

Narvaez, D. (2013). Seeking an alternative baseline for birth. *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*, Fall, 282-283.

Seeking an alternative baseline for birth

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Too often we treat babies like plants, as if they don't feel much and are not affected by their early experience. We have hardly studied the effects of birth practices but we know a few things: that early pain leaves lasting sensitivity to pain, that trauma leads to hypervigilance and stress reactivity; that separation from mother leads to dysregulation.

Childbirth practices have moved far away from what is ideal for babies and mothers, raising ethical questions. Is it ethical to induce labor when due dates are guesses? As Thomas Insel of NIH pointed out, artificial oxytocin may be having adverse effects that are unstudied and it turns out that the rise in autism parallels the rise in use of artificial oxytocin. Is it ethical to reduce the use of doulas in hospital births because it decreases the need for c-sections, lowering the profits of anesthesiologists? Is it ethical to perform procedures on mothers and babies without full informed consent? For example, mothers need to know that epidural drugs can have detrimental effects on breastfeeding success and bonding. Is it ethical to endorse infant circumcision as the AAP has done, even though there are no certain positives for infants but known harms?

Can we shift away from medicalized birth to an alternative baseline for childbirth? To do this, medical personnel in training need to experience natural births, births with no medical interventions where the mother's experience is ecstatic. Even watching a film like, *Birth as we know it*, may expand imagination about what birth can be like. When done right, birth is a spiritual experience filled with mystery and wonder in which mother and baby get in touch with a wider reality.

How can we make most birth experiences transcendent for mom and baby?

First, medical personnel and mothers themselves need to understand that moms are not machines and babies are not products. Child birth is a relationship, a process between mother and child. Medical personnel should try as much as possible to stay out of the way. Each birth is unique with its own timing and pace as the relationship between mom and baby shifts from body-in-body to body-on-body. In some countries (e.g., Israel), after the water breaks, mothers have 48 hours without interference to have a natural birth.

Second, mothers need the chance to be in charge of the event, trusting their body signals and not being treated like they have to be rescued from themselves. Of course, mothers need to be prepared for the experience. This involves not only information about childbirth options and likelihoods, but psychological preparation. They need to learn ahead of time that they can "let go" and let nature take charge. This may require working through issues of trusting body signals and letting go of resentment of their own early trauma.

Third, mothers need support, doula support. Having a knowledgeable companion who supports the mother through the experience is priceless and leads to fewer medical interventions. But again, the mother should be in charge and be allowed to keep her power.

All mammals provide an evolved developmental niche or system for their young that facilitates optimal development. For humans it includes no pain beyond labor, constant touch, responsiveness to needs, and companionship care. We know these things build a healthy brain. In rat pups in the first month of life, 250,000 neuronal connections form **every second**. Rat brains are much more fully developed than human brains at birth (which are only 25% developed). Human baby brains likely will generate many more synapses and intelligence if they are supported in the ways they evolved to expect. One expectation is on-demand breastmilk. Neonates have small stomachs and so need to eat frequently and not too much. Breastmilk has thousands of ingredients facilitating healthy development. In my view, infant formula, although necessary in emergencies, is otherwise a starvation diet since it gives babies hardly anything they need to

build a strong body, brain and mind. Everyone, professionals, mothers, and families need training about infant needs and breastfeeding.

Babies deserve to be born in a loving environment where the mother feels energized and welcoming. Adults should be ashamed if they are providing anything less. We must remember that birth is the baby's entry into the world that will leave lasting (implicit, subconscious) impressions of the nature of the world (friendly or dangerous), of people (welcoming or hurtful), of relationships (kind or mean). Which type of world view, trusting or suspicious, would you like your fellow citizens to have?