

# Everybody's Birth Book



What REALLY Works

Compiled by Vicki Elson

January 2013 Edition



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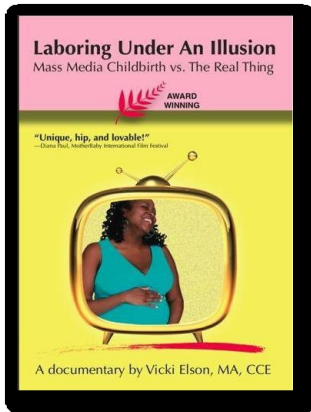
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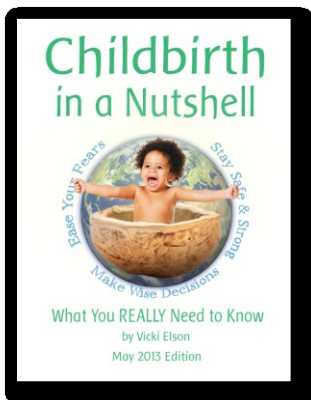
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Hi! My name is [Vicki](#).

For 30 years, my work has been focused on helping pregnant people to have safe and satisfying births, and happy experiences as new parents. I've been teaching classes, doing labor support, training childbirth educators, writing, and filmmaking.

Like most childbirth professionals, I distill what I was taught, what I've read, what I've learned from conferences and colleagues, what I've learned over the years from my students, and what worked for me personally.

**But in the back of my mind, I've always wondered: what REALLY works for most laboring mothers? So I decided to ask.**

My questionnaire doesn't ask yes-or-no questions like "Did squatting help you during labor?" The questions are wide open, like: "What really worked?" "What surprised you?" "What do you wish you had known?" That makes it harder to tally the answers, but it makes plenty of room for honesty and candor.

Mothers report what they remember as the very most helpful stuff -- some of them decades later. Most of us remember our birth experiences vividly, whether they were terrific or traumatic. We think about them often. **See page 45 to add your story to the survey! This book will evolve to reflect the experiences of more of us.**

I was impressed by the wide variety, with many pairs of opposites, like "I loved sunlight and silence!" vs. "I loved darkness and making noise!" But you will also see that **love, water, and movement** are so helpful that they're almost universal.

Special thanks to all the insightful mothers who shared their experiences, to all the beautiful people in the pictures, and to Hannah Fuller Boswell, Danielle Dickey, Sol Heifets, Erika Laquer, Liz Solomon and Pam Stone for editorial assistance!

COMING SOON: ***Childbirth in a Nutshell*** will be another free downloadable book, full of information and worksheets on birth planning, fear-busting, coping with labor, postpartum thriving, and raising awesome kids. Plus: how to stay married/partnered/in love! Also, one day, there will be a **film version of this book** and **paperback editions** of both books. [Sign up](#) for our occasional newsletter and we'll keep you posted.

***Best wishes to you and yours!***



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# We are 248 World Wide Women



*We are all ages.  
Some of us gave birth vaginally,  
with and without drugs or anesthesia,  
some by cesarean.*

*Some of us gave birth in hospitals,  
some at home, and one in the car.*

*Some of us breastfed our babies,  
some of us bottle-fed.*

*Some of us are married, some single,  
some partnered with men,  
some partnered with women.*

*Some of us are raising our children,  
some of our children are being raised by others,  
some of us have grown-up children,  
some of us have grandchildren or  
great-grandchildren.*

*So far, we come from 7  
different countries.*

*But we want to include  
the experiences of  
thousands of mothers,  
from dozens of countries.*

*Join us! Tell **your** story  
[here](#).*



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# *What REALLY Helped Us During Labor*



1. **Labor support** (basically, loving kindness) made all the difference in the world. What helped most of us more than anything was gentle, respectful care from our spouses, partners, friends, relatives, midwives, doctors,

nurses, and/or doulas (labor support professionals). They didn't have magical powers – just love, massage, and encouragement.

2. Next came...**being in warm water**. A bath or shower really helped a bunch of us.



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3. A whole lot of us loved **moving** freely, like walking, dancing, rocking, swaying our hips, climbing stairs, even crawling. Our labor support people often helped keep us moving.



4. And loads of us loved to try **different positions**, like squatting, hands-and-knees, kneeling, standing, sitting on a big rubber “birth ball” (above right), being on all fours with our upper bodies on a birth ball or other furniture, leaning over, side-lying, pulling or hanging on a cloth hung from the ceiling. Several of us loved sitting on the toilet – we hate to tell you this, but birth really does have a lot in common with pooping.

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5. Lots of us felt good when we made a lot of noise. Moaning, chanting, humming, screaming, yelling, swearing, singing, roaring, oh, ah, and that thing that horses do with their lips.

6. As noisy as lot of us were, some of us liked solitude. We just wanted to be left alone and not told what to do.

7. But we appreciated being **reassured** that everything was fine, since labor is so intense, and so unlike anything else.

8. Anything that helped us **loosen our muscles** was great. Relaxing reduced both pain and fear.

9. A number of us loved **counter-pressure**: somebody pressing really hard on our lower backs or upper buttocks.

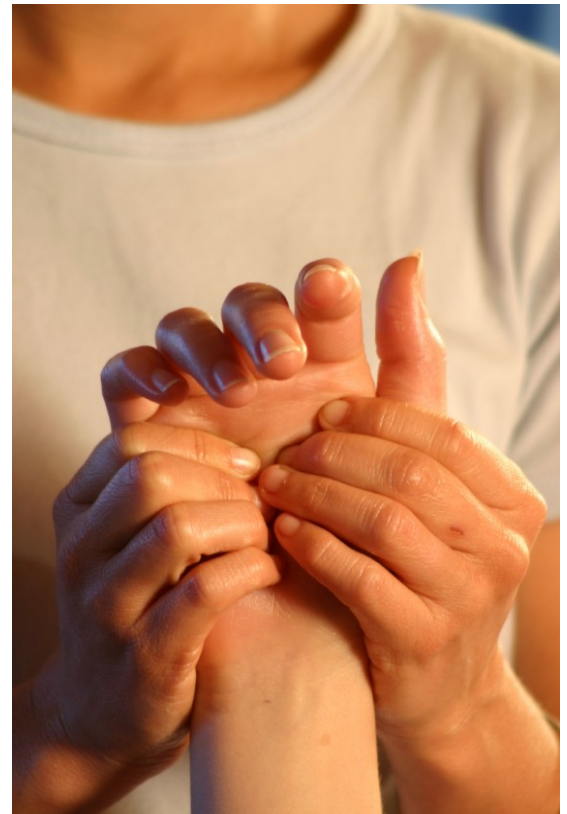
10. Focused **breathing** is a famous labor technique that many of us liked, though toward the end of labor it wasn't always enough.

