

# Being in the Drivers Seat of Birth

BY LAURIE CHAMBERLIN, CD, ICCE, LE

Drive by Epidurals is the subject line in my inbox. It's an email from my mother-in-law telling me about an article that ran in her local newspaper. I receive all kinds of birth related tidbits from friends and students alike. They know I'm a childbirth educator and they want to share. "The article says that women are too busy for childbirth classes," she wrote. "They don't have time for it and don't want to deal with it. They just want the epidural."

Last month an old high school buddy, Lita, looked me up to tell me she was having a baby. I congratulated her, asked if she knew that I was a birth professional, and gave her the link to my website. She called me right away. "You do a lot, breastfeeding class, childbirth classes, prenatal counseling. It all sounds nice." I detected a but and I got one. "I don't want any of that. I want the epidural!" said Lita. She didn't want any classes and she didn't want any books. One thing she knew for sure—she wanted the epidural.

From the vantage point of having worked with hundreds of birthing parents, I know that birth can be about more than just pain or no pain. It is an experience—growing a baby inside of us, rearranging our lives to make room for a new family member. It is worthy of our time to explore our new emerging selves, who we are about to become, and how we can best achieve our goals.

Every pregnant woman knows what I'm talking about when I say the words, Horror Stories. Women who have had traumatic or less than pleasing births love to share them with pregnant women. Instead of surrounded by excitement for labor, there is a culture of fear. In *Childbirth Without Fear*, Grantly Dick-Read writes that knowledge reduces

fear. In addition to education through classes and books, prenatal counseling for childbirth preparation deals directly with clearing big emotions before birth. This reduces fear and makes the birthing process easier to understand.

The reality is that Lita's values on the birth experience are representative of our culture. In fact, the Santa Barbara times reported 75% of first time mothers believe they either don't have time for a childbirth class or don't need one. Ah ha! I see the words I'm looking for—first time mothers. Check this out:

In my childbirth series I've seen many second-time mothers with eyes open wide, in shock it appears, hearing what they didn't know the first time around. Mandy was one such woman. Tall, with lovely dark skin and beautiful blue eyes, she said, "The first time around I didn't take a class, I laid on my back in bed, hooked up to monitoring the whole time. It was excruciating, awful, I hated it. I had no idea I could get up and walk around, take a shower or Jacuzzi, ask questions or even know what to ask. This time it's going to be different. I know my options and I know what I want!"

"It is totally worth our time," says Chelsea Cummins, mother of baby Shaylin. "There are so many different medical procedures and ways of coping with labor. It is good to know your options and it's good to understand the different procedures that the doctor might mention. Labor can be stressful if you don't understand what's happening. Birth class was a big help to me and my husband."

Without knowing the choices, options are limited. Some even say, without knowing your choices, you don't have ANY

options! Birth class participants learn that laboring women need to be dilated to 3 to 4 centimeters before any pain medication can be administered. So, for most women, that's a lot of labor to experience before any medication can be given. Reducing fear through knowledge and comfort measures actually helps to reduce pain.

Naomi Ross, labor and delivery nurse, said, "It is quite a lot of responsibility to guide women through the most important experiences of her life, without knowing her likes and dislikes. If they have taken a childbirth class with their partner, and thought about what they want and hope for, then I can help to make that work well for them. Birth should be a beautiful and momentous occasion."

Jenny spent the first six months of her pregnancy assuming she would have an epidural and "take the easy way out." She planned to have five friends, all mothers, at her birth. They inundated her with horror stories. "The worst day of your life," they exclaimed. But Jenny didn't want it to be the worst day of her life. So, in her last trimester, she took a child birth class. Her friend, Andrea, came along as her labor support person. Jenny learned that the epidural was not her only option.

During the labor, Jenny had Andrea's knowledgeable support and the help of comfort measures. Jenny did have an epidural at 6 cm and it gave her 2 hours of relief before it wore off, but she was glad she had the information when making that choice. Jenny enthusiastically wrote me afterwards. "I found everything from breathing and stretching to music and visualization to be helpful at different points throughout labor, but I think the single most valuable thing that I got from class

was that it changed how I viewed childbirth as a whole. I was able to let go of my fear and I think because of that, my son's birth was an extremely positive experience!" The biggest news of all was from the friends who watched Jenny and Andrea cope with contractions together. Not having used any of the comfort techniques in their labors, they were in awe, and very moved. They expressed the hope to change their next birth from one of horror, to triumph.

Do you remember what it was like to learn to drive a car? There was a class and live practice before we ever got to drive a car by ourselves. Imagine the driving experience without that. Not knowing what yellow, green or red meant? Not knowing how to merge onto the freeway . . . yeooowza!

For most people, the birth of their child is much bigger, more amazing, than learning to drive. Isn't it worth an investment of time and energy to make the most of the experience—to get the 'rules' of the road and learn to read the 'map of labor'?

Be the driver of your birth, with precious cargo of course. Take a childbirth class. (See Laurie's Classes on pg. 12).



LAURIE CHAMBERLIN'S BIRTH CLASS PARTICIPANTS

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