

# **The Emotional Side to Drugs in Labor: The Beginning of Learning to Parent**

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The debate over natural vs. drugged labors rages daily. Professionals argue both sides, while parents wait to hear what the healthiest choice should be. Research emerges frequently that supports one side or the other. Issues of women's right to choose an anesthetized birth over the struggle for a natural birth pervade the birth industry, in spite of evidence that shows the harmful side effects of drugs during labor. Proven or not, birth professionals have to be very careful what they encourage (or fail to discourage) in pregnant and laboring women. When birthing moms consider the pros and cons of drugs in labor it is important to remember that in addition to the physical aspects there are emotional ones as well. Parents, as well as birth professionals, need to take this into consideration. We need to stop and think that while there may be many reasons for desiring drugs (fear, ignorance, and history of abuse) other than true medical need, it is still our responsibility to educate ourselves about the reality and risks of our choices.

The emotional side to drugs in labor includes the effects that we, who have been there, live with every day. Both my teaching colleague and I have children who have learning disabilities and other problems that we believe are the result of horrible drugged births. My three brothers who had drugged births are all drug/alcohol addicts<sup>1</sup> (two of whom are now clean and sober). The only one who experienced twilight sleep is the only one who is not recovering--and he has no intention of stopping now. I have watched my family and theirs suffer through those experiences, and many of them still are. Ask yourselves, is it worth the risk?

Living in a society that believes drugs and technology solve all medical problems, birthing women need to know that no drug is considered safe during pregnancy and labor. They all have potential negative side effects, and partially unknown long-term effects. I say partially because research done in Europe promoted by Dr. Michele Odent, connects future drug addiction<sup>2</sup>, suicide<sup>3</sup> and autism<sup>4</sup> to drug exposure during labor. Other suspected effects are learning disabilities, dyslexia and ADD, but the connection has yet to be conclusively proven. However, when I asked the social workers and school psychologists why they were attending my classes, they would say it was because they see far too many learning disabilities and too much ADD. Not something they wanted to risk for their own children.

People come to the birthing professions from many different backgrounds, and for many different reasons. Mine is not an uncommon story, and it details the more emotional aspects of birth and drugs.

That's how I got here. My oldest son's birth and the experiences of my siblings with drug abuse and alcoholism. It's hard to separate the emotion from the research for me. The scientific side of my brain (the half that was trained to do legal research in medical malpractice) needs to collect information, proof, and research. I present it to my students and keep things as factual as possible in class, but what about those "emotional" side effects?

In 1989 for the birth of my first child I took Lamaze, used my regular gynecologist, and birthed at the hospital my Lamaze teacher worked at as a Labor nurse. I felt safe and cared for. My goal was a natural birth, and she was wonderful, but when I asked how to avoid a c-section, she said there was no way. Either you need one or you don't. I did not want to use any drugs, but during my short efficient labor they were repeatedly pushed on me. Even after they put in an IV that I thought contained pain medications (it didn't), and remarked how much better I felt (amazing what hydration and walking can do) that didn't stop them from giving me medication I obviously no longer needed. My husband didn't know any better. Once they gave me the Demerol (Pethidine) I was confined to bed, flat on my back, and would sleep in between the contractions, and wake up screaming during them. My comment about Demerol was that "This stuff doesn't do !#\$%&\*!" A vaginal exam was done every hour, making me scream louder. When I pushed him out they screamed at me because I couldn't push. I had no urge and was frightened. When my son was born he was blue, had respiratory depression, and several other health problems. I saw him briefly before the whisked him away to the Neonatal Intensive Care. I did not realize he was sick, and I couldn't respond to him because I was so drugged. We missed that beautiful bonding that can take place between mother and child in those first few hours.

It was 12 hours before would I see him again. Once I woke up, I demanded to see him repeatedly, to no avail. Because we both had fevers I was not allowed to hold or nurse him until 3 O'clock in the morning. The nursery nurse (Helga the nurse from %!#\$!) threatened me that I had 15 minutes to nurse him or she would take him. He was too weak to nurse, and of course she took him and I went back to my room crying that I was a failure as a mother. There was no one there to support or assist me. Luckily I was determined, and my son was a fighter. Once I got him home after a week in the hospital, he became a champion nurser. The most pathetic aspect is that none of the interventions I received during his birth were medically necessary.

Today he is 17 and very healthy, but it's been a long hard road. In 2nd grade he was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading and ADHD. If they had had their way he would be on Ritalin. Instead I insisted on an Individual Educational Plan, monitor and assist with his homework, and act as his advocate on a regular basis. We stress that concentration and sticking to a task is a life skill that needs to be learned and practiced often, and that he is not alone in this journey.

When I planned my next pregnancy I kept asking why he had the problems he did. They couldn't tell me. All they would say was that the problems he had were common with cesarean babies. But he wasn't born by cesarean! Many years of research led me to

conclude that the drugs<sup>5</sup> combined with the speed with which they cut the cord (immediately) probably caused his respiratory distress<sup>6</sup>. Repeated vaginal exams every hour (totaling at least 9) probably caused our fevers and infections<sup>7</sup>. The drugs also contributed to his difficulty breastfeeding<sup>8</sup>, and severe jaundice<sup>9</sup>.

This time I did my homework, found a midwife, and took Bradley classes. My 2<sup>nd</sup> son's birth was wonderful, natural, drug free, and he was a very healthy baby. He never left our sight, and we were able to go home in less than 24 hrs. It was a very healing experience.

What did I give up the first time that I reclaimed with my 2<sup>nd</sup> son? Health, control, bonding, respect, love--and the list goes on. I still mourn what I lost with my eldest child, and regret my ignorance. Have I risked part of his future because of it? Is it worth the risk?

I found a new profession from the experiences of my children's births. My job now is to make sure no mother and baby in my classes has to go through what my eldest son and I experienced. Recently in speaking with my mother about her birth experiences she talked about how it felt to wake up after Twilight sleep and not remember a thing about the birth. In order to reclaim what she missed the first time she had saddle blocks with the next two children. It turns out not even my birth was totally without drugs, as the Doctors insisted they would have to do repair work after the birth, and she would need a saddle block. This was administered minutes before I was born. I guess I am lucky I wasn't exposed to it longer considering the long-term effects it may have had on my brothers.

Today our most important job is to protect our children. It is the beginning of learning to parent. We need to educate ourselves regarding all choices we make for our kids' health and well being so we can make educated, not ignorant, decisions. Sometimes we say thank goodness for an intervention or medication when it is truly medically necessary, but how can we know that unless we educate ourselves? The good news, gang, is that once you learn to educate yourself on these issues and how to be your child's advocate, it is a life time skill that transfers well into parenting at all stages. I'm still at it, and probably always will be.

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