

## 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 family could be so blessed by birth.

In the years that followed Jacob's birth, I took an extended break from my work as a 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.

I was excited to discover that many birth and parenting practices that I had instinctively chosen—for example, homebirth, bed sharing, and child-led breastfeeding—were well supported by evidence from science, anthropology, psychology, and 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.

Through my research and writing, I also learned about the evolutionary wisdom of bed sharing and long-term breastfeeding, and the positive impact of secure attachment on lifelong mental health. I came to see—from my reading, my observations, and my own experiences—just how profound is the imprint of birth and early mothering on child development and family relationships.

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.

“Gentle Birth,” the first part of *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering*, focuses on gentle approaches to pregnancy and birth, and includes a wealth of scientific evidence about current maternity-care choices. These chapters are relevant to women giving birth in any setting, with information that will also help partners and family to understand and trust the natural processes of labor and birth.

“Gentle Birth” includes my own experiences in pregnancy and birth, including the homebirths of Emma, my first child, who was born almost a month early; Zoe, who was born on her due date and, like Emma, emerged posterior (facing up); Jacob, my third child, who was born in the water almost three weeks past his original due date; and the unassisted (and also surprising) semi-water birth of my fourth baby Maia. “Gentle Birth” also features a chapter called “Vision and Tools for Instinctive Birth,” which offers many ideas and tools to help prepare for birth. In the chapter called, “Healing Birth, Healing the Earth,” one of my most popular writings, I share my own inspiration for birth.

Other chapters in this first part review pregnancy and birth choices from medical and scientific perspectives. My personal belief is that women are the experts in their own bodies and babies, and that, given full information. They will make the choices that are right for themselves and their babies, whether or not these choices are in agreement with current medical or cultural beliefs. I also encourage all prospective parents to be attentive to their instincts and intuition, beyond previous ideas, ideals, or political correctness, so that they can be truly responsive and responsible. I believe that fathers can have an important role in decision making about their own babies, if they choose to accept this, and that they also need to receive support and understanding during these times.

I have included a chapter about ultrasound, because I feel that parents are generally not given sufficient accurate information to make an informed choice about this technology. Chapter 4 introduces the “BRAN” approach to decision-making, and uses this model to look at three common pregnancy choices: testing for gestational diabetes; screening and antibiotics for group B strep; and induction for “going overdue.” The centrepiece of this part, and of the book as a whole, is my article “Undisturbed Birth: Mother Nature’s Blueprint for Safety, Ease, and Ecstasy.” This expansion of my ecstatic birth material, previously published in *Mothering* magazine, 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 chapter is in the extensive material (and I am always finding more to add!) and its resonance with many women’s gentle birth, gentle mothering cellular memories of giving birth and with the experiences of those who support undisturbed birth.

Chapter 8, “Leaving Well Enough Alone,” explains the natural processes of the third stage of labor and explores the impact of early cord clamping (including cord blood banking), which can have a major impact on the health of mother and baby. The chapters on epidurals (also first published in *Mothering* magazine) and cesareans give important information to help parents make informed choices, with information covering vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC) and suggestions for having a good cesarean, when necessary. This section concludes with a review of the scientific evidence on the safety of homebirth, along with some practical guidance for those who make this responsible choice.

The second part of the book, “Gentle Mothering,” covers gentle parenting choices. New parents will enjoy information on the science of attachment, the benefits of breastfeeding, and the safety of bed sharing; experienced parents can feel supported by the medical information that validates these often-instinctive choices. You can also read about my journey—sixteen years, in total—as a breastfeeding mother, and the benefits of breastfeeding past the first year for mother and child.

Many of these chapters were featured in the first (Australian) edition of *Gentle Birth*, *Gentle Mothering*, published in 2005, and it has been a pleasure to have the opportunity to update the scientific studies for wider distribution. I have especially enjoyed documenting the solid science that supports attachment-style parenting and bed sharing and other styles of cosleeping, so that you too can feel confident about these sometimes-misunderstood choices.

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