11. We did best when we kept a **positive attitude** of confidence, intention, determination.

12. A lot of us just decided to stop fighting it and **surrender** to labor, and then it felt easier, even if physically it got harder.

13. A lot of us were amazed by our **intuition and instincts**. How smart we were when we trusted ourselves and listened to our bodies!

14. Many of us prepared for birth by **learning** as much as we could from classes and books. We were inspired by great birth stories and videos. We liked understanding what was going on in our bodies, and we were inspired by other brave, strong moms.



15. Some of us were deeply grateful for epidural anesthesia, cesarean section, pain medications like Stadol, and other **medical interventions**.

16. Those of us who made **informed decisions** about medical interventions are a lot happier than those of us who felt like our doctors or midwives didn't respect our dignity, our decisions, our capabilities, or our wishes.

17. Some of us were glad we stayed **home** for a large part of labor, or even the whole thing (typically, with skilled midwives to keep us safe).

18. Some of us depended on our **spiritual** selves. We prayed or meditated or worked on staying in the present moment.

19. Some of us thought about the many **generations** of mothers who have come before us: if they can do it, so can we! We appreciate them more now.

20. Some of us got in touch with our **wild animal** nature. One of us roared "like a cave woman," and it was great.

21. We also loved **massage** and self-massage, although some of us found that at times we didn't want to be touched at all.

22. Some of us liked **heat** or **ice**, **darkness** or **sunshine**.

23. Some of us loved listening to **music**. Jazz, classical, mellow, or peppy!



24. Last but not least, some of us repeated **mantras** over and over:

*If Mum did it, anyone can!*

*My baby's size is perfect for my body.  
We birth easily.*

*Breathe in peace, Breathe out baby.  
Breathe in breath, Breathe out baby.*

*The only way out is through.*

*Oooooooooopennnnnnnnn...*

*Sweet Jesus, help me!*

*One more contraction.  
You just have to make it through this one.*

***This*** is happening, ***now***.  
(attention to this moment instead of “what’s next?”)

*Melt your face, melt your mouth,  
melt your shoulders, melt your hands.*

*I loooooove you! Come on, baby!*

*Yeah! (“Yeeeeaaaaahhhhhhh!”)*

*Okay, body, do your good work.*

*I’m doing it!*

*Baby. Out.*

*Keep the energy moving!*

[to the baby:] ***Run for the light!***



# What Surprised Us

1. A lot of us were surprised by the **pain**, intensity, or power of birth.
2. A lot of us were surprised that there was **less pain** than we expected, that birth was easier or more bearable than we thought it would be.



3. A lot of us were surprised to discover how **strong**, fearless, and powerful we are, and how well we handled the pain.
4. A lot of us were surprised at how **beautiful**, calm, mellow, peaceful, or even glorious our labors were. The “hormone high” is real.
5. Some of us were surprised at **how long** our labors were.
6. More of us were surprised at **how fast** our babies were born.
7. Some of us took a long time to **realize** that labor was really happening.
8. Some of us were surprised how **suddenly** labor came on.
9. Several of us were surprised that **different** babies had different births, even with the same mom.
10. Some of us were amazed at how **our bodies just took over**.
11. Some of us were surprised by the **location** of the pain: deep inside the “bowl” of the pelvis for some, low in the back for others.
12. Some of us were surprised at how **noisy** we were, and how good that felt.
13. Several of us were surprised that we loved being **alone** and undisturbed, and going to a deep place inside ourselves.

14. Some of us didn't like feeling so **public** at such a private time, with our private places exposed and people expecting us to "perform." (And some of us were surprised that we didn't care.)

15. Lots of us were surprised by how good it felt to **move** around.

16. Some of us were surprised by how **instinctual** and primal we felt.

17. Some of us were surprised that we **didn't** feel that way at all.

18. Some of us were surprised that we had **no control** over what our bodies were doing.

19. Some of us were surprised that we were still **in control**, and still ourselves, throughout labor. Even some of us with epidurals agree.

20. Some of us were surprised to have **cesareans** we probably didn't need.

21. Some of us were surprised that our **care providers** were disrespectful, controlling, rushed, or unhelpful. We advise that you choose midwives, doctors, and hospitals with care, and stand up for what you want.

22. Some of us were surprised that the hospital staff were so **helpful**, kind, supportive, and wonderful.

23. Some of us were surprised by **problems** with the epidural: it took several tries to get it set up, it gave incomplete relief, it didn't work, our legs were numb, it made it harder to push. Some of us were surprised that we could still feel pressure and tugging during cesarean birth.

24. Some of us were surprised by **emotions**: fearlessness, vulnerability, humility.



25. Some of us were surprised by **sensations**: hips opening, sweating, shaking, slimy gooey grossness, nausea/vomiting, the intensity of transition, feeling like our insides might fall out, the brief “ring of fire” when the baby crowned, or like we were pooping the baby out.
26. Some of us were surprised that we actually were **pooping** as the baby was being born. (That’s common, and it’s no big deal to care providers. So don’t worry about it, and for heaven’s sake, don’t tighten up to try to prevent it, or you’ll make it harder for the baby to come out!)
27. Some of us were surprised that we needed **cesareans**, despite our best efforts.
28. Some of us were surprised at how **lovely** cesarean birth can be.
29. A few of us were surprised that our babies came out **unexpectedly** at home, or in the car! (Everybody’s just fine.)
30. A few of us were surprised by birth **smells** (strong) or baby smells (divine).
31. Some of us were surprised postpartum by how **hard** it was physically or emotionally.
32. Some of us were surprised postpartum by how **easy** and awesome it was.
33. Some of us were surprised how **hard** it was to breastfeed.
34. Some of us were surprised how **easy** and fun it was to breastfeed.
35. Some of us were surprised by how **detached** or exhausted we felt when our babies finally came out. (It got better later on.)
36. Some of us were surprised by the intensity of the **love** we felt for our babies.

