

(introductory music)

DISCLAIMER: *Taking Back Birth* is a production of the Indie Birth Association and indiebirth.com. No material on this podcast should be considered medical advice. Birth is not a medical event.

MARYN: Welcome to Indie Birth's *Taking Back Birth* series of podcasts here on iTunes. We've been making our way through a pregnancy the last bunch of months. And I am currently about 27 weeks this week. And I've been talking about some different things in the last couple of podcasts if you haven't listened. One was just getting closer to birth, obviously, and how that's been feeling and the kinds of things I've been thinking about, the plans that I feel like making at this point when I still have about—oh, I don't know. 14 weeks or something like that left.

And the most recent podcast prior to this one was all about oxytocin in pregnancy. So just a really quick review of that. Having oxytocin, which is a wonderful chemical, a naturally occurring chemical throughout your pregnancy, can have really amazing benefits. And today we're kind of talking more about birth, preparation for birth. But the role of oxytocin is still super important. So whereas last week, we talked about ways to get more oxytocin in our pregnancies so that we just generally felt better and perhaps bonded better with our babies after birth and perhaps enhanced our efficient labors. That's the hope, right? Today we're talking about actually being in that moment of labor and birth

And oxytocin has such a big role because we talked about it being the love hormone. We talked about it being something that your body produces naturally when you're feeling relaxed and safe and loved and connected to other people. So oxytocin is harder to produce for sure when you're scared or you're feeling watched or you're feeling fear of any kind whether it's coming from you or it's just coming from people around you. Fear is going to make the release of oxytocin less. And we don't want this to happen in labor. We want the oxytocin to just kind of propel our bodies into a very efficient labor pattern and a birth where the baby comes out easily. And the placenta is also birthed easily, and our bodies keep all of our blood. So that's the ideal sort of physiological birth put very simply. And the very brief and simple role of oxytocin.

Now, of course, there are other hormones. But the reason I'm mentioning oxytocin right off the bat here today before I even get started with what this one is about is because it is so valuable during labor. And today we're going to talk about having other people at your birth. Your labor and your birth. So let's see. First of all, I'm coming from the place of planning a home birth and/or unassisted birth. So you may be planning something similar. I suppose, if you're planning a birth center birth or maybe even a hospital birth, you'll still find helpful tips perhaps in this podcast. But in general, I'm just

going to share my experience with you. Kind of what I'm thinking in preparation for this birth. Maybe some of my past experiences as far as having people there that maybe did or did not work.

But in general—again, this is probably more for those of you that will be at home and have the ability to have as many people or as little people as you want. But I'm hoping everybody can take away something because it is important who we have with us during these moments. And having worked with many, many women, I can tell you that even women that are planning home births often don't take this subject so seriously. They're delighted to be planning a home birth, and they're focused on maybe the kind of music they'll have or something like that. But nobody is talking a lot about what does it mean to have people there. What effect does having people there have on your labor and birth? And certainly, that's not all negative. We'll talk about some possible negative effects of having people there. But there may very well be positive effects of having certain people there for certain reasons.

So I really do think this is something we should think about. And I have certainly felt that way throughout my pregnancies and births. This will be my seventh birth. And I think it's been a learning experience each and every time I've had a labor in determining who to invite or when to call them or who to have there to take pictures. And do I feel like I've gotten it 100 percent right in a way? No. Just because birth is that kind of thing. For me at least. Where each time I sort of evaluate or reevaluate and want to try something different than maybe I did the last time.

So that's not commentary on the actual people I've had there. But just different situations that have come up for me. So when we're talking about planning for your birth, your labor, and having people there, I think some of the best advice I have ever heard was from Laura Shanley. And Laura is the author of *Unassisted Childbirth*, and that's a wonderful, fabulous book even if you're not planning an unassisted birth. It's just a great book. And she is a great person. And I heard a conference call that she did a couple years ago. And it really stuck with me. She said something along the lines of, "When you're considering who to have at your birth, at your labor, instead of using your brain to analyze should I, shouldn't I, that kind of thing, just sit with the feeling of them there." And I don't know that she said this, but I would also add sit with the feeling of them there during a very personal moment.

