

Most women have never witnessed a birth until their child is born



# BIRTHING the soul

Bedroom floor birthing queen, **Lisa Finn Powell**, shares the stories of her children's births

**W**hether birth is difficult or easy, painful or pain-free, drawn-out or brief, it needn't be a medical event. It should never be conducted as if it were no more than a tooth extraction. For childbirth has much deeper significance than the removal of a baby like a decaying molar from a woman's body. The dawning of consciousness in a human being who is opening eyes for the first time on our world is packed with meaning for the mother and father, and can be also for everyone who shares in this greatest adventure of all." *from Homebirth by Sheila Kitzinger.*

'I want to do that again', I gasped to the midwife moments after giving birth to my son. I was a mother-goddess on an incredible hormone high; bedroom floor birthing queen seated on my throne of old sheets and towels. I have never felt more like a woman than I did immediately after bringing each of my babies into the world. My question is, 'why don't all women?'

## Sharing stories

Put two new mums together for the first time and within a few minutes the birth stories will start. Women have a deep need to purge, to compare and to talk endlessly about birthing experiences, good or bad.

Mothers need to share experiences; good or bad, painful or ecstatic

How long the labour was, how intense the contractions were, how big the baby was, how the midwives, doctors and nurses treated her, how much pain she had to endure and in an alarming number of cases, especially hospital births, how disappointed she was by the drastic way that the whole experience differed from their original expectations. What strikes me the most is when she ends her tale with a shrug, "But what could I do?" This woman is disempowered and left feeling incapable.

Mother of three, Gina Purmann, recalls the hospital birth of her first child, "I felt like I wasn't really doing anything myself. Other people were organising my birth for me. In retrospect, I would have been more forceful." I struggle during these conversations simply because, for me, each birth was wonderful. I have had four amazing home births and no regrets. I never used or felt the need for pain medication. I want to share my experiences, to inspire and encourage other women, but it feels almost as if I am gloating in the midst of their war stories. For me, giving birth in a hospital is like having a baby on another planet, unfathomable.

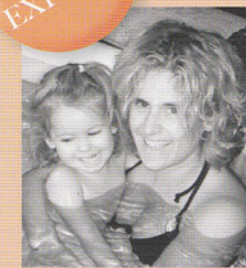
## Support System

How is it that one woman's experience can differ so drastically from another's? Why have so many of my friends, colleagues, acquaintances and relatives had very medicalised and traumatic births? Why me? I never considered myself to be very athletic, to hold a strong spiritual belief, to have a high threshold for pain or to suspect a conspiracy against women by the medical profession – all of which might contribute highly to a successful homebirth or at the very least, the motivation to attempt one in the first place. I think much of it has to do with one's environment and support system. What is being said to a woman and by whom at any critical point in her life is key to her forming beliefs in her body's ability to birth a baby?

My sister-in-law, Lynn Saults, paved the way for me. When I was only a couple of months pregnant with my first child, I was invited to attend the homebirth of my niece. I had never seen a birth, let alone one at home, and it had a profound effect on me, infusing me with the strength, confidence and knowledge that I would be able to birth my baby in the 'normal' way, without the unnecessary medical interventions that were so commonplace.

Seven months later my baby niece, Mollie and her mum, Lynn were seated next to me on the floor in front of the fireplace in my sitting room when I gave birth to my own daughter. Now teenagers, the two cousins feel very special to have been at each other's births. How blessed I was to be pointed in the right direction on literature to read, videos to watch, other mums to

NATURAL BIRTH TIPS  
ASK  
THE  
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Rachel Stacey runs Born in Water **borninwater.co.uk** and the Bath homebirth support group.

- Immersion in warm water offers great pain relief.
- Water helps you to relax, which means that your muscles are less tense and therefore your stress hormones are reduced.
- Find local groups that support couples considering waterbirths. Talk to couples who have experienced waterbirths.
- Be really prepared. Have everything ready and make sure your partner and / or birth partner know where everything is and what you wish to use.