...and...

37. And a few of us were shocked at how soon we wanted to do it **again!**



# Every Birth Is Different

“First birth: I had to walk or stand, rocking and swaying. I hated the tub. Second birth: The only thing that worked was sitting upright in the tub and vocalizing. I hated standing up. Go figure.”

“With my first, I was surprised how much it hurt. With my second, I was surprised that it didn’t hurt at all!”

“I’m so sick of the ‘Mommy Wars.’

We’re all in this together. All of us make choices based on what we have access to, what our culture says is ‘right,’ and whatever personal experiences we’ve had. We’re all different, and we’re all the same – we’re all trying to do our best for ourselves and our children, during the really intense time of labor, and then through the long slog of raising kids. I don’t want to hear anybody judging anybody else ever again.”



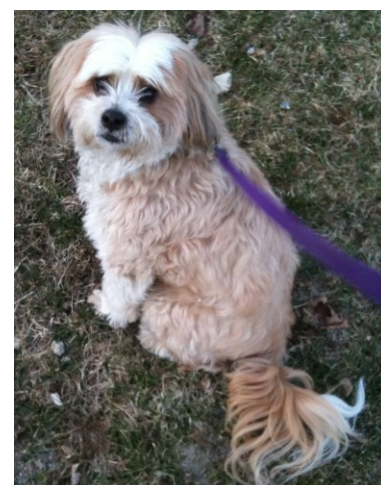
“I had an emergency c-section. It changed everything about how I approached the next delivery. That one was calm, serene, and wonderful, with my husband and my older children participating. Because of my experiences, I

became a doula and now I’m studying to be a labor and delivery nurse and someday a midwife.”

“There is not a one-size-fits-all solution. I

have five children. Each labor was completely different. The only constant was going with my instincts and staying flexible.”

“Every baby was a pound bigger than the one before. So I stopped having babies and got a puppy.”



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# *We Are So Strong!*

“I could have done ANYTHING after I gave birth. I was invigorated and confident. It was the most amazing thing I have ever felt.”

“I found out exactly what I am capable of. All my walls and coping mechanisms were stripped from me. I found out that who I am at my very core is enough. I definitely feel able to handle the tough times of motherhood easier by looking back on my birth. I remember that I can just breathe, and I can do anything from that place deep inside me. I am more confident that who I am and what I believe are valid and worthy.”

“It was hard work, it was painful, but I was not suffering.”

“For a while, after my unexpected cesarean, I felt like my body had failed. Now I am happy at how things worked out. I’m wiser. I understand that the body is fallible and life is unpredictable. I have strength and pride because I tried my hardest but I kept a level head about what was best and safest for me and the baby. I’m a more rational mother and a better decision-maker all around.”



“I constantly think about the amazing day that turned me into not just a mother, but a stronger woman. If labor weren’t hard, and our babies were just handed to us on a silver platter, I don’t think we’d appreciate them quite so much.”

“Labor was my first absolute test of putting my baby’s well-being before my own. It was my first sense of motherly empowerment to give my child the safest birth possible. It wasn’t the birth I wanted, but it was what the baby needed. It taught me to be selfless.”

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“Positive birth experiences have permanently increased my self-esteem, and helped heal old wounds from abuse. I know it doesn’t work this way for everybody, but for me, it was a breakthrough.”

“As a young mother, the empowering experience of birth really helped me with the transition from ‘pregnant woman’ (which I loved) to ‘mom’ (which terrified me).”

**“I had a VBAC. I am a powerful mama who could have thrown a dryer across the room! I feel like a superhero.”**



“It was 18 years ago and I remember it with awe. I would stand before a bullet or a bear to protect my children. I honor my own mother every day.”

“I can never in my life say ‘I can’t’ again. Whenever I start to think it, I remind myself of what I was able to accomplish and I am rejuvenated.”

**“It was our first real bonding experience as a family. It showed me that I could really rely on my partner for unconditional support and that we could work together as a team. It also made me feel more connected with my body.”**

“I was amazed by how strong I was. How strong I AM. I didn’t think I could push a baby out of my vagina. No way, no how. Never really wanted to. I was scared to death about birth. It was awesome, amazing, wonderful, painful, horrible, gross, beautiful birth reality. Natural unmedicated childbirth is amazing. I did it! I never thought I could. But I did it! And I’d do it again. Childbirth changed my life. Having a cesarean changed my life. Having a VBAC [vaginal birth after cesarean] changed my life.”







“Not orgasmic, but definitely brilliant.”

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# How Long Is Labor?



*“I was surprised how long it took me! And how powerful it made me feel!”*

“No one rushed me.”

“I was totally unable to judge how close I was to birth from my contractions. I thought it was very close. Two days later, when I finally felt the urge to push, it was a complete surprise.”

“My first labor was 48 hours. The second was one hour, and the third was 28 minutes. That was pretty surprising.”

“My labors were all over the place -- 30 hours, 5 hours. But now I get it – my kids are all different, too, like chocolate, vanilla, and pistachio.”

“My daughter is a goddess. But as you can imagine, she made a lot of noise pushing out her 11-pound son in 9 minutes. Big sister Charlotte was sitting in my lap. ‘Sometimes mommies are noisy,’ I told her. ‘Sometimes kids are scared,’ she replied. I said whatever I could think of to reassure her, but then I noticed she wasn’t listening. ‘Are you still scared, Charlotte?’ I asked. ‘No!’ she said. ‘I’m excited! The baby’s popping out!’”

