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Personal Perspective

Seeking an Alternative Baseline for Birth

Darcia Narváez

ABSTRACT

Birth is a spiritual experience for mother and baby. Women need information and psychological preparation before birth, and a knowledgeable companion during birth. Unless medical intervention is needed, medical personnel should step back and stay out of the way.

Too often we treat babies like plants, as if they don't feel much and are not affected by their early experience. We have hardly studied the effects of birth practices but we know a few things: that early pain leaves lasting sensitivity to pain, that trauma leads to hypervigilance and stress reactivity; that separation from mother leads to dysregulation.

Childbirth practices have moved far away from what is ideal for babies and mothers, raising ethical questions. Is it ethical to induce labor when due dates are guesses? As Thomas Insel, MD, Director of the National Institutes of Mental Health pointed out, artificial oxytocin may be having adverse effects that are unstudied,¹ and it turns out that the rise in autism parallels the rise in use of artificial oxytocin.²

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Is it ethical to reduce the use of doulas in hospital births because it decreases the need for c-sections, lowering the profits of anesthesiologists? Is it ethical to perform procedures on mothers and babies without full informed consent? For example, mothers need to know that epidural drugs can have detrimental effects on breast feeding success and bonding. Is it ethical to endorse infant circumcision as the American Academy of Pediatrics has done,³ even though there are no certain positives for infants but known harms?

Can we shift away from medicalized birth to an alternative baseline for childbirth? To do this, medical personnel in training need to experience natural births, births with no medical interventions where the mother's experience is ecstatic. Even watching a film like *Birth as We Know It*⁴ may expand imagination about what birth can be like. When done right, birth is a spiritual experience filled with mystery and wonder in which mother and baby get in touch with a wider reality.

How can we make most birth experiences transcendent for mom and baby?

First, medical personnel and mothers themselves need to understand that moms are not machines and babies are not products. Child birth is a relationship, a process between mother and child.

Medical personnel should try as much as possible to stay out of the way. Each birth is unique with its own timing and pace as the relationship between mom and baby shifts from body-in-body to body-on-body. In some countries (for example, Israel⁵), after the water breaks, mothers have 48 hours without interference to have a natural birth.

Second, mothers need the chance to be in charge of the event, trusting their body signals and not being treated like they have to be rescued from themselves. Of course, mothers need to be prepared for the experience. This involves not only information about childbirth options and likelihoods, but psychological preparation. They need to learn ahead of time that they can “let go” and let nature take charge. This may require working through issues of trusting body signals and letting go of resentment of their own early trauma.

Third, mothers need support, doula support. Having a knowledgeable companion who supports the mother through the experience is priceless and leads to fewer medical interventions. But again, the mother should be in charge and be allowed to keep her power.

All mammals provide an evolved developmental niche or system for their young that facilitates optimal development. For humans it includes no pain beyond labor, constant touch, responsiveness to needs, companionship care. We know these things build a good brain. Human infants are born with only 25 percent of their brains developed. Brain development occurs rapidly. At its maximum, a young child’s brain is creating two million synapses per second. Human baby brains likely will generate many more synapses and intelligence if they are supported in the ways they evolved to expect.⁶ One expectation is on-demand breastmilk. Neonates have small stomachs and so need to eat frequently and not too much. Breastmilk has thousands of ingredients facilitating healthy development. In my view, infant formula, although necessary in emergencies, is a form of starvation diet, otherwise since it gives babies hardly anything they need to build a strong body, brain, and mind. Everyone—professionals, mothers, families—need training about infant needs and breastfeeding.⁷

Babies deserve to be born in a loving environment where the mother feels energized and welcoming. Adults should be ashamed if they are providing anything less. We must remember that birth is the baby’s entry into the world that will leave lasting (implicit, subconscious) impressions of the nature of the world (friendly or dangerous), of people (welcoming or hurtful), of relationships (kind or mean).

Which type of world view, trusting or suspicious, would you like your fellow citizens to have?

NOTES

1. T.J. Insel, “A neurobiological basis of social attachment,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 154, no. 6 (1997): 726-35.

2. S.G. Gregory et al., “Association of Autism With Induced or Augmented Childbirth in North Carolina Birth Record (1990-1998) and Education Research (1997-2007) Databases,” *JAMA Pediatrics* (12 August 2013): DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2013.2904.

3. “From the American Academy of Pediatrics: Policy Statement: Circumcision Policy Statement,” *Pediatrics* 130, no. 3 (1 September 2012): 585-6 (doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-1989), <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/3/585>, 19 August 2013.

4. E. Vladimova, *Birth As We Know It* (Chico, Calif.: Birth Into Being, 2006), video, birthintobeing.com, accessed 19 August 2013.

5. Author’s personal communication with an Israeli mother.

6. Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, “Brain development: Frequently asked questions,” 2009, www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_brainFAQ, accessed 13 September 2013.

7. See extensive references in a group of posts on breastfeeding, starting with this one (with links to others): <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/moral-landscapes/201108/your-assumptions-about-infant-formula-are-probably-wrong>, accessed 13 September 2013.