AIMS For a better birth...

Family birth

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Hannah Robertson describes the beautiful birth of her third child

The other day I went to introduce my baby boy Oren at a home birth group. He is my second baby born at home. My first child, Tom, was the unlucky one to bear the brunt of my lack of knowledge and thus had a highly intervened with hospital birth which I believe resulted in a non-stop crying baby and a stressed out mum unable to tap into her own inner wisdom as mother.

My second baby had a lovely home birth supported by a fab team of NHS midwives who I could not fault. Six days after my waters went, and table tennis avoidance of induction, Daisy was born on a Saturday morning before a glorious dawn. Her birth gave me new confidence and I felt like I could take on the world. I have never been so happy and more in tune with my needs and as a result my children's needs. My third child, Oren was born at home without medical presence, a freebirth, unassisted birth, UC (unassisted childbirth), born free. Not by accident, it was a beautiful, normal, simple non-dramatic, safe, life changing, empowering, affirming and planned experience.

The home birth group made me realise more about my reasoning behind my decision. There are many reasons why women choose to freebirth. I have been a birth partner for a few women who have chosen this path to birth from a belief in the natural process, a lack of trust for an unknown community midwife attending and because some women feel most comfortable with privacy. As a doula, I have been present when a few women have birthed their babies before midwives have arrived; and although these women never planned a UC openly, through reflection it is clear that unconsciously this was pre-thought. Unconsciously planned BBA's (born before arrival) is a subject worth researching in terms of why women need to keep their wishes so secret. After discussions with a friend, I believe a big reason is fear of what others think. There seems to be a stigma attached to UC, in that lack of medics on hand equals lack of care and responsibility as a parent. This is simply not the case.

Childbirth is the most intimate and intense experience a woman will ever have and it affects not only the mother and baby but her story passes down through generations of women. It is understandable that some women put so much time in to the decisions of who will be there and where their baby/ies will be born. I did not choose this birth as a statement to prove a point, I chose to birth my baby myself because I believe childbirth is easier and more straightforward when the mum is most relaxed. For me, having a midwife there for a 'just in case scenario' may have felt like I needed to rely on her expertise and reassurance that I did not need. I have noticed that in scenarios with professionals I tend to ask most questions outwardly rather than listening and asking internally. I believe as women our intuition is a

powerful tool that guides us through life and as a pregnant and labouring woman this instinct is heightened to it's sharpest, so that the mother can sense danger. For this reason I felt that should a problem arise in the labour, I would know to seek help. A mother will do ANYTHING to protect her young and that is most certainly how I felt.

So back to the group ... as I was telling my story, the silence around me was more than a 'holding the space' to listen, instead it felt like a tense confusion at what I chose to do. This is perhaps to do with personal perception of risk. In 2008, 2,538 people died on Britain's roads, yet I am not unusual in accepting the risk of driving a car.

Between 2006 and 2008, 107 UK women died of complications of pregnancy or birth (the biggest cause was infection) which led me to feel that childbirth is really relatively safe, and since staying at home appears to have fewer risks associated than birthing in a hospital, my decisions felt safer to me than any of the other options available. Had any maternal deaths occurred during or after childbirth at home, with or without a midwife, the media would have ensured the story made history.

So I decided to birth my baby with only family and a friend present. I want full responsibility over mine andmy child's health. I will call my birth a family birth, as I really don't like being told I am brave when I feel I did nothing out of the ordinary, and only what most female mammals do in their life cycle.

My story

After an unscanned and peaceful pregnancy with no blood tests, urine samples or arbitrary tick boxes, I feltgood. I replaced all of that with reflexology, massage, osteopathy, homoeopathic tissue salts programme, a good support network, my doula and an independent midwife (for minimum antenatal) who respected my wishes.

Prelabour started after my blessingway, but nothing I would say significant until 37 weeks when I felt my bump drop. Not long after that I experienced a small gush of fluid and I am still no wiser as to whether it was amniotic fluid or mucus plug. Anyway, after that Braxton Hicks were stronger and more regular but they never felt like labour, although I had woozy days, which felt like it was soon approaching.

For the first time in my three pregnancies, my due date came and went. This was Easter weekend and on Easter Monday, I had an intense reflexology session. I should add here that over the bank holiday weekend the rash around my eldest's mouth started to scab and I knew he had impetigo. Not what you want around with a newborn.

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I woke through the night with sensations that pretty much felt like what I had experienced over the last two weeks. My partner, awoke at 4.45 and, after a couple of tightenings, I went downstairs to have porridge. I was tired but not enough to get back to sleep. I tidied up and went back to lie down until Tom bounced in at 6.45. Imade him breakfast and sent him to play, as I knew things were starting to happen.