“My third birth went so fast! Two hours total. And that made labor so hard! I really didn’t think I could do it.”

*“Our daughter was born in the front seat of our ‘91 Ford Escort. I had a ‘baby high’ for weeks.”*

# *Labor Support*

“The birthing technique that surprised me was kissing. My husband and I used this during our third birth and it was incredible the difference it made.”

“I loved massage, especially on my back, shoulders, and legs. My partner told me I was beautiful – he held my face in his hands and looked right in my eyes as the contractions surged. He reminded me to ‘ride it like a wave,’ as it rose up and peaked and then I enjoyed the sliding down as it slowly faded away.”

“My doula came in and saw me laboring. She first just kissed my forehead and told me it was going to be okay. It sounds little but it helped a lot. Also she massaged my back.”

“It was ultimately my work to do, but I couldn’t have done it without my partner. She didn’t do anything fancy, just love and encouragement, food and drink, hot and cold washcloths, and reminding me to pee every hour. But without her kindness I would have been a puddle of trouble. She’s calm.”

“My husband was my ‘anchor’ to the real world. I couldn’t have done it without him. He encouraged me, let me rest, and made me work. He held my hands while I rocked on the birth ball for hours, and he pushed on my lower back during every contraction through the night. He walked backward, pulling me along, for hours. He walked the neighborhood with me. And he cried as our kids were born.”



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## *Solitude*



“I didn’t want to be touched or talked to at all. I wanted to be left in my little bubble. I brought all this stuff with me to the hospital to help me relax, and all I wanted was to rock back and forth and be left alone.”

## *Water (Real and Imaginary)*

“Water water water! Being in the complete darkness and silence, in the birthing tub, I was able to relax and float and stop the chatter in my brain.”

“The image of that ‘Hawaii Five-O’ wave when labor got more intense: I was both riding the wave and becoming the wave.”



# Moving Around



“I wanted to be naked and yelling. I ran around my house and yelled!”

“I sat on the toilet with a big basket in front of me so I could lean forward and rest on it between contractions. I stood up and swayed. I held on to the dryer and squatted down. I got in the tub with my husband, looking in his eyes, relaxing on his chest.”

“I kind of danced, moving my hips in big circles to help the baby find her way down through my pelvis.”

“My midwife suggested taking a walk with my partner to speed things along. I said, ‘Seriously, you want me to go out and walk like this?!’ I did it, though, stopping at just about every driveway to have a contraction. This remains a very fond memory: vivid morning sunshine, fresh snow, and S. being with me so closely.”



# Breathing and Vocalizing

“My mom and my mother-in-law taught me Lamaze breathing on the spot and it worked well. They remembered it from when they gave birth to us!”

“It almost didn’t matter what anyone was doing or where I was. What REALLY worked for me was moaning, almost chanting, in a very low tone. I could feel it vibrating low in my uterus and vagina and it helped with the pain. It was just something I did. It wasn’t a decision.”

“I used calming yoga breaths: deep inhale through the nose, long slow exhale through the mouth. Also borrowed from yoga: softening into the pain, whether it’s a voluntary yoga stretch or an involuntary labor contraction.”



“I laughed in labor. I was leaning back on the toilet and I kept accidentally pushing the flush. When I was pushing the baby out, I wasn’t laughing any more, but everybody in the room said ‘YES YOU CAN!’ I pushed him out in 20 minutes.”



“Breathing. Sunshine. Feeling confident.”



# Trust



“I found total trust in my body and in my mothering mind. It was the start of my journey to strength.”

“Each time I started thinking about any of my worries or distractions, I would focus my attention on our baby actively doing her part in our labor. I’d say a mantra out loud, over and over: *Kale knows, Kale knows how to come down. Just stay relaxed and let Kale come down.*”

“Trust. When I was surrounded by people who I trusted and who believed what I was saying, my births were easy.”

“I silently repeated the phrase **‘This feels right, this is what I want’** in my head as if my life depended on it! I was on the brink of giving in to fear as I experienced sensations that were unlike anything else. That phrase kept me focused and able to trust my body and my baby.”

# Surrender

“I just needed to get out of my own way, leave it to God, and hope for the best. I wasn’t actively doing anything except managing the pain. I didn’t know how to push, but he came out anyway.”

“I wanted to be active and doing something the whole time, not trying to lessen the feeling of the contractions, but instead working with them and intensifying them.”

“I think about it often. My birth and my son’s diagnosis both taught me that I have to accept that there is a lot in life that we can’t control, and to be thankful when things turn out ‘okay’ and ‘wonderful.’ As a mother, learning this early on has saved me a lot of frustration.”

**“I let each contraction come as it was. I made every effort not to fight it, because I knew deep down that complaining would make the pain worse. I tried my best to let go and simply surrender.”**

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# Meditation and Visualization

“I did birth art projects and visualization. I did a lot of meditation and really learned to go within myself for strength. These techniques did NOT make my labor better, but they helped me get through 40 hours of back labor.”

“I visualized something I learned in a *Birthing From Within* class: I saw my cervix opening. My cervix was a hurricane, and the os [the cervical opening] was the eye of the hurricane. There was so much power in the hurricane but in the center it was calm. I could stay in the calm center with the powerful surge going on all around me.”

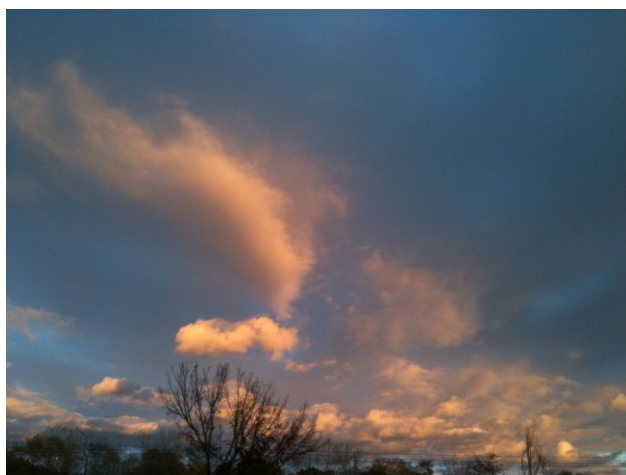
inward. I moved into a world where time was relative and irrelevant, and I simply knew in my entire being that my baby’s birth was happening as it was meant to happen.”

