

(introductory music)

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MARYN: Welcome to Indie Birth's series of podcasts here on iTunes, *Taking Back Birth*. Hi. Maryn here today with a solo podcast. I've been doing lots of fun collabs and interviews, which has been really fun. And hopefully, you've enjoyed the variety. Since—I don't know. I'm going on—I think this is the 122nd or something like that podcast. So some days I feel like that's a lot of hours of me blabbing away. But I think it has its place. I think variety is nice. And so today I'm back by my lonesome talking about one of my favorite topics. So I'm surprised that I haven't talked about this yet on a podcast. But the subject is kids at a birth. This came up by email this week. So thank you to Sarah, who suggested/recommended this topic. And like I said, yeah. I was surprised that I haven't talked about this publically. I think it's because it comes up a lot of the time just in real life. So meeting with the families I do here this is just part of our prenatal relationship, if they have other children.

And so I'm feeling like I talk about it all the time. It just isn't something I've recorded. So having kids at your birth or having kids at a birth—maybe you're the doula. Maybe you're the sister. Who knows? Just what is the role of children at birth? What can this do for them? How can this work? When does this not work? I'm going to share some of my experiences with you. And, again, I appreciate the topic because I think it's really good to consider things like this. Hence why I address it prenatally with families that have children. I don't see how you couldn't, honestly, if you have kids and you're planning on birthing at home with your kids around. It really is something that you probably want to think about. So personally, I have had kids present at all but one of my home births. And that was baby number six, and I'll probably talk a little bit about why or how that worked out in a little while.

But that's all to say that for most of my home births or all of them except for that one I have had my children here. And so perhaps that biases me in a certain kind of way. I don't know. Really I'm looking to just share my experience with you today and explore some of the questions that I think are worth asking. But as I'll say a couple of times, it really comes back to each family to make this choice for them. So in my own births, I don't think I've really considered—except for that one birth and, again, I'll explain that in a bit. But I haven't really considered not having my kids here. Mostly because at least with Deva's birth who was born about 8 months ago, it's kind of ridiculous to think of sending 7 kids away. I mean I don't know where I'd send them or what they would do. So for those of us that do have more than a couple of kids, you know what I mean. It might not be a discussion for you because your kids are there, and they're not going

anywhere. So I think there is an element of practicality to this topic too that makes it something that may not require that much planning or discussion for some families.

So birth, to me, is just part of life obviously. Which is why my kids have been around and continue to be around. And in fact, at Deva's birth, I even had an additional kid around. My daughter's have a collective best friend, who wanted to come. When I kind of knew labor would be starting a day or two before, she kept asking my kids if she could please sleep over. She really wanted to witness this birth. And this is a kid that's around all the time anyway. I didn't hesitate. It wasn't weird. I didn't even really think about it. It was, "Of course, she can be around." And so that was really cool, I think, for her. And if you watch Deva's birth video, you can see her just kind of peering on with my children. She kind of just looks like one of them. And I think that was a really awesome experience for her as a 12-year-old girl especially one that had been born, I believe, in the hospital and perhaps by surgery. I'm not 100% on that.

But, anyway, it can really affect a person, right? Or a kid or anybody to see just a natural, normal birth. And that's definitely part of this conversation. On the other side of the coin—and I'll probably just be flipping back and forth like this. It can feel stressful to have your children around. And I think that's why this is a topic for many families just depending on the relationships. Some families maybe some of the children have a dad in a different house, for example. So there's some blended families going on and other relationships that need to be considered. So it's not always the simplest thing. I have seen and I have felt for sure, in my own births, that sometimes having kids around, again, can be a little stressful. It can feel kind of suffocating. I think it depends on the labor as well. And this really isn't a labor discussion. But we all know I think that labor can really vary even when we've had a lot of babies.

