

Chapter 1

Creating a Birth Plan: What It's All About

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the basic idea of a birth plan
 - ▶ Considering all your options
 - ▶ Planning early — before contractions begin!
 - ▶ Making informed choices
 - ▶ Steering clear of birth-plan snafus
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You may be wondering how anyone can “plan” birth. Isn’t that like trying to plan a rain storm? It’ll rain whenever and for as long as it’s going to rain regardless of anyone’s plans! Although you obviously can’t plan every aspect of what will happen when you give birth, you actually have many options. Creating a birth plan gives you an opportunity to research and consider the many aspects of childbirth that *can* be planned, many of which you may not have known about otherwise. After your plan is put together, you can use it to communicate your wishes to your birth team.

In this chapter, we introduce you to birth plans and their benefits, give a general overview of birth and postpartum options, explain how you can make informed decisions, and provide tips on avoiding common birth-plan pitfalls.

What's a Birth Plan? And Why Would You Want One?

Put simply, a birth plan is a document you create to communicate your wishes and requests to your medical practitioner, the birth team, and your support team (whether that’s your partner, a doula, or someone else). You write the plan months before labor begins, when you have time to research and think through your options — preferably before contractions make concentrating difficult! Planning ahead also allows you to switch medical practitioners if your current doctor or midwife isn’t on board with your plans.

Despite the name, a birth plan also includes your wishes for the immediate postpartum period, like how you intend to feed your baby and where you want her to sleep if you're giving birth in a hospital. Birth plans also cover the fun options, like who will announce the baby's gender and who cuts the cord. In this section, we explain the reasons you should consider writing a birth plan.

Making informed choices with a clear head

You may wonder why you should bother considering all the many options for dealing with events that may not even happen during your birth. The reason is simple — thinking straight is much easier when you're not in labor. And unless you bring your laptop into the labor room, researching your choices is difficult when you're actually in the trenches, so to speak.

Technically, whenever your medical practitioner recommends a birth intervention — like *induction*, or attempting to initiate active labor — he should also tell you the potential risks and benefits. In an ideal world, you would also be given alternative options to consider. For example, on the subject of induction, your doctor could explain the choices of giving you oxytocin (Pitocin) intravenously, trying something natural first, or taking a “wait and see” approach before augmenting labor. If he thoroughly explains all three options, you can give true informed consent, which means agreeing to a procedure only after understanding what's involved.

In practice, informed consent for many procedures is covered extremely quickly, way too fast for you to process the information and make a really informed decision. Frequently, procedures are not explained at all, especially if they are routine (which doesn't necessarily mean risk free), or the procedure is presented as if you have no other options. Even if you have an amazing medical practitioner who really explains your risks and alternatives, you may have difficulty thinking through decisions when you're in the middle of labor.

Creating your birth plan allows you to research your options when you're feeling calm and collected. Writing a plan doesn't mean you may not have to make difficult decisions in the midst of labor — as we always say, birth isn't completely plan-friendly — but at least for straightforward issues, you'll be ready.

Birth plans aren't only about interventions, though. We go into more detail on those options throughout this book and in this chapter, in the section “Your Birth-Plan Options: An Overview.”

Visualizing your ideal birth

Everyone's ideal image of birth is different. One mother may consider the perfect birth to be in a well-equipped hospital with an immediate epidural, and another mother may consider her perfect birth to be at home, with no drugs, and in a birthing pool. There's nothing necessarily right or wrong about these different visions (although most people think their ideal birth is the best one!). Every birth choice has its risks and benefits, but many birth choices have more to do with comfort and personal philosophy than statistics.



Don't panic if you're thinking, "But I have no idea what I want. I don't even know what my options are!" Lots of moms and dads have no idea what they want at the beginning of their pregnancy. In fact, their "ideal birth" may change from pregnancy to pregnancy. You don't need to know all your options right now. If you did, you wouldn't need this book! As you find out more about birth and about birth plans, you'll get a better idea of what you want. For a general overview of your options, skip ahead to the section "Your Birth-Plan Options: An Overview."

Putting what you want on paper for your care providers

A written birth plan helps you communicate your concerns and wishes to your medical practitioner. Discussing your plans for childbirth before you go into labor is essential, and having a written plan in hand can be a huge help.

Never assume your medical practitioner's idea of the perfect birth is similar to your own. Even if your chosen care provider shares your birth philosophy, you should still write down your wishes to prevent misunderstandings.