“Visualizing her coming out of me was a pivotal moment in my labor. It was a moment of recognizing my baby’s reality, and a moment of permission – a cue to my body that it was okay to open and receive her into my arms.”



“Calm suffused me when I realized I was in labor. My focus turned

## Relaxation



“Keeping my jaw loose and my groans low – I don’t remember where I learned this but it was the best advice I’ve ever been given!”

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# Pushing

“Transition [the last part of the cervix dilating, just before pushing] was so intense. So much ‘letting go’ is required. No one can prepare you for what labor is, period. Wow. Awesome in the most literal sense – but intense!”

“My body had such a strong urge to push, and I actually said ‘it’s the ring of fire’ as the baby’s head crowned and stretched everything down south. It felt like the biggest BM of my life...it was just rectal pressure and I was not actually sh\*\*\*ing on the table.”

“I didn’t need a nurse or doctor telling me it was time to push. My body sent me a signal that I recognized. Amazing.”

“Pushing didn’t hurt badly, but it was so POWERFUL! I really should have listened to them when they told me not to push when the head was crowning. The brief satisfaction of those last few pushes wasn’t worth walking around like a cowboy for a month afterward.”

“I thought all of my insides were going to come out right with the baby. I thought my vagina would never ever recover. I laugh about it now.”

“I didn’t realize pushing would be such hard work.”

“My husband noticed I was pushing. I hadn’t decided to push. I was still home. I suddenly found that if I simply ‘tightened my middle’ the contractions felt kind of strong-good, instead of painful. When I touched between my legs, there was the crowning head! I guessed I was having my baby at home without help!”

“I had a moment in which I could choose to feel pain or pleasure. I chose pleasure, and so she was born in ecstasy.”





# Preparation and Education

“Ina May Gaskin’s approach to labor worked for me. I sum it up in two steps:

1. Identify and address your fears ahead of time.
2. Buck up and do it.”

“I thought I was ‘prepared’ from my birth class, but everyone really played down how painful it was.”

“I learned in childbirth class that our contractions aren’t to be feared. They won’t be more than we can bear, because they’re our own. They’re coming from our own bodies.”

“I was shocked at how different it was from what I had seen on [TV and in the movies](#). I remember pushing and having flashbacks to ‘A Baby Story’ and thinking there was something wrong with what I was doing! With the next baby, I was wiser and more in tune with the process. Through tremendous relaxation, I had the baby in just under an hour. Knowledge is power – or at least, correct knowledge is!”



“To prepare, I had spent hours and hours reading natural birth stories. It helped me to get inside a laboring woman’s mind. It helped me to not have any fear by giving me a really good picture of what to expect.”

## Medical Care

“I am no longer naïve. I’m very grateful to have the advances of modern obstetrics.”

“I was surprised that the obstetrician on call ruptured my bag of waters and manually turned my son without asking permission. He just went right ahead and did it without consulting me.”

“I was absolutely open to influence. I was told ‘You can do this’ and I did. With the second baby, I was told, ‘Wow, most women have asked for drugs at this point’ so I used meds.”

“My doctor and nurses were great. They encouraged me to try different positions, walk and move around, take a hot shower, turn the lights down low...they truly catered to what I wanted and needed.”



“What really worked for me was making sure I didn’t settle for a care provider I didn’t love.”

“I was incarcerated for selling pot when my baby was born. Most of the nurses were nice to me, but one was pretty judgmental. She didn’t get how hard it was for me to be going back to jail without my baby.”

“My husband’s first three children were born in hospitals, one by cesarean after a failed induction. He thought that out-of-hospital birth was just some hippie idea of mine that would fade. We read *The Thinking Woman’s Guide to a Better Birth* and he started to change his mind. And after he caught our second son at home with midwives helping, he said, ‘Why would anybody have a baby in a hospital?’ I’m sure I needed the freedom to move and eat in labor. I’m studying to become a midwife.”

“I was planning a home birth, but my placenta came loose. My midwives got me to the hospital in time for a lifesaving cesarean.”

“I felt in control being at home, being in my own surroundings, with loving, skilled, nurturing midwives, my partner, and my doula.”

## More Surprises

**“I did not expect to be sitting around in my own goo for 11 hours.”**

“I was inundated with the usual fears from friends, family, books, and the media. But it was surprisingly easy to ignore ALL of that when the time came to hunker down and give birth. Later, I was surprised how uncomfortable people were when I talked about my natural water birth with a midwife.”

**“The f\*\*\*ing pain and the duration...I was shocked at how much I just wanted labor to stop and be done. When she was born, my first thoughts weren't about the baby – I was just purely elated that it was over.”**

“The births of my three children were divine experiences. I only wish I could say the same for parenting.”

“I was surprised that I ended up choosing an epidural and having a cesarean birth. I was surprised at the devastation, sadness, and loss I felt, and how few people understood those feelings.”

**“I was still just me giving birth. Watching videos of women in a trance-like state, I thought it would feel more transcendent, but I was still me doing this amazing thing.”**

“I turned into a different person. I was loud and I didn't care about anyone's feelings or about being polite. I sort of forgot there was a real baby on his way. I was shocked when he was placed on my belly.”

“I had never seen birth before, not even animals, so everything was a surprise. I didn't know what to expect at all. I was 17. I wondered if I was going to die. I tried to keep busy. My grandmother was the village khabla (homebirth midwife) and she arranged a rope from the ceiling rafters for me to pull on. My labor was two hours. My son is now 26. I had 3 more babies with my grandma, and then she died so I had to go to the hospital for my fifth baby. I liked it better at home.”