So if it takes a day or two, that might really change some of the choices you've made even in preparation of children. That said if a labor is only two hours long, then any plans you had for your kids might go out the window. House set up is something that has been getting to me the last couple of births. The house that we're in now I've birthed Evie and then my miscarriage baby and Deva. So three babies in this house. And it's really small. The living space is anyway. So the house itself I wouldn't say is small, but where we actually live is. My bedroom, my bathroom. It's all really tiny. And specifically with the miscarriage baby anticipating his birth was very stressful because I really wanted to be alone. It wasn't, obviously, the kind of birth that kids want to watch or that you really want to celebrate in a way. So I was really feeling the stress of not having a space of my own really for his birth and considered even birthing in my office or guest house space that I use for classes. And had it set up at one point for that to happen.

So that's kind of an out-of-the-ordinary, sort of situation. But that was a situation that really made me feel stressed about having kids around at the time of birth. And it really made me not like some of our living situation. But, again, that's not a live birth scenario although I think the emotions can be that way for any kind of birth just depending on who you are and how your house is set up. So it's something to consider. But I found myself just envisioning the space that didn't exist in my house. And at some point, when I was preparing over the many months for him to be born, Margo even came over and helped me clean up the office space and kind of make it nice and homey. And so that was the plan. So if nothing else, it gave my brain something to do. It gave me a sense of being less suffocated from people and children around birth, and I didn't end up birthing him in the space. Just ended up being in a bathroom in the house, which worked out fine.

So anyway, not trying to go down that rabbit hole although his birth is very much on my mind this time of year. So I will probably dedicate a podcast soon to some of those thoughts. But let's get back to kids at birth. So I think the first thing that we should care about really is that kids are educated. Now this does vary really in home birth families even. Some children are really well versed in the way the bodies work. That kind of thing. Even sex and all of these topics that some times are taboo. So when I'm working with families, I'm not really trying to make it my business what kind of sex education these children have. That's their business with their family. But I think it's a reminder to all of us with our own children to educate them to the degree that we're comfortable with and sometimes beyond what we're comfortable with honestly.

But for the sake of kids at birth, we need to show them how it looks maybe first since most kids—most people haven't seen birth. I think it starts in the prenatal period though like a lot of things. So I know when I'm doing home visits, which is really the only type of prenatal visits I do I encourage the kids around to participate as much as they want. I try to talk to them. I try to have them help a little bit. Hand me this or that. Or touch the fetoscope or whatever it is. Just simple stuff. I have been trying to get together a kids kit in my midwifery prenatal bag for several years. And it's just not something I've done. I should totally put that on my list. Maybe now that I've said it out loud I'll do it. But anyway, I think that's a great idea to have stuff in your bag, if you're a midwife or a doula even that kids can touch and ask questions about and just really get to feel involved. That's really more important than really knowing what to do with a fetoscope, for example.

So just being included. Just learning as much as they want to. Helping palpate the belly or many younger children are very concerned when someone touches their mom. So just kind of asking their permission sometimes or treating it all very gently and gingerly so that the children also get to know you. Again, whether you're part of the birth team or whatever. Or if you're a mom then you can take this into account as you

invite your birth team that your child or children really feels like a part of the team, however, that rolls out. Videos, books, all of these things are really helpful in allowing children to see birth. Now the tricky part, of course, is that as adults we know that births vary. We know that those videos are great, but there's often a barrier between real life. So I would say screen the videos first if you're going to have your children watch them with you. And just check your own reaction and response to the videos you're watching.

So if you're putting on a video that you've not seen before and I've done this totally—and it's a more stressful kind of birth scenario, you feel yourself kind of tense or gripping something until you know that it's going to work out. And most of the time especially if it's a video on YouTube it is going to work out. But we can get these emotional responses, and I think it's important to remember that children can have those too. So screen the videos you want your kids to watch with you. And when you're watching them, just, again, check your own response to what you're seeing. And try your best to remain just super calm and open and just like this is the most normal thing ever because it is. But we're having to go back and reteach people this.