So who knows what that is? Some people compare birth to sex, and I think that's a really accurate analogy. Or using the bathroom. Or even being sick although we know pregnancy and birth—excuse me—are not sicknesses at all. Just sort of that feeling of being watched. Watched when you're going about a bodily process. Whatever that is. So that was Laura's suggestion to just sit with the feeling of that person that you're thinking of inviting. Maybe that's your mom. We'll get into that. Or maybe it's a doula, a

friend. Heck, maybe it's the midwife you've hired. Maybe you're still debating that because there is something you're not quite sure about inviting them.

So I feel like that's a really good tip, and I'm going to take her up on that suggestion as I get closer. And I think in more detail about the kind of energies I want there. Because that's really what it's about. Chances are you're not going to invite somebody off the street that you don't even know to your birth. So somebody that's being considered is either somebody you're close to or something that sort of can offer you something unique at your birth. Or sometimes it's just somebody that you are acquaintances with but really wants to be at a birth. I think that happens a lot especially in the birthy world. People just want to get invited because birth is cool. And we all get an oxytocin high from being at a birth, so that could be another reason.

So it's gauging the energy of these potential people. And if you're trying to feel into someone's energy—I mean that's, of course, a whole other topic. Books and books written on energy and energy work and the kind of energy people give off. But just to be brief, it's not something that requires words. It's not something that you need them to say because often people will say all the right things. "Oh, I'm fine to be at a home birth." Or, "Sure. That's—I'm not scared or whatever." But often, people do harbor fear, and that could come from so many places mostly just the society and culture we live in nowadays. But definitely their own history whether they've had babies themselves. Or heck. Their own birth. Possibly many years ago.

So I think some people as well meaning as they are to help you, if they are not really clear on their feelings about birth and about your plans whether that be unassisted or midwife birth, then it's a little risky. I think you have to be pretty clear on their energetic intentions for being there with you. And I say that from experience, of course. I'm trying to think. I don't think I've ever invited a friend that I felt didn't feel the same way as I did and that brought any fear into the space. I don't feel that way. But I have had family members. In fact, my mother, which is a whole topic to itself, be there for my first home birth. And that was the wrong choice because she had a lot of fear about home birth, in general, and didn't have time, space, interest perhaps, to get really educated.

So simply having her there even though her role was to watch my then two year old wasn't, in the end, something that felt good and helped the labor. And truly, it was probably hard on her too to be there and experience something she had never experienced and not feel like she knew what to do or what her role was. So I would not recommend that. Not to say I wouldn't recommend inviting your mother, if that's what you feel led to do. But I wasn't very conscious at the time about making an invitation that felt right. It was more like, "Well, she's my mom. Of course, she can be there."

My birth prior to the first home birth was a hospital birth, and she was there for that. And that was completely different. I mean there were probably five, six other people in the room that I didn't even know. So having her there at the hospital birth didn't feel strange or like an intrusion. It was all strange. It was all an intrusion. The oxytocin is really hard to get going naturally in a situation like that where you're feeling watched especially by people you don't know. They're timing you. There's lights on. It's cold. And that's just a couple reasons why, in general, hospital birth doesn't work as well for people that don't need it.

So I learned from that, for sure. And I have not invited my mother since as much as I love her. She does not belong at my births. And it's good to feel clear about that. So the same can be said for anyone you're considering. Just try your best to sit with the energy of them before and see how that feels. If it makes that nervous, funny feeling in your stomach or if your brain starts coming up with stuff around them being at your birth, then it's not worth it. And sometimes that's a hard situation to be in especially if a mother, for example, or a good friend was totally counting on being there with you. They have no idea that now you're thinking that doesn't feel right.

