AIMS For a better birth...

Sarah and Jackson's Story

AIMS Journal, 2022, Vol 34, No 1

By Sarah

Jackson, my son, had his second birthday late in 2021. We decided to start a family before getting married as I suffer from polycystic ovaries and wasn't sure I would be able to have children. We were fortunate that I managed to fall pregnant after just a few months. I cannot say I enjoyed pregnancy: though the first kicks and pregnancy milestones were amazing, I had to endure morning sickness from 7 to 22 weeks. Eventually I was diagnosed with Hyperemesis Gravidarum (severe nausea and vomiting) and prescribed medication, although it did little to help.

In total we had 10 scans, for various reasons such as growth concerns, placenta positioning, measurements of my uterus, and being monitored. The scans were a blessing as we got to see Jackson basically every month of pregnancy, but it was very stressful being told I needed yet another scan after every midwife appointment. Finally, after a growth monitoring scan, we were told his growth had slowed and he was better out than in - 10 days before his due date I was induced.

I've always been very anxious and nervous of anything medical. I faint at the sight of blood and have passed out with every injection I've had since about 5 years old. So as soon as I found out I was pregnant I felt nervous about the whole thing. I expected pregnancy would be an extension of all of these feelings, but in fact I surprised myself and everyone around me and was pretty calm and matter of fact throughout.

I decided that for me knowledge would be power; instead of spending time worrying about the 'what ifs', I would sign up to NCT class to be better informed about the whole process. I decided to enrol in Hypnobirthing and James and I attended both sets of classes during my pregnancy.

I found the whole process to be very much a 'tick box' exercise. My midwife appointments were almost pointless as I had all my information coming from NCT and hypnobirthing. I found them to be 'if you don't ask you don't get' - but unfortunately you don't know what you don't know. Everyone I encountered was lovely, but I never saw the same midwife at my appointments and found there wasn't any consistency throughout. This was frustrating as I was having to cover old ground at each meeting; it also meant whilst having all the various scans I didn't have one key contact to speak to.

James was great, as I knew he would be. He wanted to be involved in as much as he could, and I think he knew I would be feeling anxious and nervous and that him being with me at all appointments would help ease that.

I was induced on 31st Oct (Halloween!) - Jackson's due date was 10th November.

I was nervous of being induced as it pretty much went against anything I had been discussing during my hypnobirthing classes, which took pregnancy and birthing back to basics and said it's the most natural thing we do and that there wasn't any need for routine medical intervention and that our body knows what to do and exactly when to do it. I have heard many horror stories from friends about being induced and that essentially it's a catalyst for disaster with drugs being pumped to bring on labour and then more drugs to help with the pain of labour.

For me, I knew it was the right thing to do and so I arrived at hospital packed for 3 days at 9am and received a pessary shortly after. James stayed with me until 7pm when visiting hours stopped; until that point I hadn't felt any different. I had dinner and went off to have a shower at about 9pm. I discovered what I thought was my plug after going for a wee. I told the midwife on duty who said it probably was and to carry on as things can take a long time when you are induced. After around 10 minutes I started getting some period-like pains and again spoke to the midwife who gave me some paracetamol. After taking them and getting back into bed my waters broke. Wow! Nobody tells you how much water comes out and that it Does. Not. Stop. I again spoke to the midwife and asked if I should be calling James back; she again said no and to wait and see as being induced often takes days.

It was about 9.45 at this point and I started to get bad period pains. Something told me I had better check to see how often these were happening and so I downloaded an app on my phone and began to record them. After about five minutes the app and my brain told me I was having contractions and was in full labour. I called James and told him to come back to the hospital and I notified the midwife. She told me that as soon as a bed was available on the labour ward I would be sent up there. I remembered I needed to be on antibiotics once my waters had broken as I was Strep B positive. This got me a fast track into the labour ward, just as James arrived. By this point standing was difficult and the pain was intense. Upon arrival on the labour ward my midwife measured me and we discovered I was 7cm dilated. I requested a water birth and the pool was being run. I then had an overwhelming urge to either poo or push and was measured again and showed 9cm. The pool was stopped as I was told I wouldn't have enough time to get in before baby arrived. Gas and air helped me through the next part and Jackson was born.

Before induction I was anxious about how it was going to play out. I had been bombarded with horror stories of the slippery slope of intervention and was just determined to have as little as I could.

During the induction I felt pretty calm through the day with the pessary but the actual labour happened so quickly I didn't really get a chance to get too worked up about it.

After induction I was pretty chuffed that I had a straightforward birth without much pain relief - no stitches or anything and little blood loss. I was glad that the hypnobirthing and NCT classes had paid off. Not that I did anything in particular but I think they had helped me stay calm and trust my body, which had helped with the birth.

Midwives can be literal superheroes. I feel you have to be a certain type of person to be a midwife; during the birth my midwife was amazingly supportive and comforting; I guess I trusted her with my life. The postnatal ward was very hard - if it's not your own baby screaming it's someone else's! Lack of sleep, not knowing what to do with your newborn and just feeling battered, played a role but the midwives helped me a few times when I was figuring out breastfeeding, etc. I had to stay in for at least 24 hrs due to Strep B but decided to stay an additional night until I had grasped breastfeeding a bit better. All of the team were super supportive on that front.

My only birthing partner was James. He was great - we were both on the same page in terms of what I did and didn't want but also in terms of us both wanting to be relaxed and as calm as possible. To be honest I think he was just in awe of what I was actually doing.

Looking back, I think the midwife appointments could have been way more informative. I was a first-time mum and was just being directed to videos from the 80s on the internet for advice. I was given the odd information sheet but wasn't offered any prenatal classes that I know are offered elsewhere. I relied on NCT[1] and hypnobirthing for the majority of my information and I think it's a shame as not everyone can afford to pay for this kind of additional support.
I consented to the induction but I'm not sure I had full information. Jackson was born a healthy 7.4lb and had a straightforward birth without intervention. A few days after birth I felt like I had a pulled groin muscle which eventually moved on to my lower back. After 5 months or so of physio I decided to go private for a scan and to my surprise had slipped a disc. We think this was done during birth but can't be sure. Other than that I had no lasting issues post birth.

We are both doing well. I've suffered with anxiety and depression for a long time and I had come off all medication when I found out I was pregnant. Myself and my doctors closely monitored for postnatal depression and I resumed antidepressants as soon as I stopped breastfeeding when Jackson was 5 months. I've been on medication ever since.

Jackson is happy and healthy and you couldn't ask for anything else. He started nursery last week and is showing signs of being a bright and charming little guy.

Lockdown hit when Jackson was 4 months. It made it hard to help combat post-natal depression as I couldn't leave the house, which meant I couldn't socialise or get help from elsewhere and it was me and James on our own in the deep end! I missed the chance for most baby classes due to Covid but we have made up for it since.

Looking back, I wish I had made more of a fuss about my pregnancy sickness to the midwives. I didn't go to hospital until a few weeks before it stopped naturally, and I feel like I could have felt a lot better a lot sooner had I made sure I got some help.

Author Bio: Sarah is a 31 year old mother of Jackson. She lives in Hampshire with her husband and is

currently living a chaotic life as a stay-at-home mum, thinking about expanding the family again soon.

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[1] The NCT offers a range of income-related discounts: www.nct.org.uk/courses-workshops/course-details-and-prices/course-prices-and-discounts