

Hypnobirthing More than Parent Education

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Hypnobirthing is a combination of hypnotherapy techniques and birth preparation education. Although it is often considered modern, hypnotherapy for childbirth has been documented as far back as the 1850s. The concepts and practices of hypnosis itself date back even further, appearing in writings from ancient philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. The scientific study of hypnosis began in the late 18th century with German physician Franz Mesmer, who used it in medical treatment and referred to it as “mesmerism.” In the mid-19th century, English physician James Braid later coined the terms *hypnosis* and *hypnotism*, derived from the Greek god of sleep, Hypnos.

In 1955, the British Medical Association (BMA) formally approved hypnosis for pain management in childbirth and surgery, recognising it as an effective method of relieving pain without altering the normal course of labour, and recommended that medical professionals receive basic training in its use [1].

It's unclear who can be credited as the originator of the term Hypnobirthing. In 1989 Michelle Leclair O'Neill developed her Hypnobirthing programme although her book entitled the Hypnobirthing the Original Method” was not published until 2000. Various English hypnotherapists, particularly Paola Bagnall, have also claimed to be the first to use the term Hypnobirthing. Their work was partly based on the work of English Obstetrician Dr. Grantly Dick Reid whose book *Birth Without Fear* (1944) introduced the concept of the fear tension pain cycle, a principle that is still taught today.

During the 1980's Marie Mongan an American Hypnotherapist popularised Hypnobirthing in the USA as a childbirth preparation programme also drawing on the work of Dr Grantly Dick Read. The Mongan Method of Hypnobirthing gained international recognition through the work of hypnobirthing teachers in many countries including the UK. This then paved the way for the development of other Hypnobirthing programmes. Most notably KG Hypnobirthing the UK based teacher training programme and the first of its kind to be accredited by the Royal College of Midwives. KG Hypnobirthing is now the most popular Hypnobirthing Teacher Training Course in the UK and is gaining international recognition with recent teacher training courses across Europe, UAE and China

Hypnobirthing is a philosophy that aims to re-focus the perception of birth with physical and mental preparation. More than a century

ago, Louis Pasteur said, “*Chance favours only the prepared mind.*” (Pastor L 1854) By this he meant that sudden flashes of insight don't just happen— they are the products of preparation. The preparation for birth is an important aspect of the course. Having a positive frame of mind can make a difference to the rest of pregnancy and to the birth itself in terms of how interventions and unexpected occurrences are handled. Hypnobirthing prepares parents to take control of their birthing process to make informed decisions leading to an empowering experience that they will remember for life.

A complete birth education programme, hypnobirthing teaches simple but specific self-hypnosis, relaxation and breathing techniques for a more comfortable birth.

The main goal of hypnobirthing is to reduce the fear of childbirth, to build confidence in the physiological process, the power of the mind and how the mind impacts birth and to empower women to informed decision making through an evidenced based education. Primarily Hypnobirthing aims to change the perception of birth from the accepted medical model to a social model of birth where birth is seen as natural and part of a woman's biology and where she is calm, confident and in control working closely with her care givers.

Although birth can be described as a natural instinctive process, society has medicalised the concept of birth to a point where women accept medical intervention as ‘normal’ and therefore fear birth and feel less confident in their ability to birth.

Fear of birth is explained through Grantly Dick Reads Fear Tension Pain (FTP) Cycle, which demonstrates how fear activates the sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight, freeze). This increases adrenaline, which can interfere with the progress of labour and birth, intensifies pain and may ultimately result in the medical diagnosis of Failure to Progress (FTP). Therefore, it's logical to say that FTP can lead to FTP. In Hypnobirthing women learn simple yet effective relaxation techniques that activate parasympathetic nervous system, (rest and digest). This supports the release of oxytocin and endorphins (the body's natural pain relief), promotes coordinated uterine contraction and encourages a more comfortable physiological birth that progresses in her own time.

The most successful way to remain in the parasympathetic nervous system is to create an environment for birth that is conducive to

oxytocin release the same environment as love making; a calm loving atmosphere where your privacy is respected. This will also help to rest the Neocortex – the thinking part of the brain, women often report feeling as though they are in a trance like state. This is because the activity of the neocortex is reduced.

A full course is delivered over a twelve-hour period in whatever format works for clients. Partner participation is strongly encouraged. This gives them an active role in birth preparation and confidence to support their partner during labour and birth. The aim of hypnobirthing is to prepare parents for a confident, calm experience. This is achieved through deep relaxation using birth relaxation audio's, the subconscious mind is accessed, and past negative influences are replaced with positive affirmation and a strong belief in the physiological process. Positive communication and the reframing of medicalised language are integral to the course, empowering women to embrace their autonomy and make informed decisions. In her article Humanising Birth: Does Language Matter Mobbs N et al States: *Those providing maternity care need to consider their use of language seriously. Not only as a way of respecting women's views and ensuring that they are empowered to make decisions, but also in order to respect their human rights* [2].