The sensations were in my back but short lived and sporadic. I called the GP (desperate to get rid of this impetigo) and we could go in 30 mins so I quickly woke up and dressed a snoozy girl and off we went. I remember thinking in the car – please don't have a contraction in the doctor's – I didn't really want to be there whilst in labour. We were in and out so quick that the chemist had not even opened. So we went back home and I got Daisy some breakfast. We got ready and the kids set off on scooters whilst I waddled to the chemist on foot. It was lovely to be out on a spring-like day after such a cold star t to spring. I noticed on the way that more daffodils had opened and were showing their beautiful heads. This was what I had been waiting for.

After a phone call to Calum (my partner) to encourage him home, the kids and I set up the pool. We gaffa-taped the hose down and together put the liner in the pool. While it was filling Tom and Daisy were bouncing the walls with excitement. I put music on to give me some sense of my own world, as Tom and Daisy were still needing me to be present with them.

We had sat down as a family ten days prior and talked about their roles and what I would need to give birth. Tom was given the role of telling us the gender and Daisy was going to have the first skin to skin cuddle when I needed to get dry and clothed. I explained how important silence was to me and how questions were banned from me during labour.

The turn of events after this point are hazy. I think the pool took a good hour to fill enough for me to get in and I reckon I got in at 12ish. I lit candles and put clary sage and lavender on my oil burner. I put on my blessingway necklace to connect me to the strength and blessings of the wonderful women I knew would be supporting me. I remember worrying about feeling the surges in my back and flipped out thinking what if he is posterior and cannot turn or what if the head is asynclitic – at this point I got out Penny Simkins labour progress handbook and leant over the birth ball. I then disappeared to the shed to get a rebozo. Not sure how I was ever going to facilitate that? The kids sifting me?[1]

At this freak out moment I told myself to 'shut up and switch off '. My internal sensors were saying OK, this is painful but all is well – breathe. So I tried to work the breath more consciously and used ujjayi breathing (a yoga breath technique and mindfulness tool). Tom (aged 7) knew every time I had a surge and would massage me or tell me to breathe, the YouTube clips had definitely paid off. I was in and out of the pool – going to the loo – clearout! Adjusting the temperature of the pool – eating a banana I think. I had my bottle of water filled and at one point it looked empty and then Daisy (aged 5) came to me saying 'look mum I have filled this'.

The first part of the morning Daisy was bringing Easter eggs and all sugar y treats to have as snacks and I suggested fruit/crackers – further into my labour the same chocolate was brought out and I caved and said whatever. After noon I sent the kids off to make sandwiches. I think Tom had three bites before leaving it on a shelf. At this point I knew I needed another adult. Calum called, but I got Tom to speak because I couldn't.

After a morning thinking I wasn't progressing, I had a feel of my cervix after a tiny amount of show came

out. I could feel a head behind a tiny amount of waters. I didn't feel I was fully dilated or that anything was imminent. I texted my friend Claire to invite her over. It felt like the right time for her to come but I didn't feel ready to birth.

I then had some powerful surges and I kept saying in my head 'open, release'. As a surge reached it's peak I had an uncontrollable urge to bite – not cool with an inflatable pool so I remember almost sucking the side of the pool. In between I read my wall of blessings and they were so reassuring, keeping me feeling light. Tom come in to tell me he was sitting on the stairs with his insect book, if I needed him I could call. He must have noticed things were more intense with my loud ujjayi breath and he was telling me to breathe. Claire got to me and I remember a smiley conversation (post surge) but no idea what it was about. This was a difference to Daisy's birth where I was in an altered state of consciousness. I felt during my family birth that I was fully with it; maybe I had no need to protect myself, as everything around me was so normal. My friend there, her baby breastfeeding and my kids pottering about on a normal holiday day.

Five minutes after Claire arrived I had the most powerful surge I have ever experienced that was like vomiting from my yoni. I had no control as my body took over and my waters broke and his head came right down to my perineum. The surge seemed to last for minutes and it stung as his head stretched and bounced on my perineum. After that the kids were in the room as I had wanted birth plan wise, but it had been so intense that I asked for them to wait outside the room. I was half wanting and half not wanting the next surge to come on.

When it did, I felt I needed my hand on my perineum as my baby's head passed through; I had never experienced anything that fast. The next surge I longed for as I stroked my baby's head in the water. As soon as it came, my hands were there, waiting to lift my baby out of the water. I tried pulling when the shoulders were out but I had to wait until the surge had squeezed him all out first.

Then we met! The kids came in and Tom announced he had a brother. I was not disappointed as I thought I might be, having been convinced we were having a daughter. I fell totally in love. We lotus birthed and the cord separated at seven days postpartum. This was a great way to stay in bed and ward off the visitors, and keep myroom scented with frankincense.

I write this while holding his hot little body on my lap two weeks after he exploded into our lives. He is verysweet and pretty good at communicating his needs. Oren's Daddy arrived five minutes after Oren Isaac Phoenix was born. Oren's birth was all I had expected and dreamed.

Hannah Robertson

References

1. spinningbabies.com/more-info/for-pregnancy/weekly-activities