I guess my best advice having been through it a bunch of times is you only get this birth for this baby. So it pays to be selective. And, of course, that doesn't mean hurtful. But just being honest. I find that women that are having their first baby struggle the most with this for obvious reasons because (a) they have never been through the birth process, and they don't know that feeling yet of being watched perhaps. Yeah. I think that's one of the hardest parts of having it be the first go around. And wanting to include family or friends is a really normal feeling too.

So it could not sit quite right with you sort of at a deeper level. But on a surface level or in your brain having so and so there or your mother there sounds like a great idea. And you really want to include them. You love them. You want them to be there to witness this baby coming earth side. Or you want their help. But this is just a different kind of selection process. This isn't the same way that we choose people to help us after birth. So I think just, again, sitting with that, and you really have to come to your own conclusions. And sometimes you have to express things to people that they don't expect or you don't expect or are slightly uncomfortable. But, again, this is your birth. This is for your baby to come earth side. If you have a partner and a family, this is a family event. This is for your family and for you and your partner to welcome this little person in.

So that's my personal feeling. I think it's hard to have people there that are bringing in fear in any way. And, again, sometimes that's unspoken. It's just a feeling you get when you think of having them there. And you'd rather get the feeling prenatally during your pregnancy than in the middle of labor. At that point, to realize that they're causing

you stress or fear, sometimes it's a little late for that. Although they can certainly be asked to leave. So all of these things wrap up together, I think. Oxytocin, the number of people at the birth, feeling observed, feeling watched, feeling like you're being timed, feeling like you've got to hurry up. I think that's a common feeling with having people around.

And I struggle every time with that as well. No matter who it is I'm going to be calling whether it's just a friend or last time we had a really close friend take pictures for us. I always kind of put off that phone call. I hate that phone call. It's sort of acknowledging that you're in the labor process, number one. But nobody knows how long it's going to take or anything like that. So I always sort of hate the point at which I call somebody and say, "Okay. I think it's time you come over," because truly I don't know if it's going to be a couple minutes or several hours. And I'm always not wanting to make people sit around and wait for me. I don't know if that's a feeling that comes from my past experiences in birth. Feeling observed, feeling watched. It's really, really hard to ignore that. It's really hard to have people around your house waiting even if they're doing their best to not feel like they're waiting. It's hard when they're not normally at your house, and you're in this labor process to feel like they're not waiting for you.

I don't know. Maybe that's just me. But it's something to think about. So something to think about. The person that you may choose and when you might call them. That's another thing to think about. So sometimes the coordination of birth works out really great. And somebody really does want to be there for the birth, but they don't need to be there for the labor. And you don't want them there for the labor. Well, heck. If things work out and somebody can give them a quick phone call, maybe they'll make it over for the baby actually being born. And that will be possibly less intrusive than having had them there the whole birth.

So remember you can always change your mind. And I think no matter who you invite even if it's your mother you need to put that out there. That nothing is carved in stone. That these are just possibilities. Them being there or not being there. And that you really won't know. You won't know the final call until it's time. So I think that should be a general understanding of people that are considering being at births in any capacity. Somehow there should be a memo out there of okay. If you get invited to a birth, it doesn't mean you're going to actually come. It doesn't mean that. You may not be called. And that's happened to me as well with even friends over the years. They don't call because they don't want that. They don't want you there, or they don't want anyone there. Or whatever it is.

So it's about people not taking it personally and about you really claiming your space and claiming this birth and understanding that the people you have there really do matter whether it's the sheer number of people because more is definitely more. Sort of

that party atmosphere that some people like to think of their labor being which I don't think is wrong or bad. I think it's kind of cool to picture being supported by lots of close women friends or whatever it is. But I think in reality most women sort of whittle down that group. And hewn there is a group, from what I've seen, it doesn't always work as well. Labor doesn't move as swiftly. It doesn't move as effortlessly, if labor can be effortless. You know what I mean. More people. More commotion. More energies in the room really. I think that's what it comes down to.