**'Now teenagers, the two cousins feel very special to have been at each other's births.'**

speak to and midwives to gain encouragement from. In short, my sister-in-law literally showed me that there was another way. It changed my life.

## Hospital v. home

We are all products of our upbringing, influence and surroundings. Ideas are placed in our heads without our consent or knowledge and ultimately lead to shaping our lives. Hollywood bombards us with images of women screaming in agony, shouting at their husbands, going into instant, painful and rapid labour and then delivering their babes in the back of taxi cabs with a handful of terrified, helpless men (including husbands) wringing their hands. Or, just making it to the hospital in time to be 'saved' by machines.

The hospital vs. homebirth debate is almost always discussed in terms of 'the safest place to be' and society concludes that the 'just in case' medical model is better. Culturally, birth is defined as dramatic, dangerous and excruciating. Labouring mums are portrayed as out-of-control, helpless and petrified. Babies are treated shockingly moments after birth. Fathers' roles are superfluous at best. Strangers are present at a very private, sacred, even holy event, while family members are kept at bay, especially children.

It is unbelievable that most women have never witnessed a birth before they themselves give birth for the very first time. Possibly they will have viewed some childbirth videos and undoubtedly seen snippets in movies, but more often than not most women have never been present for a live birth, to share the intensity and power that is so incredible. By the time they reach childbearing age they have developed very skewed but nonetheless solidly formed views of what they now consider 'the burden of birth'.

## Unnecessary Caesareans

It is with these deeply implanted fears that women first wade the waters of childbirth. No wonder why so many first births end in Caesarean-section and countless interventions. Is our society preparing women's bodies to fall short? It is precisely the opposite of what should be instilled in them. It is true that there are undoubtedly birth emergencies and that medical technology has saved the lives of many babies and mums. However, this approach is clearly a one size fits all solution to playing it safe in childbirth, not allowing the natural process to occur and seriously hindering a woman's instinctive ability to trust in her own body. Does the medical establishment really think that more interventions are a viable path to improving the negative outcomes of normal birth?

According to statistics, one in four UK births end in c-section. The World Health Organisation guidelines recommend a rate no more than 10%, not 25%. (It's >

Choose the people who surround you in birth carefully

even higher in the U.S. - 29.1%, more than 34% in some states). It is estimated that over 140,000 women a year undergo caesarean sections. If any operation over 10 per cent is unnecessary and avoidable, we can conclude that over 75,000 women a year are having unnecessary major surgery. More harm is being done than good.

Women's bodies are just as capable as always. It is extremely rare for babies to be 'too big' for their mother's pelvises; this only occurs with severe bone deformities or incorrect healing of a pelvic break.

Unnecessary interventions are so great in number that home birth is actually safer than hospital birth. Having all of those medical procedures available 'just in case' actually makes them more likely to be used, even when they're not indicated. These include surgical and drug induction, instrumental delivery by ventouse or forceps, episiotomies, epidurals and of course, c-sections.

**After birth**

After the birth, the procedures continue. Babies are whisked away in a frenzy of checking and measuring - all done in an extremely rapid business-like timeframe adding to the post birth stress of the baby (and mum). Early cord clamping is routinely practised in hospitals. Studies have shown that even waiting two minutes to allow more blood from the cord and placenta to flow into the infant raises iron levels significantly, thus having long term benefits for the baby.

**Keeping birth safe**

Angela Horn, of [homebirth.org](http://homebirth.org) and mother of five home birthed children says, "If you want to keep birth safe and normal, remember that the first intervention in labour is stepping outside your own home." It is important to remember that hospitals are institutions, catering to large numbers of people. Their standard of care is not individualised. You forfeit a birth personalised to your own needs when you enter their domain. There is something about crossing the hospital threshold that can make you feel as if you are no longer in charge of your own body. Juliette Grassby-Lewis, mother of three home and waterbirthed children said, 'I feel very disempowered when I go into hospitals, even when it's only to visit someone.'