Books, of course. To be honest, I'm not up on kids books about home birth. But I know there are some. So I would look into those and do that as well. So involve your children before birth. Have them ask questions. Prepare them. I have a pretend baby and a pelvis and a placenta. And you and I know that it's not really that close to the real thing really. A placenta, in particular. But we can just start to introduce these things and have kids touch the toys and ask questions, and they will remember. And of course depending on age, you've got different learning scenarios going on. But an older child could potentially learn about the placenta in a more scientific way before birth. And a younger child might just be prepared for the way it looks or the fact that they can help cut the cord.

So I think there's lots of ways to do that. Prepare I mean and educate. And involve. And that's really the key to having kids at birth. And really just having them understand enough to be educated as they grow up because really birth shouldn't be this kind of thing that no one ever has any idea about until they're actually doing it themselves. It would be much more normal if we had all grown up around people birthing. But that's not the case. So we're having to change it.

So, of course, I believe that birth is normal and natural and fine for kids. I have been asked time and time again and again depending on age of child. "Oh, my child is really sensitive. I'm afraid they'll be scared by seeing blood," or whatever it is. "I'm afraid my child will be damaged for the rest of his life because he heard me screaming." I think these are all real concerns. They are all realities of birth. But I do think there's many adults putting their adulthood onto children. Now, again, I can't say from here if that's what you're doing if you've said that or thought that because there is a—really a level of

legitimacy as well to the whole thing. Some kids are sensitive. Some kids might be afraid. So, again, it's going to come back to personality of your child and how old they are. But I'm just saying in a general sense putting these adult beliefs on kids isn't helpful.

So try to think of it as a clean slate. Your child I mean. That your prior misconceptions about birth perhaps or maybe it's of your spouse or somebody else that's going to be present—maybe they're the ones that are kind of scared by the birth process. Or maybe they're the ones that think birth is dirty or whatever. These are beliefs that many people have held onto their entire lives, and they, unknowingly, pass them down. So in the defense of kids being a clean slate, I have seen many times kids who maybe their parents thought this or that—the way they would react. And these kids have done amazing at birth. They haven't been scared. They haven't been grossed out. It hasn't been anything but just cool and really fun for them to be involved. So I think that's something to think about.

Many kids, again, are really into a lot of this stuff. I can think of many kids like I've already said that wanted to touch. I remember my own kids in one of my births. I think it was my third, so I had two already. And my oldest daughter at the time was super into it. And when the amniotic sac came out before the baby kind of like this giant balloon, she really wanted to touch it. She was about four at the time. And the same went for once my third was born. My same, older daughter really wanted to cut the umbilical cord and feel that and look at the placenta. So different kids will want different things. They'll want to be involved in different ways. Obviously, I don't think forcing a kid to be there or watch or touch or do any of that is appropriate, and I really think we can just make offers and show them. And a lot of kids will want to participate.

I do think—and I have seen—that some people, some kids are more sensitive. They're more energetically sensitive. They're more sensitive in general. They may not jive with the whole labor vibe. They may not enjoy that energy. They might feel anxious or restless. Again, it's not something I've seen really hardly at all. So I don't think it's common, and I think a lot of that does come from maybe lack of preparation or some of the other things I've mentioned. But, of course, I just want to put it out there that we're not all the same, and all of our kids aren't the same. But in general, it's how can we prepare them? How can we? Can we give them a job? Can we talk about some things that scare them? Do they just need to know more about the way the process works? Do they need to hear sounds of women in labor? That's something my kids have always kind of laughed about.

And I think, honestly, it was scary to them the first times that some of them heard the sounds of labor. Now they kind of joke about it because they're older. And the older kids, of course, have kind of taught the younger ones that it sounds funny when

someone is having a baby to them. It may be part of the humor is actually them being uncomfortable with the rawness of birth, or maybe it is even a tiny bit of fear. But to me, that was never a reason to keep kids away or to make them go do something else. This is life. This is birth. I think we all need to see it and just be as sensitive as we can. Having our daughter and sons see birth is amazing. And witnessing normal birth, home birth is something that I think must be restored. And how we do that, I think, we each choose that and do the best we can so that this next generation doesn't have to have the same discussions perhaps. Maybe similar but maybe they'll be more adept at having their families and their kids involved than we are. It still feels really weird to a lot of us.