**“I was surprised by how normal I felt between contractions. These powerful waves would crash over me, and then we'd just resume our conversation!”**

“Breastfeeding with one breast after a mastectomy is no problem. The boob is enormously (literally!) adaptable. It went from an A cup to a Double D and worked like a champ. This was really healing for me after the grief of the mastectomy.”

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“I was amazed how easily I handled the pain and kept a positive attitude no matter what. And how well I accepted the need for the C-section, given that I had looked forward to giving birth my whole life – this was no time to wallow in pain or disappointment. It was very very important to me that I felt I had done everything I could to give birth vaginally.”



“I was surprised how boring early labor was! How I wanted people around, loving me. How much it hurt. How sacred and primal it was. How much it mattered how I was treated during the birth, and how much that affected me postpartum.”

“Nobody in my village had ever had triplets all survive before. I think it’s because all the women took turns massaging them for months, till they grew up big and strong.”

“How wonderful the baby smelled the first time I held him! If I could package that smell I’m sure I’d be rich.”

“I was amazed by how hard it was, and how wonderful it was to have a child when it was over, and how mothering feelings are just there.”

“I was surprised by everything, but especially the fact that I actually gave birth to a gorgeous human being! This left me spiritually high for about 20 years.”

“She came out. I said, ‘Oh, I know YOU!’ She felt so great, all wet and slippery and wiggly and alive against my bare chest. She pooped on me. She peed on me. I still loved her just as much. I can trace my whole adult identity to that moment.”

## What We Wish We Had Known

Many of us felt like we knew **plenty**, or we felt like we were in such good hands with our midwives or doctors that we could just relax and do our work.

*“I enjoyed going into labor with no expectations. The whole thing was a huge learning curve.”*

*“I don’t think it’s an issue of what we know. I think it’s about feeling SAFE to go through the process together, to ask questions, to let down inhibitions.”*

And a lot of us wish we had taken good childbirth **classes**, so we would have had more of an idea what labor would be like, how to make informed decisions and advocate for ourselves, and how to cope by using comfort techniques like focused breathing, self-hypnosis, or deep relaxation.

*“I wish I had known ways to get through the intensity, instead of constantly looking for ways to escape it.”*

*“I was one of those people who said, ‘People have been having babies for millions of years. What are they going to teach ME?’ Boy, was I wrong. Now I preach childbirth education to everyone.”*

*“Our class just focused on hospital compliance and policies. I wish I had known that there were other classes available in town.”*

Some of us wish we had spent more time enjoying true **stories** of normal birth. We wish we hadn’t let people ([or TV](#)) trouble us with their scary stories.

*“I wish I had known that I could touch my baby’s head as she was being born and say ‘Hello.’ I wish I had understood that it’s not a separate experience that’s happening to me, but rather a moment that I was creating with this little one.”*

*“I had all this ‘book knowledge,’ but with the flood of hormones it was all so crazy and overwhelming and wonderful all at once. You have no idea what it’s going to feel like until it happens.”*

A lot of us wish we had dealt with our **fears** and resolved our relationship issues *before* labor, so we would have had more confidence and less to deal with when we were busy working hard.

*“I was deathly afraid of tearing. I didn’t realize that when those tissues are stretched, you can tear a little and not even notice. They gave me numbing medicine for the two little stitches, and some ice, and of course my pretty baby was worth it, and I’m good as new. With my next baby, who was a pound bigger, I didn’t tear at all.”*

*“I didn’t feel safe in my relationship. My partner wasn’t automatically kind to me, but habitually grumpy. We needed to work that out, which we did over the next couple of years, but labor felt lonely and disappointing. I should have had a doula or my mom with me.”*

*“I survived sexual abuse as a young teenager. Years later, that made it hard to ‘relax’ and ‘open up’ giving birth. Those very words triggered memories. I wish I had told my midwife and done some healing work about it.”*



Some of us wish we had learned more about **positions** for labor. We wish we had spent more time upright and working with gravity, and less time lying down.

*“I just laid there in bed like a sick person. Of course my labor was slow! When I finally realized I could get up and dance, everything got more fun.”*



Some of us wish we had studied how the baby's **presentation** (like breech, posterior, or brow first) could affect labor, and what to do about it.

*"I wish I had known that breech babies can be born vaginally with skillful support."*

*"I wish I had known about [optimal fetal positioning](#)."*

Some of us wish we had **asked** for what we needed.

*"With the second baby, I was very vocal about asking for verbal support and encouragement. I should have done that with the first one."*

A lot of us wish we had known that we would be at the **mercy** of our caregivers. We felt vulnerable and sensitive in labor, and we were amazed at what a difference our care providers could make. We wish we had chosen them more carefully. We wish we'd realized that our doctors or midwives might be absent during most of labor.

*"They weren't very willing to talk about what they were doing."*

*"I wish I had known that my obstetrician has a 50% cesarean rate."*

*"Not all medical care is based on science or respect for the normal mammalian process."*



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Some of us wish we had known that it's okay to **question** what's being done to us, to stand up for ourselves, and to say "No" to things that don't make sense. We wish we had insisted on informed consent.

*"I wish I had understood how to go over benefits and risks with my care provider, and what my options really were, and that I had a right to refuse."*

*"I wish I had known how important it is for me to have control over my own body, and to give birth among people who respect that."*

*"I wish I had known that I could refuse to lie on the bed for hours, connected to the machines. Laying down caused problems with my labor and there was no real need for it."*

*"I had a lot of pressure from my mother and mother-in-law to birth without an epidural or pitocin or anything. Their labors were much shorter than mine. I wish I had known not to let people get to me."*

*"I wish I had realized that the doctor, midwife, nurses, and doula are working for ME. I paid them to serve me. It's not their experience, their birth, or their say."*

*"Like a nervous little kid on the first day of school, I waited until someone 'told' me to put the baby to my breast. I should have just done that sooner."*



Some of us wish we'd known that we **really can do it** if we just trust our bodies, let go, and go with the flow.

*"My baby was born in spite of my brain."*

*"I wish I had just stopped worrying and trusted my instincts."*

*"I wish I'd known that when you start to think 'Oh, I really can't do this any more' is when you're almost finished."*

A lot of us wish we had thought to hire or recruit a **doula**. (A doula is a non-medical labor support professional – or a close friend or relative --whose job is to support us, encourage us, help us cope with labor, and help us think through decisions.)

