egg until weaning from breastfeeding takes place. The resulting bonds created during this period are foundational within those lives.

Pregnancy provides a woman with valuable and heightened awareness of the intangible aspects of herself and of life. Support in accessing her innate wisdom, guidance with education, and modeling of trust, allows her to more easily release previously learned resistance or fear. This facilitates a Gentle Birth experience.

*Nature is already as good as it can be
It cannot be improved upon
He who tries to redesign it, spoils it
He who tries to redirect it, misleads it*

-Lao-tzu

Vision

To recognize, embrace, support the optimal opportunity for a gentle, healthy beginning in life is one of the most intimate, simple and globally healing efforts anyone can engage in. As more people rediscover, appreciate, and implement this approach to entry into life, we can expect that the emerging generation, and generations thereafter will enjoy greater connection to well being as the order of the universe. The prospect of activating and perpetuating increased levels of well being for all can be a source of current inspiration, hope and well being for those who begin to embark on this path. Everyone can benefit.

Essence of a Gentle Birth

A gentle birth takes place when a woman is supported by the people she chooses to be with during this most intimate time. She needs to be loved and nurtured by those around her so she can feel comfortable and secure enough to follow her natural instincts. During a natural, gentle birth a woman feels and senses the power of the birth and uses this energy to transform every part of her own being. A gentle birth is not rushed. The baby emerges at its own pace and in its own time. It is received into the hands of those who love and recognize it as a human being with its own life purpose, only beginning to unfold. Following are suggestions for assisting women to create their own gentle experience.

Key Elements

Preparation

Throughout history women learned to give birth intuitively. They watched their mothers, family members and others in the community give birth as they grew from children to women, ready to carry on the reproductive cycle of life. Familiarity eliminated unnecessary fears and anxieties. They engaged in cultural rituals and information sharing as well as observing and feeling the indescribable. This created a well-rounded inspiring education, ideal for nurturing a spirit/ mind/ body connection.

Due to many decades of technologic experimentation, several generations of mothers in America lost an opportunity to learn about birth intuitively. Indeed, in conjunction with the emergence of the medical establishment, and their discrediting of the value of midwifery, attitudes toward birth changed dramatically. A radical and misguided priority began to govern the treatment of women experiencing reproductive activity. The priorities focused upon creating independent individuals who were driven to thrive in the free market economy. A life embracing perspective had been abandoned in favor of treating symptoms as they appeared, with science being called upon as the only valid method for problem solving in a progressive world. Birth began to be viewed as pathology, and the medical community came to view

themselves as able and responsible for controlling and modifying all pathology. Extensive use of anesthesia, routine and unnecessary interventions, isolation of laboring mothers and separation of mothers and babies, became associated with safe and modern practices. Parents were encouraged to resist showing affection for their children, and directed to show caring through methods which excluded physical touch and contact. Massive and persistent campaigns undermined trust in the body, and promoted transferring all trust to the ultimate authority of the day, physicians. Many American mothers and grandmothers have little memory of any birth experience. By 1955, 95 percent of all American births took place in a hospital with an alluring and fashionable objective of painless and safe birth through anesthesia. When women became coerced into desiring painless birth, they also relinquished their own power to the medical technicians and physicians. Those women who have vague memories of their hospital experiences often tell stories of humiliation, frustration and disempowerment. The concept of joyful birth often seems alien to them as they hear of the changes taking place in recent years. They are amazed to watch their grandchildren begin to view birth differently, from an increasingly empowered perspective. Childbirth educators are needed now to recreate the knowledge previously learned intuitively and through one's own mother or family, to engender current and future generations with the previously lost vital connection to birth.

Educators can help expectant mothers learn about the life process, the design of labor and birth, and how to best nurture good health and a positive and hopeful attitude. They can show pregnant mothers varieties of coping techniques and encourage them to empower themselves by trusting their own choices and preferences. Educators can show families how to access resources gaining useful information and the knowledge of available alternatives. Educators can provide a theoretical "new image" mirror to hold up to an expectant mother and point out what has always been there but not previously noticed. Educators can encourage women to internally assess how she feels about her sexuality, her relationship with the father, her relationship with her own parents and any other beliefs surrounding birth which she might hold.