So, again, some things to consider, I think, would be the age of the child. And in my experience, less than two years old doesn't really seem to care as far as it being this monumental experience. But they can still be prepared even that mama is going to have a baby, and these are the sounds. And here's the pool where it might happen. And the baby is going to come out first. And as much detail, I guess, as you feel a less than two year old needs. The thing about that age at births sometimes they need a lot of attention because they're little. And they don't understand intellectually that mama can't be bothered right now. She's in labor. She has to concentrate. They don't care. They want a drink. They want a snack. They're going to ask the mom. And so those scenarios, I feel like, could use a little planning if a mom is aware that her young child might want that. And I've really seen that a lot. I mean why wouldn't a young child keep wanting things from their mom? It's just the way it goes.

So I think in those scenarios I'm not advocating for a kid to be removed or taken away to a babysitter although that works for some families. But just that they are maybe as someone there that can devote 100% of their attention to the child. Now, of course, that's another person at the birth which may not be something that the family wants to do. But ideally, if there is someone close—maybe it's the grandma, maybe it's an aunt—and I get it. All of those people can bring extra energy in to that may not be worth it. But if there is really someone that a child is used to being with, the child feels safe with, it's a really fabulous thing to have someone devoted solely to the child.

Without that, you usually wind up with a partner that's kind of split in two. That wants to be with the mom and wants to be part of this birth but is having to take care of a child which we all know is a full time job. And if it's during the day or if it's nap time or whatever it is, it can turn into a big thing. So I am always willing to help as I can with children at births having many of my own. But I'm not usually the person that a less than two year old wants to hang out with at a birth. I mean they know me. But they don't know me quite as well as their family. So I think age is something to consider. Just having someone available for a young child. And it might even be a slightly older child just depending on your child's personality that you need someone available for

them. The maturity level of three, four year old can vary. There are some four year olds that can totally be in the swing of it and kind of handle a more mature responsibility level around birth. In other words, if they are asked to be quiet or not speak, they can do that. And then, of course, we all know that there's three, four, five, whatever year olds that can't. They just won't be able to handle that. And it will be stressful to them.

I can remember a birth many years ago where the mom had a—I want to say three year old. And so, obviously, she was birthing, and it wasn't her first baby. It actually was her fourth or fifth. And it was her longest birth. And birth can take all kinds of time and energy. But it was very clear to me that this labor that the mom was holding back because she was having to take care of this three year old. The dad wasn't super available energetically and emotionally for this child, who was very attached to mom. And so the kid was literally hanging over the pool just doing what kids do. Nothing wrong with the child. Whining, asking for things. But this mom was trying to work on birthing this baby. So at some point, I kind of suggested that maybe the grandma come over because the mom and the grandma were—are very close. And so that solved it. I took the kid out of the room until the grandma came, and then the grandma was able to be with her in another part of the house.

And then the kid didn't really seem to care. It was—she knew the mom was in the house. She knew she was safe with grandma. And then finally, this mom could get down to the business of birthing this other baby. So that's one time that really sticks out in my memory as the mom being very obviously stressed and distracted really. So yes. Babies come out. Yes. At some point, our bodies are just going to go ahead. But this was really taking more because of her distraction. And once the kid did leave the room, the mom did get down to business and birthed the baby pretty soon after. So kids coming at the moment of birth—oh, wait a minute. I'm totally skipping around. Nope. Back up. We were talking about age of kids.

Personality type, obviously. I think that goes without saying too much more. Some kids need more. Some need less. Some are higher needs. Some need to be involved. Some don't. So you really just have to assess where your child or where your children are at and really put yourself first. So as moms, it's not something we're used to doing. But I guess having seen this scenario myself over the years it's something that I've learned to do in my own birth. It's not that I don't care about my kids. Of course, I do. But when I'm birthing, I don't care about it. Someone else can care. And someone else can feed them and take care of them. And I don't want to be distracted by that. And I try to communicate that beforehand because it is stressful. It can be stressful having kids around that think life is just like any other day. And it is in a lot of ways. But labor can take focus and intention. So it is, again, a great topic.

