



Introduction

THE seeds for *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering* were sown in the blissful days and weeks following the birth of my son, Jacob Patrick. Jacob's birth, my third at home, had been intense and yet ordinary, challenging but joyous, and ultimately ecstatic and fulfilling. Holding my new baby in my arms, I wished that every mother, baby, father, and family could be so blessed by birth.

With this wish, I began to write. My first article, "Reclaiming every woman's birth right" was published in *The Age*, Melbourne, in 1996, and has been updated as the first chapter in this book. This article asks the question: Why is birth seen in such a negative light in our culture and what can we, as women and as a culture, gain through reclaiming birth?

In the years that followed Jacob's birth, I took an extended break from my work as a GP (family physician), gaining more opportunities to explore my path as a mother and to write about my experiences. I became especially interested in exploring the nexus

between biomedical perspectives and gentle approaches in birth and mothering, and this became a cornerstone of my writing.

I was excited to discover that many gentle birth and parenting practices that I had instinctively chosen – for example homebirth, carrying my baby, and child-led breastfeeding – were well supported by evidence from science, anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary medicine. I felt strongly that parents deserve to know this, so that they can distinguish cultural disapproval from genuine risks when they evaluate birth and parenting choices.

I also learned that there are still major questions about, for example, the long-term safety of ultrasound; and that long-term studies of almost every other medical procedure in pregnancy and birth are lacking. I learned, contrary to medical belief, that a mother's feelings and experiences during pregnancy and birth can have major, and possibly life-long, consequences for her baby and herself, which highlights the importance of gentle, loving care for women in pregnancy, birth, and mothering.

Through my research and writing, I also learned about the evolutionary wisdom of co-sleeping and long-term breastfeeding, and of the innate ability of babies to communicate their elimination needs, all of which inspired and supported me as a mother. I also came to see, from my reading, my observations, and my own experiences, just how profound the imprint of birth and early mothering on child development and family relationships is.

With the birth of my fourth baby Maia Rose in 2000, I experienced giving birth as our foremothers may have: birth as pure instinct and pleasure. This amazing experience inspired me to look at the ecstasy of birth from a scientific perspective, and I began to develop the material on ecstatic and undisturbed birth that you will read here, first published in *Mothering* magazine.

In this book, you will find a collection of my best articles, written from 1996 to 2005. Almost all of these articles have been previously published in parenting and professional publications, and I have been touched by the rich feedback that I have received. Many of you, my readers, have contacted me to let me know how much my writing has supported you in your journey to parenthood. Birth professionals have been appreciative that they can

INTRODUCTION

now cite positive proof for their gentle approaches, and many have asked to distribute my articles to their clients and contacts.

Every article has been updated for publication in *Gentle Birth*, *Gentle Mothering*, with the intention that each one can stand alone. For this reason you may find some of my favourite themes repeated through the book, especially the information on hormonal systems of birth, which I see as one of the most powerful arguments for gentle birth.

You may also notice, with these updates, that I have used a mixture of Australian, UK and US spellings and terms, which reflects my international audience, and which I hope is at least reasonably tolerable to you all.

“Gentle Birth”, the first part of *Gentle Birth*, *Gentle Mothering*, focuses on gentle approaches to pregnancy and birth. These articles are straightforward and largely unreferenced, and incorporate some of my own experiences in pregnancy and birth. These include the homebirth of Emma, my first child, who was born almost a month early (as well as arriving unexpectedly posterior), the waterbirth of Jacob, my third child, who was born almost three weeks past his due date, and the unassisted (and also surprising) semi-waterbirth of Maia, my fourth baby. Maia’s birth is the foundation of the article “Ecstatic Birth”, also featured in this section.

My second child Zoe’s posterior birth, my most challenging, is the focus for my reflections on instinctive birth. This essay includes many ideas and tools to help prepare for birth. I also share my own inspiration for birth through the popular essay, “Healing Birth, healing the Earth”. Zoe’s birth is also mentioned in my articles on the practice of lotus birth (non-severance of the cord) and homebirth.

The middle section, “Gentle Birth – the Evidence”, looks at pregnancy and birth from medical and scientific perspectives, providing substantial and well-referenced information supporting informed and gentle choices. I include articles about ultrasound and prenatal diagnosis because I feel that parents are generally not given sufficient accurate information to make an informed choice about these very new technologies. I also express my concerns about the possible long-term physical and emotional side effects

for both parents and offspring. In a similar vein, the essay “Leaving well alone” explores the possible sequelae of early cord clamping (including cord blood banking), which again is rarely discussed with parents, but can have a major impact on mother and baby.

The centrepiece in this section, and in the book as a whole, is my article, “Undisturbed Birth: Mother Nature’s blueprint for safety, ease and ecstasy”. This is an expansion of my previously published ecstatic birth material, and features a wealth of scientific research that supports the ecstasy, and the evolutionary wisdom, of gentle birth. I also detail some of the possible consequences of disturbing birth with intense monitoring and with medical interventions. The power of this article lies in the extensive material (and I am always finding more to add!) and its resonance with many women’s cellular memories of giving birth, and with the experiences of those who support undisturbed birth.

My own experiences, again, have inspired me to look at the medical evidence around breech birth and homebirth, concluding that the evidence supports women who wish to make gentle choices in these areas. This section includes well-referenced facts on caesareans, which will assist women making informed choices when offered this major birth intervention.

The final section, “Gentle Mothering”, features my favourite articles on gentle parenting choices. For new parents, there are introductions to attachment parenting and co-sleeping, with information that will ensure safe sleeping in any setting. I also explore choices such as controlled crying in the article, “Getting a Good Night’s Sleep”, and share more of my own experiences as a co-sleeping parent.

You can also read about my journey – almost 15 years, in total – as a breastfeeding mother, and the benefits of prolonged breastfeeding for mother and child. “Mothering, Mindfulness, and a Baby’s Bottom” describes the amazing process of raising my fourth baby without nappies/diapers. I also share the richness and support that yoga has brought me, in pregnancy and mothering, and hope to inspire and support more yoga-mamas!

“Gentle Mothering” concludes with some very practical parenting information to support gentle discipline. This material can

INTRODUCTION

be used with children of any age, but is especially relevant from ages two to ten.

Birth and mothering have truly blessed me, and in turn I am passing that blessing to you through this book. May you be inspired, informed, nourished and supported by what you read, and may your parenting have a firm and gentle foundation, based on instinct, wisdom, and love.

GENTLE BIRTH, GENTLE MOTHERING