When a pregnant mother encounters supportive, informed guidance, she will be able to develop self esteem and confidence. When a pregnant mother has had time to prepare herself emotionally, it will be easier for her to surrender any resistance in her birthing process. Previously confusing topics will become clearer for her. She will be able to more clearly define her own preferences within this context. This will lead to planning, greater understanding and a feeling of preparation. Preparation replaces anxiety and fear with focus, direction and greater calm. Research has clearly demonstrated that childbirth education has a powerful and beneficial influence upon the unfolding of a laboring experience and birth.

A Reassuring Environment

A laboring woman has 8 times more oxytocin receptors occurring in her body than at any other time in her life. This combined with endorphins, provides her with a natural aid to enhance her labor and bonding experience. When she is comfortable, distraction-free, and believes herself to be in a safe environment, she is able to access the primal nature of her hindbrain, which will lead her through the process. Laboring and birth are a parasympathetic experience. Comparatively, the sympathetic experience is associated with the "fight or flight" response and increased catecholamine production. Catecholamines such as epinephrine and norepinephrine, will both undermine the effects of and stop production of the oxytocin and endorphins needed to help with labor.

In the parasympathetic mode, the dark, quiet environment will help a woman to feel safe and to access her instinctive nature more easily. She will tend to conserve energy more efficiently, influencing the duration of her labor. For her to be soothed during and between contractions, in whatever way appeals to her, will allow her to maintain this complex physiologic state. This in turn will be conveyed to the infant during the labor as well as at birth. The infant relies on its mother's reactions to labor and birth as an indicator of its own safety. Even in a case where a mother chooses to labor vocally and with loud sounds, the infant can still sense the difference between a mother having chosen to follow her instinctual pattern and a mother who is panicky and afraid. That mother and baby are a team, working through this transformation together, by intention, reduces infant stress and allows for easier bonding and normal physiologic process.

Additionally, the assignment of each unique birth to a standardized arbitrary schedule is antithetical to the process, undermines trust, and creates stress in a laboring woman, pulling her out of her hind brain to try to function in a mode which does not serve her as well.

Using **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** we have a simple template from which to understand and remember the importance of support for a laboring woman and new mother.

The pyramid is divided into 5 spaces horizontally. At the base of the triangle is the core element of **physiologic** needs. This translates to assuring that mother is rested, fed, hydrated, and in a comfortable temperature environment.

The next space is assigned the category of **safety and security**. Here we provide the reassuring environment, so she need not worry about her safety, and can allow herself to focus completely upon the laboring process.

The next category addresses **love and belonging**. Being surrounded by people who care and who love her, facilitates the production of hormones needed to progress.

The top remaining categories are next, **self esteem**, the confidence gained with help in the 3 previous categories, and at the top, **self actualization**, the achievement of her goal, having the entirety of a supportive foundation beneath her.

Freedom of Movement

A pervasive myth, centuries old but more actively perpetuated in recent decades, is that a laboring mother should be in bed. Restriction of a laboring woman's freedom of movement during labor is not conducive to progress at all. Women need to be able to choose every position they get into as a direct response to subtle instinctive communication between she and her infant during labor and birth. Just as a woman will get an urge to eat or to sleep, she will get urges to take certain positions which will bring her better comfort and coincidentally allow the baby to reposition itself as it moves down and out. Baby will tend to take the path of least resistance in its rotation down and out. It is important for mother to put as little continuous pressure on the moveable portions of pelvis (such as laying continuously in bed) as possible so that baby has opportunity to position optimally for birth. Further, gravity can be a wonderful advantage in bringing baby down.