The time of day of birth is something to think about, but, of course, I don't think we can control that at all. Many of the families I work with do have a plan for during the day should they birth during the day. But usually, you have less of a plan at night because the assumption is that the child or children will stay sleeping. And that's the truth. It really makes things less complicated.

So I think there are some options when we're talking about kids at birth. And what are we talking about? If you're the one birthing, what do you actually want? Do you want your kids there the whole time during the labor? If so, do you have preparations for them? Do you have people? Do you maybe have some other activities? Older kids maybe would want to bake a cake or who knows what. So I think planning can go into that, if you want them at a labor. I think there can be just kids coming in as best as anyone can plan when the baby is actually coming out. And then I think there is involving kids after birth obviously. So, again, depending on the age of the child it might not be super important to this child to be there at the moment the baby comes out of the woman's body. It might not be. It might be just fine to come in five, ten minutes later, half an hour later, an hour later and see that brand new baby on the mama's chest in bed. Whatever. Whatever you've decided, whatever kind of preparation you've done. Sometimes it's just chance. Just the way it works out.

But I'm just saying, again, that some kids are fine and happy to be involved after. So we don't necessarily need to get hung up about them being there at the moment of unless it's something they've said they've really wanted to do or if that's something that's really important to you. So, again, you have those three stages of labor, birth, and postpartum to invite kids in, to prepare them for, to choose, and to just see what happens. One sort of recent story is really sweet, I think. So it was a baby whose birth I was at six years ago. Six years old. And his mom was birthing another baby a couple months ago. And they had planned for this child to not be there during the labor and birth because he's a very smart, precocious child that was going to, she thought, probably talk a lot and ask her questions and very focused on him most days of her life because he's her only kid.

So, again, nothing weird. It's just this is the way kids are. So they, as a family, decided that he would go elsewhere for the afternoon. And the child was fine with that. So when I arrived, she was progressing in labor. Side note, I could tell she was waiting for him to leave. She kept trying to go into her room and shut the door, and this sweet child was just following her with questions. So in this case, it made sense that this was the plan. She knew her child well. And before he left, he was very sweet. He was helping me set up my stuff and was very curious about looking in my bag. And I showed him all of the things that had been used at his birth. So things like the cord scissors, which we sterilize, and the scale and just the couple of items that literally were used for him on his birth day. So that was a sweet way of, unknowingly, really connecting the dots for him, I

think, even though he's a super smart kid and just inviting him in in a way that hadn't been planned, hadn't been expected. So he was really thrilled to help me with my stuff and was really cute about hearing the stories that I was telling him about his own birth. And then he went on his happy way, and the mom, of course, got deeper into labor, birthed her baby, and I believe he came back an hour or two after. And he was just thrilled to see this new little baby sibling. And by the sound of it, story of it, didn't necessarily have any regrets. That was just the plan for him. And it worked out perfect.

So yeah. I guess I'm not trying to convince anybody not to have their kids around at the moment of birth. Obviously, the moment of birth is my favorite thing in the world. And I'm personally just thrilled that almost all of my children were awake last time to see Deva actually come out of my body. In fact, on her video, I even say to them, "Can you see her head?" Like I'm just so thrilled. Like that's not even the word. It's just amazing to me that birth even happens this way. That people exit our bodies, and I was just—it was such a beautiful thing for me to have them see. So I'm not advocating taking kids away for the moment of birth, if you feel the way I do and you have kids that want to see that or can see that or whatever it is. I couldn't say enough about what a brilliant thing that is. And, hopefully, in the future of our children that are allowed to see birth—again, it's something that really affects them. It really changes them. That that is just the way they think birth goes. That there really isn't a lot of question in their deeper selves.

