

(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 from my new creative space location. One of the first podcasts to record from this place. So hopefully, the sound is okay, and I am sitting in a partially empty room. It's a two-room space. And the one room, I think, is looking pretty nice. It's decorated pretty cozy. Lots of birth photos. And I've had a couple of meetings in there, so that room has the benefit of that energy. This smaller room is where I plan to do videos and podcasts and is kind of an alone room. So not so decorated. A little lonely feeling. And to my husband's discovery the other day, there is a black widow living in here in the radiator in the wall. So I am, of course, positioned so that I can record this podcast and also keep a lookout for anything that might crawl out. I do not like spiders. I do not like black widows. And so I am hoping, at some point, it makes an appearance, so we can just be done. Who knows what that means? I actually haven't seen it. My husband has. So not sure what the symbolism is there. But this will be, I think, a pretty powerful, creative space for myself and, hopefully, for many women. So we could even say that the female spider, the black widow in particular, is kind of an archetypal powerful woman symbol. So I'll leave it at that, and I'll let you know.

Anyhow, what is this podcast actually about? It's not about black widows although there is something about that energy honestly that might lend itself to the actual subject and topic of this podcast, which is mothers at birth. So this comes up all the time. All the time with the women I serve. And I think that's partly because it's a discussion for most people who they're going to have at their birth. And I think in serving lots of people that haven't had a home birth before the topic of mothers being at a birth is new and something that many first time home birthers in particular seem to be dabbling in deciding or considering in a way, that I'd say, probably more experienced home birthers don't. And that can go either way. We'll talk about that. So maybe those people are 100% sure that their mother at their birth is not a thing they want. And then there are, of course, people where they are 100% sure they do want their mothers at their birth. But like I said, it seems to be people that have had home births before that are not really considering this as much.

So I do have opinions on this topic like I do on most. And I just want to share my experience and things I talk about with the people I work with to maybe consider. But ultimately, it's not for me to say even with the women I serve. It's not really my business who they have at their birth other than some of the topics I'll share about today. So I'll talk about educating people that are going to be at your birth. And I do think that that's

a role I have in helping with. So I don't think that I necessarily want to be a part of every birth that might have sort of unconscious decision making around things like who will be there. I think that's a really important choice. And so while I respect everyone's thoughts and opinions on the matter, I think it can create interesting situations that, personally, I may or may not want to be a part of. That's just honest. And that's just some of the boundaries that I have.

But okay. My own experience with mothers at births. First of all, I think it mostly does not work, but I would, of course, add that sometimes it does work. And sometimes there is a way to kind of make it work or to mold or shape it into something that can work. For women that it does work for, honestly, I think they know these things that we're going to talk about, so I don't think most women have luck with just asking their mothers to be at their home birth and not really addressing some of the things we'll talk about and having it work out great. I'm sure it does sometimes. I'm sure there are people listening who just decided to have their mother there, and that was it. But for the most part, I think if one is going to want that and plan for it then there does need to be a plan so that the best outcome is achieved.

So my own story, I always share a little bit. My own mom was at my first birth. However, my first birth was a hospital birth, so there wasn't really the same energy or dynamics there obviously. I wasn't really in charge of my own birth. The doctor was. The nurses were. So I don't really even remember the role that my mom played or didn't play. I don't remember being comforted by her. I don't remember being annoyed by her. She was just, honestly at the time of birth, another person in the room. And there were a lot of people in the room. So I don't really feel like that counts as far as what we're talking about today. My next birth, which was my first home birth, my mom was present again. And I didn't know that this was a topic of discussion. I didn't know that this was something to make a conscious choice about. I didn't really know anything about undisturbed birth or my own needs or wants. I just figured, "Well, she was at the last birth. What difference does it make that this is at home? It'll be good for her."

Now my own story, as many of you know, is we didn't switch to a home birth midwife until only a couple weeks before my son was born. So I don't blame not prepping in this way on my midwife at all. However, I think if we had worked together longer perhaps this would have come up as a topic between us. And I would have been better prepared either to prepare my mom to come or to prepare her to not come. But there was no planning. There was no preparation around it. And honestly, it was not a great experience for her or for me in terms of her. So I regret that. And, again, I feel like without this opportunity to be told maybe it's a thing or to learn or to investigate all the ways this could look then often we wind up with a situation where a mom, in particular, at a birth is really uncomfortable.

