

Categories: Been There

Date: Aug 18, 2011

Title: The Happy Medium

## Having a baby in a birth center

By Amy Suardi

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After opposing experiences of natural childbirth—in both a supportive, midwife-assisted environment and a hostile high-tech hospital—I knew what felt right. But it was only after reading stacks of books on natural childbirth that I was able to devise the perfect setup.

I was nine months pregnant when we moved to the Syracuse area, where I found my dream team: an in-hospital birth center, a midwife (a healthcare practitioner who specializes in pregnancy and childbirth) and a doula (a woman trained to offer physical and emotional support during labor).

Even though home births for low-risk pregnancies are as safe as hospital births, I knew that idea would never fly with my physician husband and father. And, I have to admit, I looked forward to the two days of post-partum peace and pampering in the hotel—I mean, hospital.



So I was thrilled when my insurance company said it would cover a midwife-assisted birth at the Birth Place, an alternative birthing center inside St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center. Insurance wouldn't cover a doula, but after learning that doulas reduce labor's duration by 25 percent and the risk of cesarean section by 26 percent, I decided that the \$500 fee was money well spent.

My husband, Enrico, felt a little like chopped liver when he found out I wanted to hire a helper. But then I read *Birthing From Within* by Pam England, who explained, "Asking your husband to be your sole guide through labor is like asking him to lead the way on a climb of Mount Everest. He may be smart and trustworthy, you may love him, but in the

Himalayas you'd both be a lot better off with a Sherpa!" So I signed on with my Sherpa, Chris Goldman of Doulas of Central New York, who had come highly recommended.

After having a few meetings with Chris, and asking about her own birth experiences, I decided it would be really cool to give birth on a birthing stool, and to reach down and catch the baby myself as he entered the world. Things didn't exactly go that way, and when the time came, I wondered if anyone was going to catch him at all.

Labor didn't start in a recognizable way. It was my due date, but I thought the post-dinner watermelon was to blame for the pressure on my belly. However, when the discomfort began to return in waves, I felt the thrilling yet ominous onset of labor. Giving birth has been the most powerful experience of my life (some people compare it to running a marathon or climbing a mountain), but I still felt a little scared because, well, it hurts like hell.

I puttered around, packing my bag, taking a shower, even writing emails, until the contractions started requiring total concentration. By the time I met Chris and her mentoring doula, Malinda, at the Birth Place, it was midnight. We practically cheered to find I was already seven centimeters dilated.

I had barely furrowed my brow so far, but the last three centimeters—called the transition phase of labor—are the most intense. And let me tell you, thank the heavens for doulas. It was amazing to me that something as apparently simple as touch and encouragement could reduce my pain into an outline of its former self. They suggested I sit on a birthing ball, which relieved some pressure, and when I started to squeeze on a table, Malinda offered to let me lean and hug on her. The soothing warmth of this woman was the perfect salve. I had no idea that my baby would be born minutes later.

The baby was not active enough to record the heart-rate highs the hospital needed, and when drinking apple juice wasn't waking him up, the nurse started getting ready to hook me up to an IV. Enrico, imagining a long night ahead, was contemplating getting a Diet Coke when he heard me scream at the end of a contraction. The nurse's eyes got big, and people started running. Someone yelled, "Get Linda!" Linda, my midwife, was in the next room assisting a first-time mother.

I was standing up, and during a particularly hefty contraction, my baby had descended three inches into this world. I didn't realize that Chris was on the floor ready to catch the baby if needed. "What should I do?" I whimpered. With a baby half-in and half-out, I could barely move.

The nurse, who was rushing around getting birth supplies, responded, "You're going to lie down on the bed and have the baby." I appreciated her can-do confidence, but the last position I wanted to be in was flat on the bed, unable to see what was going on and pushing against gravity.

So I stood leaning against the end of the bed, and Linda flew in, kneeled in front of me, and said brightly, "Hello!" Part of my birth plan had been "spontaneous bearing down" (i.e., no staff screaming "Push!" as if I were in a boxing match). But because the pressure on my cervix was so intense it felt like a chorus of screams anyway, I obeyed when Linda said, "Amy, I just need one good push."

Luke came flying out, Linda caught him, and I screamed, "Oh my God!" Luke was born just an hour after we had arrived at the hospital and eight minutes after my water broke. Linda handed him up to me, but I felt so shaky that I immediately handed him to Enrico.

Enrico also got to cut the cord, after it had stopped pulsating, as we had requested. The nurse simply wiped the baby off, and handed him to us, so we could hold him right away. We were given so much bonding time that we didn't even find out that he weighed 8 pounds 9 ounces until an hour after he was born.

Also as requested, Luke didn't get bathed until the next day, when he was not in danger of getting chilled and needing an incubator, and when his siblings could help give him his first bath.

While a birth can never be planned like a dinner party, I came amazingly close to getting what I wanted. It was simple, nurturing, and quick—in fact, Luke came barreling out so fast his cheeks got bruised. A tiny part of me wished the birth was slower, because although labor is tough, it only happens a precious few times.

To cocoon with my baby, I asked to stay the full two days post-partum. The Birth Place can only guarantee one, but I didn't mind being transferred to the main maternity ward, where the nurses were just as sweet, the a la carte food service just as luxurious, and the newborn peace just as blissful. ■

*Amy Suardi is a former Fayetteville resident who blogs at [www.frugal-mama.com](http://www.frugal-mama.com).*

Amy is pictured above with her newborn, Luke.