And when you're the one in labor, you do not want to be sorting through people's energies. It's just not the time for that. Yours is the most important. And what you're going through with your baby is the most important. Nobody else's feelings or fears or aspirations really should be part of your picture. It just interferes with the flow of birth. So maybe that's been helpful. I think talking about having your mother at a birth for a minute or two is relevant. I meet lots of women that think this is a great idea. And I'm not saying it's not. But I think it is a rare mother daughter relationship and it is a rare mother truly that can be present fully with her daughter during these moments.

Now I don't know the mother side from experience yet. My daughters are not anywhere near having babies. But I know it's going to come fast. And I've already thought in a way about how I would be. And I think it would be hard. Not to say I wouldn't be there if she wanted or couldn't find a way to support or heck. Maybe I will get to be the midwife for my grandchildren. Who knows? But I can see already emotionally how it's difficult for mothers to support their daughters at birth just because—just because. There's not anything we can do for anyone in labor. So I think it would be hard to see our daughter in a place where we wanted to be able to do more. And, of course, we can't because labor is just something a woman must do or does do pretty much on her own with support.

So if you feel like your mother can be great support to you, then go for it. And I think that's a lovely thing when it does happen. A mother that can truly not bring any fears into the birthing room of her daughter is a unique woman and probably has done quite a lot of work on herself and/or her own birth experiences. So, again, I think it's just a unique situation. And I have seen a lot that women who are thinking about inviting their mothers end up not feeling quite the same way by the end of pregnancy. It sounds like a great idea in the beginning. You're going to have a home birth. You're going to have a water birth. Your mom is going to be there to watch because really it's cool, right? For your mom to see her granddaughter or grandson coming into the world.

But often as these women get closer to their labors and they understand the role of oxytocin more, then often a good deal of them will decide that no. The mother at the labor not such a great idea. Again, maybe she can be called nearer to the end. Heck, maybe she can be watching some of the other children but out of the house. So it's not

that she doesn't have a role. She can play a very important role. But just that she's not there just through every contraction sort of watching and waiting. Unless that's what you want. And somehow that feels right to you.

But just something—excuse me—to think about especially if you've not been through the labor process before. That having your mother there could do more harm than good. It's possible. So that brings us to sort of assigning people specific roles. Okay. So if you've decided person A, B—person A and B are going to be there. No matter who that is. Then how about a job for them to do? Especially if it's a home birth. There's tons to do.

There's food to be made. There may be children to be watched. There may be dogs to be walked. So having people sit around at a home birth is one of, I think, the most uncomfortable things. And that's whether I'm there as the birth attendant or whether I'm the actual laboring woman. I just—ugh. I despise the feeling of people just sitting around because you can't help but have that feeling. We're all waiting. We're all waiting for something. We're waiting for this woman to birth this baby. So that's been my experience. I think people that have specific roles or jobs at a birth are way easier to handle. And I think they probably have this sense of feeling valued, I would imagine. I know I do. I like to have something to do other than sit around and watch or wait. I like to—I don't mind preparing food or taking care of the kids or going outside and—I don't know. Walking around the neighborhood. That's something.

But really you can assign people sort of specific roles, so you could have a recipe ready with all the ingredients whether that's cookies or some kind of casserole. Put somebody to work on that. And, again, watching kids is another really valuable role if you already have children. So you do want great, reliable people for those roles. And they're very necessary. So if you plan not to have your kids there whether it's for the whole labor or just part of it then you really do need somebody in charge solely of the children. And whether to have children at a birth is another subject. I think in general it's awesome to have our children at our births. At least towards the end when the birth is actually happening.

But all I would advise given experience is that your partner not be put in charge of watching the children unless that's just really what you want to do and where you feel comfortable. Otherwise, the partner isn't available to you at all for anything because whether it's one kid or five—we know how that goes. That's where their attention will be is with the children. So I think it's something to think about. Giving people a role and children are really amazing thing to be looked after and that's something you can really use people for in advance. And perhaps even have one or two people sort of on call that you trust and know—and have them know that you may call. You may not. If it's in the middle of the night, you may not be waking the kids up. But if it's any time else, then

you really need them to do X, Y, and Z whether that's to come over and be with the kids and take care of them. Or to take them out to the park or whatever. But this is definitely something to think. And I find one of the most talked about subjects with people that have children and when they're planning a home birth.