**Mood setting**

At home, the mood and management of your birth is largely within your control. You can make your space exactly as you desire with dim lights, music or candles. You are not hooked to an IV or an electronic fetal monitor. You can walk around which is much better for labour progression than being confined to



**Further information**

- [aims.org.uk](http://aims.org.uk)
- [babble.com](http://babble.com)
- [bellybelly.com](http://bellybelly.com)
- [birthchoiceuk.com](http://birthchoiceuk.com)
- [cemach.org](http://cemach.org)
- [gentlebirth.org](http://gentlebirth.org)
- [homebirth.org](http://homebirth.org)
- [sheilakitinger.com](http://sheilakitinger.com)

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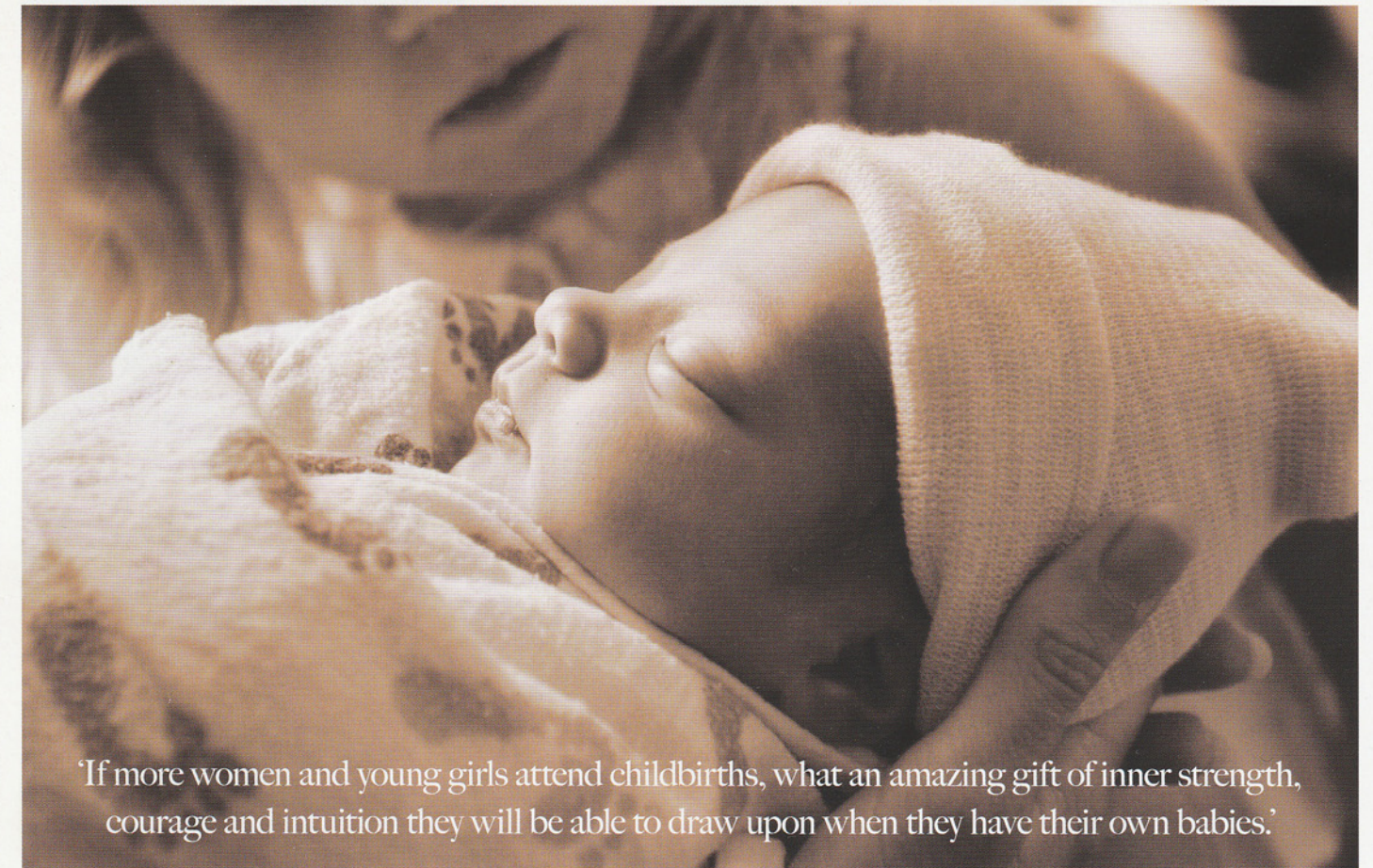
a bed. You can have present whomever you choose, even your children. You can be alone when you want, tucked away in a romantic comfortable corner with your partner or surrounded by friends and family. You can vocalize during your contractions if you feel the need. One mum reports feeling betrayed by the hospital staff when they demanded that she be quieter for the sake of others.