My mom had two unmedicated hospital births, so she wasn't unfamiliar with natural birth but knew nothing about home birth and, again, wasn't prepared in any sort of way. She didn't like my midwife, for whatever reason. And I remember spent most of my labor hiding in the small little kitchen we had with obvious scared energy. I don't remember more than that. I just remember feeling that she was scared and that I felt less free to really birth with her there. I do remember her taking my then two-year-old daughter out at some point probably before the birth. In fact, I don't really recall if they were actually there for the moment of birth. I don't think they were. I think she had taken my daughter out probably shortly before. Probably when it got really loud and really intense and didn't come back probably until after my son was born.

And I remember her being traumatized or whatever, scared, had stuff to work through, and I didn't really know what to do with that. I didn't really care in a sense because I had just had a baby. And honestly to this day, we haven't really ever talked about that. Home birth isn't her thing. And for all of the rest of my children, she has never been present. She has never been invited. She, honestly, never even knows when I go into labor. And this seems to work best for both of us because I know she doesn't really want to know until the baby is here. And I think we're both okay with that. But like I said, for better or for worse, the experience we both had was having her at a hospital birth and my first home birth. And as a result of that experience, I felt like there was a lot to learn and share.

So one sweet thing I wanted to share is that my daughter, Ever, who is now 4 ½, she will regularly ask me if I will help her when it is time for her to birth a baby. And right? She's only 4. Who knows what that means? But I think it is cool to think we are educating younger generations about birth in a way that they're going to know what they want. So whether or not she actually wants me there years from now, I couldn't say. But I certainly never had a discussion with my mom at age 4 about her being with me when I would have a baby.

So there is a huge elephant in the room, I think, when we talk about having mothers at birth. And it is fear. So like I said, many women, many couples, sit here with me. And when we bring up this topic of who will have there, what are you desiring, and this topic of, "Oh, I think I should have my mom there," or, "Oh, my mom is going to be there," something that we're not addressing is the fear that is around birth. This is a cultural fear. This is a societal fear. This is a fear that most people carry including mothers. We have lost our connection to birth. We have lost our connection really from woman to woman, for the most part. And we are not handing down experiences. So you may be, I think, one of the rare people that at least I've met that was herself born at home. So if you've had a mom whose had home births, then none of this may apply. This may be a nonissue for you because if that is the case—not all the time but there is a great chance

that your mother does not fear birth unless she had some kind of traumatic experience perhaps at her own home births.

But I meet those kind of people so rarely. And I think the generation that is birthing now, for the most part, their mothers just didn't have home births in the numbers that maybe we're having now or hopefully we will one day. So, again, fear is in the room. And when people say they want to have their mothers at birth, I wonder if they know that most everyone is carrying this fear about birth and that there are no positive experiences being handed down.

Another important thing is that the role of mother is so powerful. We move in our lives from maiden to mother. We all do, if we birth. Literally one day we are not mothers. And the next we are. And where that happens in pregnancy is a whole other topic. It's a pretty gray area. When does a woman feel like a mother? Is it when she's pregnant? Is it early pregnancy? Does she not become a mother until she births? There is no right answer, but I think what I'm trying to get at is the role of mother is powerful and defines us to a certain extent. And there is something so beautiful and maybe confusing and challenging even about passing this role on to the birthing woman. So we've been the daughters. And then at some point, some ambiguous point in our own birthing process, we become the mother. And so the role hands down. And I guess really then our mothers move into the crone stage. We'll never—they'll never cease being mothers. But kind of like the life cycle moves on.

And I think that is something unspoken that people are feeling and processing, and it can be scary and overwhelming, I think, on the mother's side even though I haven't had daughters that have birthed yet obviously. I can almost feel that on a mother's behalf. Like this trepidation, this fear around her own daughter passing through this threshold to kind of take up the reins as mother. And that's changing her own identity. So I guess that's pretty deep in some ways. I think it's pretty cool too. But I'm just saying that I think there are deeper reasons beside fear that this is a hard and sometimes challenging thing to have a mother at a birth. Also this brings into question our own relationships with our own mothers, which for many women, for many people, are complicated for lack of a better word. So when I've seen mothers at births, a lot comes into my mind. A lot of questions. Does she respect her daughter as a woman? Does she treat her like a child? Does she trust her? Does she trust her choices as a mother?