If you're giving birth in the hospital, you have very little control over which nurse you get, and you get very little time to discuss your birth plans with her. Most nurses want their patients to have a healthy and positive birth, and a written birth plan makes it easier for them to provide you with what you want.



Just writing your plan down won't magically make your birth wishes a reality. Although we discuss many birth options throughout this book, not every option is available in every birth location or with every medical practitioner. Even if the option is available, you still need to advocate for yourself beyond handing your nurse, midwife, or doctor a written birth plan. See Chapter 18 on writing a plan that's assertive without being aggressive, and turn to Chapter 19 for more on advocating for your birth.

Your Birth-Plan Options: An Overview

We mention birth-plan options a lot in this chapter, but maybe you're wondering what those options actually are. We discuss many birth possibilities in Chapter 18 as well as throughout this book. For now, here's a list of the basics:

- ✔ **Where do you want to give birth?** You may give birth at home, in a hospital, or at a birth center. You also should consider which hospital or birth center to choose. In Chapter 4, we explain how to choose a hospital or birth center, and in Chapter 5, we talk about choosing a home birth.
- ✔ **What kind of practitioner do you envision?** You may decide on an obstetrician or a midwife. You may or may not want to stick with your current gynecologist or midwife. In Chapter 3, we give you tips on choosing your medical practitioner.
- ✔ **Who will support and advocate for you during labor and delivery?** Your significant other is not the only option for labor support. You may consider hiring a doula to work with your partner or as your sole support. You may also choose a friend or family member for this role. In Chapter 6, we explain what makes a good birthing buddy, and in Chapter 3, we tell you how to hire a doula. Chapter 19 provides guidance on how dads, doulas, and friends can support and advocate for you.
- ✔ **Whom do you want to invite to the birth?** You can invite friends and family members to the birth, either to wait down the hall or be by your side in the delivery room. You may even consider including your older children at the birth. Or you and your partner can be alone, inviting family after the baby arrives. In Chapter 6, we talk about who to invite and who *not* to invite to the birth.
- ✔ **Do you want a natural childbirth?** Women choose natural childbirth for a number of reasons, from concerns about epidural risks to wanting a “natural experience.” Whether you're absolutely determined to give birth without pain drugs or you're just considering it, we discuss childbirth methods in Chapter 7 and delve into natural soothing techniques in Chapter 8. If you decide to use pain medications, you have a number of pain-relief options, from epidurals to walking epidurals to IV narcotics. In Chapter 11, we explain their pros and cons.
- ✔ **What comfort techniques will you try?** Pain drugs are only one way to get relief from labor pains. To name just a few, you can use massage, hydrotherapy, or hypnosis. Even if you plan an epidural, you probably won't be able to get one right away, so having an arsenal of comfort techniques is important. In Chapter 8, we list many natural soothing methods for you to try during labor.

- ✔ **What birthing tools or props do you want to use?** Birthing props and comfort tools are not only fun but also extremely helpful! You may decide to use a birthing pool, a squat bar, a birth ball, or massage tools. Even your music choices can be important for the birth. For more on birth tools and props, see Chapter 8.
- ✔ **How do you expect to stay active during labor?** If you assumed you'd be lying in bed for the entire labor, think again! Many positions and movements can be helpful during labor, and remaining active has lots of benefits. Turn to Chapter 9 for more on labor positions and movement.
- ✔ **Will you accept an IV for hydration, or do you hope to drink fluids on your own?** IVs are routine in many hospitals, but not all, and you have options. You may even be able to eat and drink lightly. See Chapter 10 for more on nourishing your body during labor.
- ✔ **What kind of environment do you hope for during delivery?** Perhaps you'd like a meditative environment, with ocean waves playing in the background. Or perhaps you want upbeat music to energize you. Check out Chapters 15 and 18 for more on birth-environment requests.
- ✔ **What kind of monitoring do you want?** If you're getting an epidural, continuous monitoring is required, but if you're hoping for a natural birth, you may be able to have intermittent monitoring. In Chapter 12, we discuss your monitoring options.
- ✔ **How do you feel about induction and speeding up labor?** Induction is a controversial topic, especially when done for convenience or when scheduled before your due date. Labor augmentation is another touchy topic, and your medical practitioner plays a big role in your options. In Chapter 13, we discuss the pros and cons to labor augmentation.
- ✔ **How do you want to push?** Surprise: You don't have to push while lying on your back! In fact, you'll probably have an easier time if you don't. You may even choose to have a water birth. In Chapter 9 we discuss the pros and cons to various pushing positions as well as the pros and cons of water birth.
- ✔ **How do you envision the delivery of the baby?** Are you hoping to help guide the baby out (with the help of your practitioner)? Do you hope to watch the delivery in a mirror? If you don't know the sex, do you want your medical practitioner to announce it, or do you want your partner to tell you? In Chapter 15, we discuss all these options.
- ✔ **Do you prefer to receive an episiotomy (surgical incision) or to tear naturally?** Some (but not all) women prefer to tear rather than be cut, and in an emergency, it's not always an option. We discuss the pros and cons to episiotomy in Chapter 13, along with other assisted vaginal-delivery interventions.