**Using water**

In your own home, you are free to give birth in whatever position you choose. As archaic as it sounds, women are still lying in beds (for the ease of the birth attendants) pushing their babies up and out - the worst possible way to give birth, instead of making use of gravity by squatting, kneeling or standing. Water births are more achievable at home as at the hospital the pool is often not available or the midwives 'allow' labouring in the water, but then insist that the woman get out to give birth.

By staying home, your labour is not interrupted by the trip to the hospital. Often the change of environment, presence of strangers, sound of machines etc., slows the progress considerably. Moreover this can lead to having labour 'helped along' with syntocinon, which makes the contractions very powerful and increases the risk of the baby going into

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distress. The mother may not be able to cope with pain and need an epidural. If left alone, to walk around in her own surroundings at home, she would have the use of her unaltered hormones to manage the pain.

**Managing pain**

According to a study conducted by midwife Brenda Manning, one of the top 12 fears in labour is pain. "It is helpful if pregnant women can revise their learned perception of pain. They can alter how they address it by simply remembering that the pain of childbirth is not the pain of injury. There is no damage being caused by the contractions, it is just muscles working really hard to stretch and open for a baby to be born. This is an easy concept to grasp once you cease to think of birth as being an illness. It is a state of health and birth is a normal physical process. Choose the people who surround you in birthing carefully, they will support and help you whenever you feel overwhelmed. Positive, loving people in a calm, comfortable environment make a huge difference to how you cope with pain."

Up to 10% of women report having pain free childbirth, some experiencing extreme feelings of ecstasy - even orgasms. This is a far cry from the image that is common in our society.

For me, homebirth is the safest option. There is overwhelming evidence that supports this view, unfortunately countered by the fear-induced medical rhetoric that continues to deny this reality. I encourage all mums-to-be to be well read, prepared and confident; they don't need the permission of the medical establishment to have their baby at home. Even if they plan a hospital birth it is crucial to know what may happen and to never take only one opinion on the matter. I draw hope from the fact that mothers will always feel the need to discuss their birth experiences with each other. We look to a day when these stories are mostly positive and joyful ones that our daughters and childless sisters are hearing from us. Stories of overwhelming joy and happiness, not in spite of the pain and interventions, but instead of. If more women and young girls attend these lovely childbirths, what an amazing gift of inner strength, courage and intuition they will be able to draw upon when they have their own babies.

The cycle of childbirth lore will become realigned with the cycle of life itself...beautiful.

*Lisa Finn Powell lives in London with her husband and four home birthed children. She is expecting her fifth child in early April - possibly while you are reading this.*

**Suggested Reading:**

- A Good Birth, A Safe Birth**, D. Korte & R. Scaer, Bantam Books
- A Guide to Midwifery, Heart & Hands**, Elizabeth Davis, John Muir Press
- Homebirth**, Sheila Kitzinger, Penguin
- Homebirth**, Nicky Wesson, Pinter and Martin
- Immaculate Deception**, Suzanne Arms, Bergin & Garvey
- Instinctive Birthing**, Val Clarke
- Labor Pains: Modern Midwives and Homebirth**, D. Sullivan & R. Weitz, Yale Press
- Mind Over Labor**, Carl Jones, Viking Penguin
- Special Delivery**, Rahima Baldwin, Celestial Arts