There are so many questions that come up that are not mine to answer. But I think if they aren't at least made known or conscious then they have the potential to really disrupt a labor and birth. I don't think any birthing woman wants to feel the energy of her mother not trusting her as a mother or not respecting her choices as a woman in those moments that are so raw and open and sacred. These are conversations and things that should definitely happen before birth. So I'm not saying one is going to

approach their mother and say, “Do you respect me as a woman?” No. But picking up these clues and leading your own life in a way that shows your mother that you are a grown up. That these are your choices. That at this point in time you’re not really looking for her approval or her feedback or her thoughts or her opinions, which all is way harder to do than it might sound as we all know. So that’s why we don’t wait until we’re in labor to do it. And that’s why we don’t invite our mothers unconsciously to our births because these are the deeper levels. These are the deeper things that are going on that most people don’t want to address on any level at all, and that it really, really can mess things up.

Another relationship that comes into play at a birth is assuming a mother—or not the mother. Sorry. Assuming—well, the birthing mother, the birthing woman has a partner. And that actually reminds me that when I have heard of successful mothers at birth stories sometimes it’s because that woman doesn’t have a partner, and her mother is really kind of filling that role which I think can really change things perhaps positively because she’s not in that mother to the birthing woman role. She’s a partner. But if there is a partner and there is a mother to the birthing woman, then there is that relationship to consider. And I’ve definitely seen and felt dynamics that are uncomfortable and unclear and muddy between the partner and the mother while a woman is birthing.

And that’s another thing to iron out. Again, I think the overall recommendation, if I had to make one on this podcast, isn’t that there is a rule about it. It’s not that mothers at births are bad or that partners at births are bad at all. It’s just these are complicated relationships sometimes between each other. And if we don’t have this ironed out a little bit or awareness, then the intensity of birth can make it a lot harder to deal with, and nobody wants that because birth is already sort of complicated and intense. Why complicate it more by having your mother there when your partner hates your mother? And that’s an energy that hasn’t been sorted out. It just won’t be good for you.

So let’s talk more about educating anybody that really is going to be there or that you want there. We are talking specifically about mothers, but I believe firmly that anybody that has the honor of being invited to your home birth has the commitment to educate themselves to be able to support you in the most conscious way. To me, that is the nonnegotiable. So if somebody wants to invite a friend or a sister or a mother and they aren’t willing to help educate them or they think that’s not necessary, that’s the kind of thing that it’s hard to be a part of because in protection of the woman’s space we must acknowledge that other people’s energies can be so disruptive. And the biggest way to disrupt birth is with fear. So how do we combat fear? Well, through all the ways we’ve talked about but specifically education.

So when we're talking about mothers being at births, first, it is being very bold in helping her or providing resources for her, the mother, to work through her own trauma and her own experience. So how do we do that? Well, that's not always the easiest thing, which is why sometimes this becomes a topic that it's easier just to not honestly. That's why. I think that's why many women don't get to the point where they're comfortable with their own mothers there because they realize these things. And you really can't solve someone else's trauma for them. You really can't even make someone look at their trauma and process it for you. It's just not going to happen that way. So this is a little sticky. But in working on ourselves during pregnancy, one thing I ask people to do is interview their mothers about their birth. So their mother will tell the whole story. Her pregnancy, her experiences, how she felt, how the birth went, what interventions she had, what trauma she may have had or not. And kind of get that out so that the birthing woman first really understands where she came from and the experience of her mother.

And, again, just generally, I'd say if your mother had a really traumatic birth experience and she hasn't ever dealt with that because many people haven't then it might just be too much to take on. And you don't have to blame her or judge her for it. But because of that, it might be almost impossible for her to support you without her experience first and foremost in her mind. That's just normal. I have met many mothers along the way who have had traumatic birth experiences and are aware and have processed their trauma and actually are the most supportive of their daughters having home births because they don't want their daughters to experience the trauma that they had. I still think even those kind of people need to be educated about undisturbed birth. And so that is a huge topic, and there are many resources. These podcasts for one and lots of books. And, of course, the people that I meet with I really do like to sit down with their mothers together with them, if they're seriously going to have them at the birth, and educate them in the way that I'm able to in a short amount of time.