In addition to allowing optimal space for baby to move down and through the pelvis, freedom of movement also allows for better maternal circulation, which will help her muscles work more efficiently. Freedom of movement also is effective as a coping technique, thus tending to enhance maternal perception of empowerment.

Quiet

A hushed and quiet atmosphere for laboring can be helpful in reducing infant stress as it goes through the journey of birth. It supports the parasympathetic state of instinctual coping and processing. For those attending to mother, quiet conveys a gentle respect for the intricate interaction of hormones which help to progress labor and also facilitate bonding for mother and baby. Quiet also maintains gentle regard for the heightened sensitivity and sensorial invasion a newborn encounters once born. Even if a mother chooses to make her own higher volume sounds, if she is purposely choosing to express, and chooses tones in

the lower octaves rather than high, the baby will sense that she is not panicked.

Low Light

Another key to maintaining the calm of parasympathetic state is low lighting. Newborns have been primarily in the dark during gestation. During the birth process, low light provides the most comfortable environment for mother and child. Low light creates a relaxing and private atmosphere in which a special, intimate event can take place. A room lit with natural light, candles, or very low wattage electric light provides an ideal ambience for a laboring woman. After the birth, the child's eyes are spared from bright lights. The most amazing thing has been witnessed in darkened birthing rooms: Newborn babies almost immediately open their eyes and begin to gaze at their mothers. Gazing into the eyes of your newly emerged child, who seems peaceful and present, is an unforgettable moment.

Continuous Labor Support

The benefits of an experienced, caring, supportive person whom the mother trusts, have now been well documented by Dr. Marshall Klaus and his co-researchers. In their scientific study they were able to determine that the difference in labor outcome, between mother being alone, and mother being supported, was highly significant. In the three control groups, the mothers who were left alone to labor had the most incidence of poor outcome, and of negative perception of the labor and birth experience. Mothers with a person sitting in the room continuously, without otherwise interacting, had much better outcomes and perceptions. The mothers who were given continuous interactive labor support showed the highest statistical difference in outcome and perception. These mothers had 50% fewer surgical births, requested painkilling medication 60% less often than the others, and also had much lower incidence of interventions such as forceps or vacuum deliveries.

Regardless of the amount of intellectual training a woman has, the intensity of labor, and the newness of physiologic responses she likely never before encountered will tend to surprise her and shake her confidence. It is at those moments, that the loving care of a trusted companion or several, will be most appreciated. Their reassurance that all is well and progressing, the physical care they can provide, and reflection to her of the marvel of how she is coping will be useful.

Labor Starts on Its Own

Nature has always had its own pace and series of cycles. In all living things, there is a time of increase and a time of decrease. A time of growing, a peak, and a decline, even as a cycle within a larger cycle. Fruit ripens and falls from a tree. Trees shed their leaves and have new growth. It is logical to trust that the design of a healthy human gestation follows the same principles. Prior to the time when technology and pharmaceuticals were so pervasively used in birth, healthy babies came when the critical balance of complex processes reached a point which initiated labor. They gestate as long as they need to and then come into the world.

The well known unfolding of events such as head engagement, preparatory contractions, a softening cervix, greater maternal hip joint laxity, to name a few, during the final weeks of pregnancy illustrate the wisdom of biologic design. Despite extensive research and technology, there remains deep mystery surrounding exactly what takes place in this process. It is still difficult to determine the moment of conception definitively, and still difficult to predetermine the perfect moment when labor will start. The methods used for determining due dates are more accurately termed "educated approximations" based upon usually incomplete information. Only 15% of women have a 28 day menstrual cycle, yet the conventional methods in use today are based upon an assumption of a 28 day cycle. Therefore, an induction of labor is based upon considerable guesswork. Induction as a common occurrence (36%) in America, has created ample opportunities for research. This research has shown us that to artificially initiate labor for any but the most critical medical reasons, is to create an unnecessary and potentially serious risk to mother and baby.