Another idea as far as specific roles that people could possibly play at a labor or birth is to consider the help you need or want after the birth. I think personally that's the most valuable help you could ever get. Postpartum help. I wish in my previous births that I had been wise to that and had used people's offers more efficiently because after the birth that's when you want help. You're sitting there with your baby. Your job is to nurse your baby. You don't need anything really other than somebody making you food and handing you a glass of water. But the house probably needs some help. The kids need to go here or there. Or maybe it's someone to come over and clean up the kitchen or to vacuum the house or to do loads of laundry.

There are so many useful jobs after the baby comes. And, again, I think it's partly cultural. If people really understood the value of the postpartum, they would know to offer that. But because they don't understand, they don't know. And their instinct is to just say, "Oh, if you need anything during the birth, call me." No. We need you after the birth. So one of the best ideas I've ever seen—and this probably is more for a postpartum class. But if you have a baby blessing or a mama blessing or a baby shower then when you have all those people together have someone in charge of having them sign up. Whether it's email addresses or phone numbers. And get a list of people that are willing to help you.

And you can even ask them on the sheet of paper what they're willing to do whether that's dog walk or clean the house. And then after the baby is here, you have a whole list of people that are really willing and able to help you. And that, I think, is the best gift. Birth is so personal, I think, and private and family based. Most people don't see it that way. That hasn't been their experience. So they really just don't know to kind of stay out. Stay out of that area unless you ask them. And they don't know to help after. But that is amazing, wonderful help. And so if you have that list of people that keeps asking about how they can help during the birth or if there is anything you need now during your pregnancy, just remind them how valuable they will be to you after. And then you'll have this whole list of people that are willing.

And then you don't have to give them all reasons as to why they're not going to be at the birth. The birth just isn't for anybody really but the partner and perhaps the children and an attendant or whoever else you're going to have there. That's my thought. So birth photography brings up an interesting, I think, subject when we're talking about having people at your birth. Engaging their energy and the oxytocin flow and what disturbs that. Of course, it is all relevant to having someone there to take pictures.

Birth photography is definitely becoming a big thing or a bigger thing, I think, than it was even five years ago. People are getting all kinds of pictures and videos. And in the big picture, it's awesome especially when these are home births, unassisted births, water births that we can really teach women through these photographs. So not to say that's everyone's goal. Not everyone is a birth nerd like myself. But that definitely was part of my reasoning when I was considering having pictures.

I knew that I could have someone there that I do trust and I do love and I wouldn't feel strange being watched by or looked at by. So for me, it was the right choice for my previous birth. And, again, some of it did come back to I wanted documentation. I had never had pictures of the five babies that came before. And I really wanted some beautiful pictures, and I definitely got those. But, again, for me, it was partly feeling—I have no problem sharing my birth images. It's really, I think helpful and can teach women what birth can look like without all the interventions and the hands and the gloves and the flat on the back.

Not that that's where everybody's thought is, but if you're considering a birth photographer I'd say if at all possible if it could be somebody you're already friends with. And maybe they're not a professional photographer. I don't know that it matters. Certainly, it might matter in certain situations. Dark room. Water births are harder to get great pictures of. But it can just be somebody you love and trust that is good with a camera or wants to try. I think that's perfectly acceptable. I don't really have experience with having someone there that I don't know. Photography wise. And that was offered to me by a local photographer. And I sat and met with her, and she was very nice. But it just didn't feel right. And I personally couldn't have imagined having someone there that I really didn't know at all taking pictures of me.