KG Hypnobirthing uses a simple but effective example of building a house to describe the course and the progression from one session to the next. Below is an example of some of the topics included in a typical course:

- **Session one** - Laying the foundation: Discussing the principles of hypnobirthing, basic tenants of hypnosis. The power of the mind and how fear has a negative effect on birth. The fear tension pain cycle. The power of words and their impact on decision making.
- **Session two** - Building the structure: Techniques for a calm comfortable birth, physical information. Breathing techniques, visualisation, relaxation and affirmation.
- **Session three** - Furnishing your house: Planning before birth, due dates and bonus time. 'What If's' caesarean birth, induction of labour, questions, Benefits, Risk, alternative, Intuition/Information, Nothing (B.R.A.I.N), and place of birth is discussed.
- **Session 4** - Living in Your Beautiful Home: Giving birth, physiological pathway, up phase of labour, down phase of labour, golden hour and lots of other useful stuff! Each session concludes with deep relaxation [3].

Change takes place with repetition and practice therefore parents are encouraged to practice the techniques taught on a regular basis.

Parents are also taught about the maternity system, how to work in partnership with their care givers, and how to remain in control whatever path their birth takes. All women have the right to safe, respectful maternity care and to make informed decisions based on evidence, not fear, routine procedures, culture, or hospital policy. Hypnobirthing empowers women to understand their human rights in childbirth, particularly the right to self-determination. The White Ribbon Alliance state that:

'To improve maternal and new-born health is to promote self-care as a vital component of any comprehensive maternal and new-born healthcare strategy. We know that when women are equipped with information and resources, they make the best health decisions for themselves and their families'.

Hypnobirthing women often document their plan for birth so that their health carer providers are fully aware of the choices she has made and how they can support her even when her choice may fall outside obstetric guidance. NICE Quality Statement (2012) States - *Patients are made aware that they have the right to choose, accept or decline treatment and these decisions are respected and supported*. Taking a Hypnobirthing course gives parent the tools to take back their birth, to be powerful in their interaction with health care providers.

The principle of respect for human rights, education in physiology and the elimination of the fear of birth that are taught in Hypnobirthing should be the basis of all parent education but unfortunately, they are not. The majority of women are ill-prepared for birth and follow without question hospital policies that are not necessarily evidenced based or indeed in the woman's best interest, hence the increase in reports of obstetric violence, birth trauma and women choosing to free birth. Hypnobirthing gives women the skills to achieve a positive birth experience however birth unfolds [4].

There is evidence to support that women who are educated in Hypnobirthing techniques show improved experience and postnatal well-being, better control of emotions during childbirth, and alleviation of fear and pain associated with it. Virgen de las Nieves et al (2024)

The Experience, Outcomes and Impact of Hypnobirthing: (2019) A Mixed Methods Study in Wales.

This study explored the experience of learning and using hypnobirthing in Wales. Participants appreciated the use of the techniques in labour. They also felt it helped them to be able to advocate for their preferences. The use of hypnobirthing in labour was helped by supportive, understanding care and a sense of privacy and control. Hypnobirthing provided tools to manage the experience of labour and birth. It also helped many of the participants in this study to adapt to changing events, where necessary.

Following a review of the evidence Tommy's (pregnancy and baby charity) report"

- Hypnobirthing can help manage stress and reduce anxiety, which may lead to a calmer birth.
- May also help to reduce some of the fear and pain during labour.
- In some cases, hypnobirthing and using relaxation techniques have been shown to make labour shorter.
- Practising hypnobirthing, whether it is at a class, with a book or online, may help women feel more prepared and in control when labour starts.
- It may help you cope with previous birth trauma
- Hypnobirthing may reduce the need for drugs and medical intervention although not all studies have found this.
- Some studies show it may increase your sense of wellbeing as a new parent.
- Hypnobirthing can help the birth partner to play a more active role during labour [5].

Empirical evidence reported from women, hypnobirthing instructors, and healthcare professionals suggests that hypnobirthing may be also be associated with lower rates of caesarean section, induction of labour, alongside higher rates of physiological birth, water birth, reduced use of pain relief, and overall birth satisfaction. Robust research is needed to confirm the clinical benefits shown by women who take a comprehensive,

respected hypnobirthing course.

I currently work with KGH as their consultant for teacher training, liaising with organisations at home and abroad to meet their training requirements. Our vision for 2026 and beyond is to train health care professionals in KG Hypnobirthing not only to enhance their practice but to support women and their partner to a positive birth experience. Our goal is to address the unnecessary intervention in birth, to lessen the incidence of obstetric violence and women reporting birth trauma. We know this can be achieved when women are listened to, their voices heard and their choices respected and supported. Educating a woman to a confident birth not only has a positive effect on herself, her family her local community but also on humanity [6-13].

It was Michel Odent who said – ‘To change the world, we must first change the way babies are being born’.

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