The First Breath

At the moment a child takes its first breath, fetal circulation is quickly altered to infant circulation. While the changing values will be effective in a healthy newborn, it takes time for them to adjust to this new way of existence. It will take time for the new pathways to become permanent. The newborn must adjust to breathing at a different rate, heart rate slowing slightly, and it must adjust to the multitude of powerful new sensations it is encountering, including the sensation of cold air entering its lungs.

A gentle birth supports the new found discovery that normal newborns do not need immediate invasive suctioning and vigorous wiping and rubbing to begin breathing. These practices, as protocols, can be scary to the newborn. The newborn senses there is fear behind those practices, a sense of urgency, a fear of losing control, fear of the loss of life if immediate aggressive action is not taken. These attitudes, however well intended, do not convey the needed sense of welcoming and are not at all gentle.

The First Caresses

An unhurried and undisturbed interaction between mother and baby is one of the most pinnacle moments in the new life of the child. The feel of skin to skin contact, being held, soothed, welcomed have a powerful calming effect on the newborn. Touching and massaging the newborn is beneficial for both mother and baby. The mothers instinctual reaction is to smell and lightly touch the baby with her fingertips. In a gentle birth the mother is asked to determine the sex of her baby by either looking or feeling under the warm blankets. Within the first few moments of birth the mothers body will experience the an enduring bliss which facilitates a flood of emotional bonding, protection and love.

How a baby is received and how it experiences these first few moments of life is utterly important and permanently imprinted upon its memory. Baby is born with a genetic encoding, a preprogrammed expectation, which activates certain areas of its brain and nervous system as it encounters its mothers left breast. Mothers throughout all cultures and geographic locations instinctively cradle their babies in this position where the baby is in contact with her heart rhythm.

The Baby at the Breast

An extension of this wise and ancient biologic design is for the baby to begin sucking on mother's breast within moments after birth. The baby will provide many cues indicating that it is ready to breastfeed when it is born awake and alert with access to its mother. If the baby is not put to the breast within the first hour after birth, she may lapse into a drowsy state that can continue for up to twenty-four hours, making nursing thereafter more difficult. For early nursing to develop easily, the baby's senses must be stimulated to function fully. In a gentle birth, the mother and child are free to communicate with each other without inhibitions.

Not only does this provide increased emotional comfort for the baby, but the stimulation of the mothers nipple causes release of increased oxytocin which will create beneficial uterine contractions. These contractions will work to help expel the placenta and close off blood vessels in the uterus, thus preventing extensive loss of blood. The colostrum extracted by the baby from the breast will populate the infant gastrointestinal tract with beneficial bacteria suited to enhancing digestion, protect the infant with all the antibodies developed by the mother, and provide the infant with a high protein snack. The proximity of the infant to mother when nursing is also a part of the design in that infant vision is clear enough to be able to see it's mothers face from this position.

Bonding and Attachment

One of the most telling examples of the importance of bonding and attachment practices is to look at

American culture today reflecting a time when these critical issues were completely misunderstood and overlooked for close to a century. The psychological health of a great many Americans in recent history is in need of much therapy. In a gentle birth the child is not suddenly taken away from her parents to be weighed, measured, and cleaned far from her mother, who is the only safe and familiar person in the world to her. There is no reason or justification for such a practice. In a gentle birth the mother is awake and aware, highly conscious, energized by having given birth, and extremely eager to spend time with her child—touching, feeling, resting or sleeping together. The newborn needs and wants to comforting presence of its mother, her warmth, touch, sound and smell. After a gentle birth most mothers experience an incredible exhilaration that helps them to overcome their exhaustion.

A baby controls himself by attuning to his mother. The mother must be physically present and emotionally available for the baby to be able to interpret where he is in the world. The baby who receives gentle attention from its mother and is in attunement with his mother is secure in his knowing, and can more easily trust that his birth has happened for good reasons. The first hours and days after birth are extremely important ones; they can deeply affect the future relationship between mother and parents. Time spent together and alone at this time (and continued through early childhood) will lay the foundation for its entire future of emotional health.