So if they're already on board with undisturbed birth, they get that. We talk more about their role or their lack of role almost. So being available but not being intrusive. Perhaps being outside of the birthing room if that's what she wants. Having a project perhaps like cooking or cleaning. But basically, being aware of her energy. So that is something—those two things—both looking at past trauma and experience and her own views of birth and being willing to learn more. Being willing to go there and accept that things may have happened to her in her births that now she is learning about maybe differently. Maybe they didn't have to happen or maybe she didn't have to be induced because babies come or whatever it is.

So it's a big chunk to bite off especially if one is super close to birth. This may not be something that can be resolved in a way that feels really good. And that is overall what I would recommend is that if you're considering having your mother at your birth you have to go through these steps with her so that you feel good. Or whatever steps you

feel have to go through for you to feel good and like this is the perfect thing, and you're not just doing it because you feel bad or she'll be mad or—I think the most famous one is, “But I want her to see real birth,” which is a beautiful statement. And I think a beautiful offer to the world to allow someone that may not ever have the experience again, someone that's close to you, to see you do this fantastic thing. But I would still argue that that's not a great reason to someone in that is not conscious and is going to bring fear. It is never worth it. And above and beyond, compromise will ruin a birth. It will.

And that doesn't mean, of course, that anything bad will happen. It just may really cloud the experience that you have or be something you have to deal with after birth. It's never worth it to bring unconscious people into your birth space. I am totally uncompromising about that. I just can't think of an example where that seems like the right thing. The safety of mother and baby on every level, not just physical, is paramount. Is the most important thing. And people that are unconscious and bring fear and doubt and questioning or other sorts of energy—energy that's too busy or excited or nervous—none of these things are considered conscious energy for undisturbed birth. So if that gives anyone permission to disinvite someone whether it's your mother or a friend, then I say go for it. You only get this birth with this baby. It is not worth giving it up for anyone.

So there's a couple other things that come to mind when I think about having your mother there. The first is—well, this kind of goes back to the principles of undisturbed birth. But there is this element of privacy. And just depending on your mother, that might be a big deal. That might not really be a big deal because she's used to give you privacy. But remember. Birth is like sex. There are so many similarities. As we like to say, what gets the baby in will get the baby out. So if there is any kind of way you would feel hindered by eyes on you when you're having sex or really for that matter going to the bathroom—although I think sex is obviously way more intimate—then you should not have that person there. If you feel like they're going to judge you or be surprised or it's something you're not going to be able to really get into fully because someone is watching which is a normal mammal way to be then that person should not be there.

So that. Some other things to consider if you really are going to have your mother there—really anybody, I think, consider her strengths and have these deep in detail conversations please. Don't just ask someone to be there and never prep them and never ask them these things. I've been there and done that, and it's generally not successful and, most of all, not fulfilling. It's really not as fulfilling for the birthing woman. And I would argue it's not very fulfilling for the person there because just imagine their experience. Just try for a minute. Let's say they're fearful, or they just don't know a lot about birth. But they love you. And they want to be there to hand you

drinks and watch the baby come out, whatever it is. Just imagine being that person if you can. Imagine how it might feel to see birth for the first time. Imagine how kind of bored sometimes people are at births in this capacity because they don't realize it's not this dramatic super event most of the time. It takes time, and labor can be kind of boring from their perspective. There's not anything to do.

But then they get busy, and they think they should do stuff. So that can really mess with everyone. But in other words, I think if we try to put ourselves in that space maybe we can feel a little better how honestly it would be really uncomfortable for most people to be at birth without being prepared. And even then, it might still be uncomfortable for them. So I usually say if—let's say it's your mom. If she can't watch—I hate to say graphic but whatever. Graphic, raw birth videos on YouTube then I don't know how she's going to handle being with her own daughter with a baby coming out of her body. I think we overestimate what people are prepared for when this is our world. We're in it. We're the pregnant ones. We're educating ourselves all the time. We're visualizing this birth. I mean we know what it's going to be like to a certain extent unless you haven't had a baby before.