- ✔ **What are your feelings about cesarean section (C-section)?** Some women are fearful of C-section, whereas others actually opt for one (sometimes without medical reason). In the past, after you had a cesarean you always had to have cesarean with subsequent babies, but now many women can try for a vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC). If you do need a C-section, you have options — yes, even for a cesarean! — like lowering the drape to watch the delivery or breast-feeding on the surgical table. See Chapter 14 for more on cesarean section.
- ✔ **Who will cut the cord and when? Do you want the baby placed directly on your chest after birth or cleaned up and weighed first?** A number of birth-plan choices are relevant to the moment your baby is born. See Chapter 15 for more on your moment-of-birth options.
- ✔ **What do you want to do with the placenta?** You even have options regarding the placenta! For the delivery of the placenta, you may request the medical practitioner not use controlled traction and allow a natural delivery of the placenta. In Chapter 13, we explain placenta-related delivery options. You also may request the birth team save the placenta for you so you can make a “placenta print” or bury your placenta in the back yard; see Chapter 22 for more on preserving birth memories.
- ✔ **Do you plan to take pictures or video of the birth?** Some parents only want pictures after the baby is delivered, but others want photos of the entire birth experience. Flip to Chapters 15 and 22 for photo-taking tips.
- ✔ **How do you plan to feed your baby?** Will you breast-feed, bottle-feed, or do a little of both? Some bottle-feeding moms face bottle guilt, but breast-feeding isn’t always possible or desired. Some hospital routines unintentionally sabotage breast-feeding mothers, but your birth plan can include requests to avoid some potential problems. See Chapter 17 for more on nourishing your baby.
- ✔ **Where do you want your baby to sleep?** *Full rooming-in* means your baby stays with you around the clock, while *partial rooming-in* means your baby sleeps in the nursery. See Chapter 17 for more on making decisions about where your baby sleeps.
- ✔ **What drops, shots, and tests do you want for your baby? If you have a baby boy, do you want the hospital to do a circumcision?** Vaccinations are a hot topic in the United States. Some parents decide to forgo all shots, while others accept them all, choose selectively, or delay them. Circumcision is also a hot topic, and parents who decide to snip may or may not want to do so right after the birth or at the hospital. See Chapter 16 for more on the various shots and snips your baby faces.

Why Planning Must Begin Early in Pregnancy

Although many options exist, everything isn't available in every birth facility or with every medical practitioner. Birth location policies and your medical practitioner's practices have a big effect on your options and on the chances of getting the birth you want. Planning early for the birth gives you time to:

- ✓ **Interview medical practitioners:** If you start planning early, you'll have more time to consider the right practitioner for you and have time to switch if necessary. In Chapter 3, we discuss choosing a practitioner and what to do if you need to switch at the last moment.
- ✓ **Tour your chosen birth facility:** You can't make a real decision about where to deliver until you've been there. Tour a couple hospitals or birth centers to evaluate where you'd feel most comfortable. Because where you give birth is often connected to who attends the birth, tour early in your pregnancy in case you need to switch practitioners.

For a home birth, early planning is recommended so you can check your local home-birth laws and find a medical practitioner. Don't make the mistake of thinking all home-birth practitioners share your birth philosophy. You also need to prepare your home, which may include gathering supplies or renting a birthing pool. See Chapter 5 for more on preparing for a home birth.



Are you reading this book late in your pregnancy and thinking you waited too long to start planning? Planning late is always better than never. Also, remember you don't necessarily have to find the "perfect" practitioner or birth location. We're not sure they even exist! As long as you're comfortable with your choices and arrangements, aim for "good enough" instead.

But I'm Not a Doctor! How Do I Make Smart Choices?