So I'm not advocating one or the other. Just kind of presenting the options. That said I just want to say again that I think what we're really desiring for our children—or at least I'll just speak for myself is having them involved. Having them included. Having them remember. Having a sibling see another sibling come into this world, I think is one of the greatest gifts you can give your family. And, again, a lot of it is probably an unspoken gift. Just what that means, how that feels. I would argue—and there's probably never going to be studies on this just like there isn't on most of these things—that siblings are probably better bonded when they are present at each other's births. So that's not to make people feel bad about not being there.

In fact, the story I did want to tell about my kids not being at one of our births, which was True's, and he's number six is actually kind of sad to me. So obviously, I had five older children at the time. And I'm trying to remember the details. Like a lot of my labors, it started in the morning. And he wasn't born until 9:00 at night. But the difference with his birth was we had family coming into town because they had anticipated his birth, of course. They were coming from the other side of the country, but they knew that I usually had babies around my date. And so they were planning to be there. Not at the birth. But for the kids after. So it just so happened, they literally were on a plane the day that I was in labor. And they arrived a couple of hours before he was born. And my kids were really excited to see them. So it went both ways. The kids were super

excited to see their grandparents. They hadn't seen them for a year. And I was getting into that stage of labor where you really don't want anyone around.

And I don't remember being really like mental about the decision. I don't even know that I'm the one that made it. But the decision was made for the five children to go with the grandparents and whatever. Have dinner with them. So they missed True's birth. He was born at about 9:00 at night. And they still talk about it. They still talk about being sent away which is sort of horrible because I really don't think that was the way it went. But that, unfortunately, is what they remember. So we have a lot of nice photos from his birth. We had a photographer there. And she did stick around and take lots of photos of them with True as a newborn after. So it's really great to have those memories and see their faces. And their faces look kind of shocked even though many of the older ones had seen birth before. The younger ones hadn't. And so in a lot of ways, it felt less of a seamless connection, if that makes sense.

They love him. He's five now. He's whatever. There's not like a problem with the sibling relationship. But I do know that my older kids would say they were very sad they weren't there, and they really felt like they missed out. So that's been my experience. If I did go on to have more babies, which is yet to be seen, it's just not something I would personally question. We're kind of getting to the other side of the spectrum with our kids now which is that we have older kids. So I have a 13-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter. And if I did have any more, obviously, they'd be older. And so what do I think about that? What do you think about that? My answer is birth is birth. I wouldn't care if my 13-year-old son saw Deva be born. And I don't think that's an issue. I think it's normal and natural and beautiful for kids of all ages, if they want to participate to see birth and not feel weird about it.

Birth is—it's not a sexual event. Yes. Birth is—it has many similar energies. It's not a static sterile event. But it's also just really normal. And as they grow up, it might even be more important for them to continue to see. But in any case, most of my kids at this point have seen birth except for the youngest one. So at some point, we'll stop having babies, and there will be kids of mine that won't have seen birth other than their own videos, which is also kind of cool. So anyway hope you enjoyed my perspective on kids at birth. I really do believe it's a family choice. It's a family decision. There's lots to consider. As the woman that will be laboring, I know firsthand what that's like and all the things to consider. I also know how pregnancy emotions can run high, and so sometimes it seems like this really, really passionate topic. And it is. But it usually works out.

So make yourself some options. Do some educating. Talk to your kids. Talk to your family. And then trust, ultimately, that it'll work out perfectly. Thanks for listening. Check out the Indie Birth site for new stuff. I usually bug people about reviews on

iTunes. And that's because it really does help iTunes—people that are looking at iTunes to have people find our podcast, obviously. The issue is that most of you are listening to our podcast on the Indie Birth site, which is fabulous. But anyway, it's just kind of—there's two different things going on with that. So if you're led to leave a positive review on iTunes, it's always appreciated. It's just kind of tricky and hard to I have been told. So I understand that people aren't really into it. But if you've been listening to my podcast for the last four years and you have something nice to say, then maybe you'll take the leap and log into iTunes and leave a review.

All right. Thank you so much. Have a great day.

(closing music)