But even then, if you're having a home birth, you're probably open to yeah. I'm going to poop on the floor. Or whatever it is. It's real. It's raw. So, again, this is not for everybody, and it's not something we need to feel bad about when it's not because, again, it might be so uncomfortable for these people we think should be there that it's not even worth it. I think what really needs to be considered from the birthing woman's perspective because she is the one. This is all about her and her baby. So if that's you, why do you want your mother there? I think that's the boldest question to ask. And sometimes when you say that to people in person, you feel kind of harsh because maybe there is some—more respect we should have. If a woman wants her mother there, we should just respect that. And oh, it's her mother. Of course.

But no. As somebody that attends births and really cares deeply about women having an amazing experience, I think it's worth asking why do you want her there. And that's not meant to be a challenge. But what do you think her role is? What do you think she can give to this experience? And is there something she can give that really can only come from her? So in other words, if you're picturing just as a support, then perhaps your midwife is going to fill that role. Or a doula. Does it really have to be your mom? What other kind of roles would you want her to fill? So, again, maybe it's someone to cook or have a project or to watch your two year old. That's where it comes up a lot in women I've worked with. Is like, "Oh, my mom is the natural one to watch the kid." Well, that's great, but it doesn't mean people have to be present at the birth.

And that's a complicated situation because I think sometimes people go into that thinking, "Oh, but she's not going to be at the birth. She's going to pick up the kid," and

then be gone. Well, I can tell you from experience—many experiences actually before I caught on, that that is a complicated thing. I've been at labors where that happens. And the mom comes in. And the woman is in labor, and labor is getting intense. And this mom is oblivious. She hasn't been prepared. She's definitely nervous. She has kind of no idea what to do. And maybe she is waiting for the kid to get ready or hemming and hawing getting the kid ready or whatever it is. But her energy usually literally stops labor. I have seen it more than a handful of times.

So that is one of the most—I hate to say insidious situations where a mother can wind up at a birth kind of like not really planned, not really welcome, not educated, not conscious. Nothing. She just winds up there. And it can seriously mess with the energy. So yeah. Again, I can think of at least probably close to ten births sort of in my recent memory history where that was the case. The mom stopped by either for another child or to drop off food or whatever it is, and labor just literally stops because the woman is uncomfortable. They haven't had these talks. And having your mom watch you birth, I don't care what anyone says. In this culture, in this area of the world, is sort of a big deal. It's not something we're familiar with. It's not something we're comfortable with. We're a pretty closed society. It's not like people walk around naked—most of them—with their extended family members. So, again, it is a big deal. And the worst of it is if it makes the birthing woman feel scared or releases adrenalin then it really does affect the birth process.

So a little bit more about doing this or inviting your mom to heal her or to give her this massive experience of her grandchild's birth at home. I think that's a really noble thing to want. And I admire the intention of it because it's so giving. Like let me share what's going to be this beautiful experience. But I would just caution you to not do that. You can't rush people's healing. You can't change their birth experiences just by seeing yours really. And in the experience I've had, mothers don't need to be present to have any degree of healing. So in other words, I have been present with women whose mothers have had all cesareans. This mother didn't witness her daughter's home birth. That was never going to happen. Thank goodness. But afterwards, her mother was deeply touched, deeply affected by the fact that her daughter did it. That she had this vaginal birth. Something she was never able to achieve. And being there moments or hours after birth and seeing a newborn baby—trust me—is special, is something they'll remember forever. They will feel included.

Most people are used to invited—or used to being invited to a hospital which is a completely different experience bonding wise. So I would just reiterate that having a mother at a birth, like watching the labor, watching the baby come out might not be the right thing, and a good compromise can be, “Well, we'll call you when the baby is here.” I've seen mothers literally come over minutes after or hours after. And, again, that is a very special experience. So I don't think we need to assume we need to heal anyone

from their experiences. I don't think we should assume really that our experience will touch someone in a way that necessarily is life changing. I know that's our hope. That's all of our hopes, right? That birth will change people. But we're talking about grown adult women that are grandmothers at this point, and I think they have to want it. And some do. Like I said, there are mothers out there that are into it. I've had mothers come to free workshops with their daughters and sit and cry and get it. And that's a different scenario. So I'm not at all saying that that doesn't work. But that is not super common. And as the birthing women, we need to take the responsibility to offer the education if this is really something we want because we can't bring every mother to a free Indie Birth workshop unfortunately. Maybe one day that will be more of the case.