*“My husband was very present and helpful and active, but I would have definitely benefited from some female energy and support.”*

*“I wish I had known how valuable it would be to have a doula or other support person – in addition to my partner – to be by my side throughout labor, through nurses’ shift changes, through communication challenges with the hospital staff, through my partner’s own vulnerabilities and need to get some rest.”*

*“I wish I had known that you should pick a doula who doesn’t have her head up her butt. A doula should respect and support you, not force her own agenda.”*

Some of us wish we had understood the **“domino effect,”** how one intervention like induction, drugs, or an epidural could lead to more interventions, sometimes culminating in a cesarean.

*“Pitocin induction hurts more than natural labor. It requires an IV, extra monitoring, and often an epidural.”*

*“I wish someone had convinced me not to be induced just because I was one week ‘overdue’. I knew that one intervention can lead to another, but I didn’t realize how fast it could happen. It was stressful, and I narrowly avoided an emergency c-section. I should have followed my gut instinct to just wait a few more days.”*

*“I wish I had known with my first birth that accepting the epidural would increase the likelihood of a c-section, and that that c-section would be a cloud hanging over every birth afterward. I wish I’d known more about midwifery and out-of-hospital birthing options – perhaps I never would have needed that c-section in the first place.”*



We had mixed feelings about **epidurals** and drugs. Some of us wish we hadn't had them, but a few of us wish we'd had them sooner.

*"I wish I had known that labor drugs are the devil."*

*"I wish I had known that labor drugs are not evil."*

*"I wish I had known more about natural childbirth. I wish I had known how little my hospital supports natural childbirth so I could have birthed somewhere else."*

*"I wish I had known the epidural would leave me with back pain for 2 months."*

*"I wish I had known how safe epidurals are. I wouldn't have suffered so long."*

*"Natural pain relief won't work for everyone. There's nothing wrong with seeking pain relief medicines before the pain gets out of control."*

A bunch of us wish we had known that it's okay to give birth at **home** with good midwives and good hospital backup in case of emergency. Or to stay home longer in labor before going to the hospital.

*"I wish I'd stayed home with the first baby! Hospital birth was okay, but home birth was so very safe and satisfying."*

And a couple of us were the opposite: we wish we'd had **hospital** births instead of home or birth center births. We realize that this kind of conflicting information is confusing for those of you reading this and wondering where to have your baby. We all hope that you'll do the research and figure out what is safest and best for your own family. The "right" choice varies from one family to the next, and it depends on what's available in your community.

*"I wish I had known it was going to be one of those rare births where the umbilical cord comes out before the baby does. But we got to the hospital in time for a cesarean to save my baby."*

We had conflicting experiences about lots of other things, too.

*"I wish I had known that labor feels exactly like strong period cramps."*

*"I wish I had known that labor doesn't just feel like strong period cramps."*

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Some of us wish we'd learned more about **cesarean** birth and recovery, since we didn't know we'd need to give birth that way. And a couple of us wish we'd known that cesareans aren't that bad, and might be better for us and our babies than vaginal birth in some situations.

*"I wish I'd prepared for a c-section recovery. It's harder physically, logistically, and emotionally. I felt like if I didn't prepare for a c-section, it wouldn't happen – too bad that didn't work out!"*

*"I was just so grateful for this technology and for my beautiful boy."*

Some of us wish we'd understood how the **speed** of labor can vary.

*"It came on all of a sudden and I had the baby in the kitchen 20 minutes later."*

*"It took days and days."*

Some of us wish we'd known how **hard**, painful, or intense labor can be, and some of us are glad we *didn't* know because it would have scared us.

*"Somebody should have told me!"*

*"I'm glad nobody told me!"*



We wish we had understood more about **pushing**.

*“I wish I had known that effective pushing feels like taking a big poop. It’s low and full of uncomfortable pressure.”*

*“I wish I had known specifically how to use my diaphragm muscles to push. It was hard to learn on the spot.”*

*“Once I figured out how to push productively things got WAY easier. I was growling like a vicious animal but that wasn’t working. Just then my doula made this deep deep belly hum into my ear. I repeated it to her just out of curiosity, and I felt my muscles pushing! Yahoo! Three of those pushes, and my baby was in my arms!”*



*“I wish I had known that apparently I don’t get a pushing urge.”*

*“I wish I had known that pooping is not such a big deal. The midwives didn’t care – they just wiped it away. If I had spent less time protecting my bum and trying not to poop, pushing would have been over sooner.”*

*“I wish it had occurred to me that I could reach down and catch my babies myself.”*

A couple of us had heavy **bleeding** after the baby was born. The massage and pitocin for that were painful.

*“I wish I had known that such a dangerous thing could happen. I’m glad I got lifesaving help.”*

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Some of us wish we had understood normal variations in **bonding**.

*“I wish I had known how much I would LOVE this child, and what I would do for her!”*

*“I wish I had known that I might NOT feel overwhelmed with love and joy. I learned to love the baby over time.”*



Some of wished we had known how **tired** we would be after the birth.

*“I wish I had really, really known how much I should have rested before.”*

Some of us wished we had known how **sore** we would feel in the days after the birth.

*“The aftermath was worse than labor. Sitting hurt for ages.”*

*“I was alarmed and worried about my vagina’s future. But **kegels** do work!”*

*“I wish I had known that I’d feel weak for a while. I worried that I’d never feel like myself again.”*

*“I wish I had known the trick of squirting warm water on yourself as you pee, so it doesn’t sting.”*

*“The pain between my legs caught me way off guard. So did the whole lochia situation – wearing a menstrual pad for a solid month.”*

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Some of us wish we had known about **afterpains**, the contractions that startle us *after* the baby's born, as the uterus goes back to its nonpregnant size.

*"Ouch! I finally remembered to use my labor techniques for that."*

A lot of us wish we'd had more **support** after the birth. We were happy to have our babies, AND we felt overwhelmed.