Plenty of mothers-to-be are intimidated at the thought of considering the pros and cons of a medical procedure — especially if they then decide to go against their medical practitioner's protocols or routines. If you feel unqualified to make decisions about childbirth, the good news is you're not the first person to confront all these choices, and you don't have to make them on your own. In this section, we explain how you can educate yourself on your birth options and who you can ask for help when you can't decide what to do.

Getting an education

If you want to deliver babies, you need to go to medical or midwifery school. If you want to make decisions about your birth plan, medical training is not required! You can get the information you need to make informed choices by taking childbirth-education classes and researching birth on your own.

Childbirth education classes aren't only about teaching natural childbirth methods, though most encourage natural labor and spend a great deal of time on comfort techniques. The rest of class time is spent talking about the mechanics of normal childbirth and the pros and cons of various interventions. In Chapter 7, we help you navigate your education options so you can pick a class that's right for you.

Your education doesn't have to stop there. Reading about birth in books and doing online research can help you write your birth plan. By picking up this book, in fact, you've already armed yourself with plenty of information to make birth-plan decisions (in our humble opinion, of course).

Consulting the experienced and the wise

Here's more good news about writing your birth plan: You don't have to do it alone! You can ask for advice from all the following people:

- ✓ **Your medical practitioner:** Your doctor is not the enemy! Although your medical practitioner has his own concerns regarding your birth choices — including malpractice suits and sometimes his own convenience — he is still an excellent resource. If you don't understand some issues or want more information, ask your doctor or midwife.
- ✓ **Your childbirth educator:** Most childbirth instructors are happy to help with birth questions and even help you write your plan. They may be willing to read over what you've put together and make suggestions.
- ✓ **Your doula:** Part of a doula's job is to help advocate for your birth choices, and that includes helping you with your birth plan. A doula can also give you inside information on local practitioners and birth locations, which can be a huge help.
- ✓ **Other experienced moms and dads:** Anyone who has gone through childbirth can serve as a resource when you're creating your own plan. Friends and relatives can tell you what they wish they had done differently and what was just perfect. They may also be able to give feedback on local medical practitioners and birth locations; just be sure to ask *why* they liked a particular place or person. Remember that everyone visualizes the perfect birth differently and that everyone's circumstances are different.

Avoiding Potential Birth-Plan Pitfalls

In case you haven't guessed yet, we think birth plans are pretty great advocacy tools, but even we can admit they aren't always perfect. In this section, we discuss some common pitfalls and how to avoid them.

Navigating through your choices

Considering all the options for your birth can be overwhelming. So many choices to make! If you feel exhausted just thinking about it, remember that you don't have to have an opinion on every aspect of birth. Just because you have options doesn't mean you must specifically choose one or the other.

If you don't have strong feelings about an issue, you can go with whatever your medical practitioner suggests or whatever feels right in the moment. Creating your birth plan should be an energizing experience and a chance to really take charge (as much as possible) of your birth experience. The key is to feel empowered, not overwhelmed, by all your choices.



In your birth plan, be sure to state the issues that are most important to you, even if you think they're obvious. Leave out the issues you don't have an opinion on or don't really care about. See Chapter 18 for more on writing your plan.

Planning your birth (even if you want an epidural)

Birth plans are not only for natural births. Many aspects of the birth and the immediate postpartum period have nothing to do with using drugs or not. Even within the option of using an epidural, you have choices, like when to start it, whether you want a walking epidural, and whether you want it turned down when it's time to push.

Remembering that birth is unpredictable

Critics of birth plans say that they set women up for disappointment. If a couple's birth goes badly, they may feel they failed in some way, like their plan wasn't good enough. We think that failing to plan is a worse option than planning and having those plans go awry.

Creating a birth plan isn't about trying to control birth, and it's not about restricting the possibilities of what's considered a positive birth experience. If you keep in mind that your birth plan isn't a contract but more of a flexible guide, you're less likely to feel disappointed if a few little things go differently than planned. In Chapter 20, we discuss changes in plans and how to cope after a traumatic birth experience.

Standing up for your beliefs

Writing down your birth wishes is only the first step to getting the birth you want. You also need to speak to your practitioner before labor begins if you want him on your side. During the birth itself, you will likely need to work with the nurses and advocate for your plan, especially if your wishes run contrary to the hospital's routines.

In Chapter 19, we explain how you can work with the birth team and advocate for yourself, and in Chapter 21, we discuss how to overcome common birth-plan obstacles.