But let her be an adult. And you be an adult. Don't be the little girl anymore. Stand up for yourself and figure out what you want for this birth for you. Yes. You're a daughter. You'll always be her daughter. But you're a mom in some capacity. Whether you feel like one right now, you will at some point in the process. And it is your job as a mother to protect your family's space. And I say that a lot. And it's big. So when we talk about this, it's not just—obviously, I've been talking for 35 minutes. It's not a two-minute conversation. It's not like, "Oh, that's bad," or, "Oh, that's good." It's like no. This is complex because stepping into the role of mother is huge and many of us don't have the confidence to do that right off the bat, which is also normal. Maybe it's our first baby. Or who knows what? But we haven't realized that we need the confidence, and we think sometimes, I think, that our mothers can give us that confidence. But they can't. We have to step into that role ourselves, and our mothers can be there as witnesses and as guides. But looking to them for permission for this to be okay, especially when most people really aren't okay with home birth, is pretty dangerous.

So what are your own fears? If you really feel like your mother has to be there and she's not on the same page and she's not fearful, well, then what's the deal to be blunt? What are you hanging onto? What are you afraid of? Yes. Birth is an unknown. Yes. It can be scary. We are crossing the coals. We never know, in a way, how it'll wind up. But I guess really what can our mothers protect us from at those moments? Birth is something that we do with support, but we really must do alone.

So in the end, I say why risk it? Unless you have a really awesome relationship with your mother and you can get all of this out on the table in enough time. You have educational resources. You have all this emotional work that you're willing to do around your own issues around being a mother. You're willing to hear her and work with her, and you have a job for her and a role for her. And I think another important thing is a clause that says—well, with anyone at a birth, a clause that says, "Yes. I am planning on calling you, but I might actually not. And I just need you to be okay with the fact that I don't know for sure even if this is my ninth baby. I don't know for sure what I'll want.

And so please, please don't be hurt." I mean you can't really control that. But I'm just putting—I'm being honest that this might not play out in the way we think.

So I think if you've decided that you don't want your mother there and for some reason she thinks she's automatically invited which totally happens or maybe you've said at some point she was going to be there but now you've heard some of these things and you're like, "Oh no. I don't think that is the best thing I could do," then the hard conversation might come up. So I'd love to hear people's stories or ideas around how maybe you manage this conversation. I think it can be hard. And then I also think it doesn't have to be hard. It's just you being honest as a powerful woman, as a mother, and just hoping people understand that you don't ever mean to hurt them. This is just about you. It has to be about you and you have to be honest.

So I don't know. Those conversations go all kinds of ways. Sometimes mothers when they're told they don't need to be there or we don't want you there or some nicer way of saying that, they are hurt. And maybe the relationship goes through a little adjustment or turmoil. But I've never heard of a mother that didn't get over it at all in my experience. So I think honesty is the best policy. I always tell people they can blame it on me kind of sort of. Just like, "Oh, my midwife really suggests not having a lot of people at the birth and keeping it pretty quiet. And how about we call you right when the baby is here or whatever works for you?" But most I think will come to a place where they understand and I'm guessing might even be relieved honestly. So I'm sure it's offensive in a way that I don't quite understand since I'm not a grandmother yet. But I think for a lot of people it would be relieving to not have to witness this.

So only you can know what's right for you. Only you can know how to have this conversation or when. But I think I've shared enough points on how to go about reasoning for yourself which way to go. Do you want to have your mother there truly for sort of all your right and true reasons? If so, then how can you work through it with her to make it the most amazing experience for both of you? Or you've decided that that is really not what you actually want and maybe you're reconsidering all the people that you've invited.

So my bottom line is I think birth should remain private and intimate. Of course, that definition really does depend on what that means for each woman but totally support women in not compromising their births for other people. It's just not worth it. There is always another way for someone to get an experience they need to have, and I don't think our births need to be out there as experiences for other people. They are really purely our experiences and that of our babies and so keeping it as intimate and being really conscious and intentional about who you invite in especially mothers is important. So thanks so much for listening. Check out the [indiebirth.org](http://indiebirth.org) site for new stuff, and I'll talk to you next time.

(closing music)