So to each her own. But certainly pictures are wonderful, if you have someone available to you or someone that's close to you. Does it mess with oxytocin? Hmm. I think we're all different like that. I think it can for sure. Anybody there can mess with the oxytocin and the flow of birth. And to be perfectly honest, my dream birth—and this is from probably seven, eight years ago. It dawned on me one day even as a midwifery apprentice. That my dream birth was really to be completely alone. I don't know if that includes my partner or not because I haven't actually done it that way yet. But I have moments, at least for me, where I think that's the absolute ideal. And I can feel sort of on a deep body level that that could be the right thing and that that is why many women choose it in a sense just because being watched at all has its moments. Even if they are people you love having around, it just depends. It just depends on the person, I think.

So those are some maybe helpful tips about having birth photography. Let's see. What else? I think talking about attendants for a couple minutes is relevant. I mean, heck, if

we're talking about birth photography, who are you going to have there to support you? If it's not a close friend or family member, we've already discussed that. We've discussed the moms. We've discussed having someone there to take pictures. Who are you having there? If it's an unassisted birth, then probably nobody other than a friend or maybe not even that. But if you're having an attendant of any kind whether that's a midwife or whatever, a more traditional midwife, I think it's always good to just see how that feels.

And we could go back to Laura Shanley's idea of gauging their energy and knowing that we can change our minds. We can make different choices. And that could work in reverse. You could be planning an unassisted birth. And at the last minute decide to have an attendant there because that energy feels good and soothing to you. But in a more typical situation, I suppose, many women don't feel as comfortable with their attendants. And that may increase as they get closer to birth. I know that to be true around here many times. Because as you get closer to birth, it just all becomes more real. And often the real nitty gritty comes up. You start asking questions of your care provider, your attendant, such as will you leave the room? Or will you give me as much privacy to labor? And the kinds of answers you get to these questions start to shape how you feel about the person—having the person there.

Things you might not have been aware of up until that point. So the general suggestion, I think, for home births is why would you need a birth plan? I think that's one good tip off. You're starting to get close to birth. You're sitting down with your midwife or your birth attendant. And as you start to get clear on the sort of labor you imagine or the kind of people there, you start getting into the birth plan details. Will you do this? Will you let me do this? Can you go here? Can you be there? Can we call you at this point?

If that stuff gets to be really tedious or seems like it's a struggle, I think that's a pretty good red flag that perhaps that energy isn't what you need. I always say to women if you're struggling at all with those kinds of choices feeling like someone isn't sort of supporting whatever it is your choice is it's only going to be magnified at the time of labor and birth. Yeah. It's nothing—nothing compared to—discussing it prenatally is nothing compared to trying to work those things out during a labor. So you want as little stress, as—little to no fear, all of sort of these negative qualities that we do deal quite a bit within normal day to day life. We really want to make an effort to not have those there at our birth. And that can come in the form of other people. And that can come in the form of, again, talking about choices or feeling like you need a plan. You really shouldn't need too big of a plan when you're home and calling the shots. So something else to think about.

Because I think the whole idea of a birth plan flavors the energy. Sort of tips it in the direction of being more managed often by somebody else. And you should be the one

managing your birth. So I think that about sums it up for today. I think having people at your birth can be wonderful. It can be a real gift to them. It can be an immense help to you. And whoever is there, for better or for worse, you will create some bond with. Again, that's the truth of oxytocin and just the sacredness and the specialness of a birth experience. That sort of whatever happens, whoever is there, you're all sort of bonded because it's that life changing and that intimate. So think carefully. Feel carefully into who you invite. Try your best to leave guilt and obligation out of the picture. Do your best to just honestly go forward and choose what feels right for you and your baby and this birth without any—having to feel bad about it or feeling like you need to make someone happy. This is the time to be selfish, if there is such a thing, and I don't think that's what it is at all. But you need to look out for your interests.

And in understanding how labor and birth work, in particular, it makes sense to really be—really be cautious and really be conscious about who you have there with you to support you at these moments. So best of luck to you. We have quite a few weeks before that should arise at least on this end. But just something I've been thinking about as I make my way through the pregnancy. So thanks so much for joining me. Talk to you later.

(closing music)