*"After labor is all over, the real work begins. Caring for a newborn after a difficult labor is tough. You need lots of help."*

*"Caring for a newborn is hard work, even though (or because?) it is monotonous. I wish I hadn't minimized my difficulties. I wish I hadn't been ashamed to ask for more help."*

*"I wish I had eaten better, drunk more water, rested more, gotten some massage. I should have asked my friends and family to pitch in more."*

A surprising number of us suffered from **depression** in the weeks and months following birth. We were confused because we had nice babies, but we cried a lot and felt lost, lonely, sad, angry, and miserable.

*"I had postpartum depression very badly and I didn't know what was wrong with me. I didn't know that I should ask for [help](#)."*

*"I wish I had been less hard on myself."*

*"I wish I'd known that my emotional needs postpartum were entirely valid."*

*"I needed to tell the story over and over until something settled. I felt like I had to process the birth the way one might process trauma."*

We had a variety of reactions to being in the **hospital** after the baby was born.

*"I wish I had known about early check-out. The visiting hours were short and the nurses were unhelpful. It was noisy and I couldn't sleep."*

*"We left a day early and I really wish we had stayed longer taken advantage of the nurses and support at the hospital."*

A couple of us wish we had reminded the nurses to keep our **placentas**.

*“I wish I had known more about (and not been so grossed out by) placenta encapsulation. I did it with my fourth baby, and it has done wonders to keep my raging hormones and emotions more level.”*

Some of us wish we had worked harder to keep the **sacred** space of the immediate family in the baby’s first couple of weeks.

*“We should have limited the number of visitors! I wanted to show off the baby I had made – I felt like freaking Rembrandt! – but I got really tired and exposed us all to extra germs.”*

Some of us wish we’d known that our babies would be **fussy** or colicky.

*“If I had known she was going to cry and cry and cry, I would have asked for more support to keep myself sane.”*

Several of us wish we had known that **breastfeeding** can be difficult or painful for some moms. We’re glad we kept at it, but it was *not* effortless. We appreciated advice from expert nursers and the sisterhood of support groups.

*“People say, ‘If breastfeeding hurts, you’re doing it wrong.’ Well, it hurt for weeks, and we were doing it right.”*

*“I didn’t realize how hard breastfeeding could be. Determination and perseverance paid off! What a healthy little guy.”*

A couple of us wish we had known more about coping with **loss**.

*“I wish I had known that sometimes you don’t go home from the hospital with a baby, and there’s no warning.”*

*“Pain is just part of the risk you take when you open your heart to a new person. It’s worth the risk: ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all’ is really true. Those of us who have lost children or whose children suffer from illnesses really appreciate the comfort of those who have been through it themselves. We think it’s worthwhile to take just a minute during pregnancy to ask ourselves how we’d cope with a problem, and who our best helpers might be.”*



We had no idea that parenthood would **change** our lives so much!

*“I don’t even remember who I was B.C. (Before Children). But I really like who I am now – less selfish, more patient, more playful!”*

*“If I had known that sharing my birth stories would have helped other women, I wouldn’t have been so private about it. Birth was exhilarating for me.”*



*“I wish I had known how shy my husband was. I would have asked him out ten years earlier and had four kids with him.”*



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# Our Advice To Other Parents

*“Don’t take advice. This is all about YOU and YOUR family.”*

“Stay flexible and open to whatever experience you have. Don’t be attached to a particular kind of birth – you might need to roll with the punches. Let all things flow. Be adaptable.”

“Hire the practice with the lowest cesarean rate. These are usually the people who are well-trained in evidence-based medicine. They understand how a woman’s body works. It’s better not to fight the battle during labor – just hire somebody good in the first place. Don’t be shy about changing to a different practice if you want to.”

*“Be informed AND follow your own gut feelings.”*

“Take a GOOD childbirth class – it’s worth the money and time! The more you invest yourself in it, the more you’ll get out of it. And turn off the TV.”

*“Find your own rhythm.”*

“Educate yourself, know your options, and be assertive.”

*“Stay healthy and fit. Eat well, rest well, and enjoy exercise or yoga.”*

“If you fully trust your doctor or midwife’s values and judgment, you’ll be free to relax and experience the birth.”

*“Don’t have anybody at the birth that doesn’t make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside.”*

“Get a doula. But make sure she is open-minded. I thought I wanted an all-natural birth, but it turned out I really wanted an epidural. My doula helped me think it through, and she was supportive of my choice.”

*“You need to nurture yourself to be able to nurture your family. Become comfortable looking at your life, your habits, your tendencies, why you do certain things or believe certain things. Life is about to change big time!”*

“Do your homework. Fear and lack of knowledge cause stress, tension, and pain. Knowledge drives away fear.”

*“Learn all you can about baby care and parenting NOW. The birth is just one day. Raising kids is pretty much forever.”*

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“Be careful not to get pregnant again too soon. The quality of your relationship with each child is more important than the quantity of children you have. You don’t want to spread yourself too thin.”

“Learn to communicate really well with the other parent and adults who will help raise the child. Keep your humor. If you don’t have any, find it quick!”





## *What do YOU really want to KNOW...*

...about pregnancy?

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...about giving birth?

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...about parenting?

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How will you find your answers?

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# How YOU Can Participate In This Project



1. Leave your questions and feedback at <http://birth-media.com/for-pregnant-people/>
2. If you have ever had a baby, complete this survey: <http://www.surveymoz.com/s3/544934/What-REALLY-worked-for-you-in-labor>  
ALL birth stories are valuable! The more variety, the better!
3. Help a non-English speaker complete the survey by translating. We hope to translate this book into multiple languages someday.
4. Help somebody complete the survey who doesn't have internet access. It can be done by mail. See instructions: <http://birth-media.com/what-really-works-for-labor/>
5. There will be ways to help that we haven't thought of yet. Sign up at [www.birch-media.com](http://www.birch-media.com) for our occasional newsletter.
6. Spread the word through your neighborhoods and networks!

***Thank you for your interest.  
May all families be happy!***

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