

Podcast: Taking Back Birth Episode 1: A Close Look At Prenatal Care

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Synopsis: *In this episode of Taking Back Birth, I take a close look at prenatal care. Here are just a few of the things I discuss...*

- *What really IS prenatal care? It's got to be about more than charts and numbers... and it is!*
- *Why looking for prenatal care from the wrong sources can affect your birth experience.*
- *How your best friend or partner could become a valuable part of your prenatal care.*
- *How becoming self-sufficient could be the best thing you ever do for your birth.*

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INTRODUCTORY MUSIC...

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MARYN: *Good afternoon!* This is Maryn from Indie Birth, and welcome to our first podcast ever!

I'm going to start off today by talking about a subject that is very near and dear to my own heart. It's near to my heart personally, as a mother. It's near to me as a birth educator, and birth consultant and birth attendant; and it's near to me as we guide Indie Birth into its *true* mission, which is offering this education to women everywhere. So that regardless of the choices that *you* make in *your* pregnancy and birth, that you feel as empowered and educated as possible; that no stone has been left unturned in your thought process, in your emotional process. So that regardless of outcome, you feel confident that you did everything you possibly could to own your experience.

Now the reason this is so near to me is because I've had many pregnancies, and I've experienced every pregnancy in a completely different way, pretty much. Now that kind of goes without saying. I think pregnancies are just different. So, whether you've had two or six or eight, they're all different; just as your children are, just as the experience and the birth experience. They're all different.

But what I want to talk about today is what is known as prenatal care, at least in this country, in the US. What is prenatal care? Why is it important? *Is* it important? What are the various ways that one can go about receiving prenatal care? Who gives prenatal care? And in the end, what does it all matter? What are we going for? Why does it matter what our pregnancy experience is? How important is it? These are some questions I want to talk about today and answer, *for myself*, and I'd like to just offer them to you as another woman's experience. There is no right way to do any of these things. There is no *perfect* way or *perfect* decision. So I hope to just share with you my experience and give you some food for thought. So that if you're pregnant now or you're planning a pregnancy, you can have your mind opened a little bit more - as I've strived to with each pregnancy - to the possibilities of what this all means and how much ownership we really can take in our own experience.

So, I've had so many types of pregnancy experiences. My very first was your 100% typical hospital birth. And I'm not really going to talk about birth so much; just to say that the prenatal

care was the typical, at least American woman first-baby experience. Typical experience in this country; which is care with an obstetrician, even though I had no reason to believe I was high-risk and I certainly wasn't high-risk at any point. I felt myself, believed myself to be educated. I had read some books. I was sure I wanted a natural childbirth. My husband and I enrolled and took the Bradley childbirth classes. So I had a clue as to what I wanted, but I had no idea how the prenatal care factored into my overall experience.

So looking back, I think it's amusing that I desired a certain birth experience, but yet I wasn't questioning the nine months that came before that, as far as the person I was seeing, what our relationship was, the way in which I made choices in regard to testing and other decisions. These things did not occur to me, and they would only occur to me later, that there are so many ways to get prenatal care.

So, again, what *is* prenatal care? Let's jump back to that for a minute. I googled it, actually. I wanted to see what the standard definitions of prenatal care were and are. And, in most cases, something like "the medical care received during a pregnancy" or "health care given by a doctor during pregnancy". And in most of those cases, the definition would go on to include "the importance of prenatal care because of all the testing that needs to be done in pregnancy and the immediacy in which prenatal care must begin to make sure that a pregnancy is healthy." So you might agree with me that in those definitions, it is very much about fear; very much about control; very much about this unknown being called pregnancy and how if it's not caught right away, with the appropriate testing, that things could just go horribly wrong and the mom and baby wouldn't be healthy.

Now, this may be true for an occasional woman. Maybe, you know, you know somebody that is considered legitimately a high-risk pregnancy for one medical reason or another, and perhaps that's more appropriate in those cases, that testing would really make or break a pregnancy. But in truth, most women *are* healthy; most women *are* low-risk. And we know in this country that that is true, even though most see an obstetrician.

So if this is true, what is all this craziness about going to the doctor the minute you know you are pregnant and having them do an ultrasound at your first visit to confirm your pregnancy? What does this *mean*? What does this *do* to a woman's sense of intuition or connection to her pregnancy? I'd say it does *a lot*.

So this kind of prenatal care, whether it comes from a doctor, or truly, it can come from a midwife as well, and it can come from a homebirth midwife as well. This kind of prenatal care looks to the outside; that the woman doesn't know or isn't aware of or doesn't trust that everything she needs *really* is within her. Even if she hasn't discovered it yet. That everything she needs for a healthy pregnancy starts within, and truly it does. It does: start within, in a very real way.

So I'd argue that prenatal care that's reliant on testing, mostly testing; lack of education in the sense of nutritional education; prevention of complications. So it's not that we're acting like a complication can never happen without testing or with testing. But, when we talk about complications in relation to prenatal care that we talk about prevention, as far as nutrition and prevention of infection and a healthy lifestyle: avoiding toxins and environmental hazards. Those are important things to talk about. But certainly, when I was under typical doctor care with my first pregnancy, none of those things were being talked about.

So what was I going to these visits for? Very curious! Right? To keep this chart on me, to take five minutes and listen to the baby's heartbeat with a doppler. What does that do? What does that confirm? You know, it confirms that yes, the baby is in there, but there was no other information given. But yet, it was me looking to the outside for confirmation that yes, I was healthy. Yes, this baby was healthy. And, indeed, the doctor must know more than I did because he had all the tools and I was going to check in with him to feel like everything was on track. So again, that's the way most women in this country are doing things and most women will continue to do things in that way for quite a while, I'm guessing.

My goal is to just slowly assist the shift in thinking. Which is: *if* you're seeing a doctor who's reliant on testing, and who *isn't* concerned about your relationship with him, or your trust in him, or your birth, or your intuition, or your sense of what your baby or body needs, then we need to start guiding women to *self-care*.

Now, the far end of the spectrum for prenatal care, you know, if one end is the OB-managed care, where the woman is very much a patient; doesn't participate in her care; usually isn't given any informed choice when testing options are, you know, brought to her attention; sometimes they're *not* even brought to her attention that there are choices. If that's one end of the spectrum, then the complete other end of the spectrum is doing your own prenatal care, from start to finish. And *that* can have many different shades of gray; that's not a black and white issue *either*.

Now, I've done that as well. In-between my OB-managed care, with my other children, I've had nurse-midwife-at-the-hospital-care, which was slightly more involving of me and my choices and my desires. Especially since at that point I had had a child and was more aware of my choices. So I've had that. I've had a nurse-midwife at home: a home birth. I've had an unlicensed, unregulated, uncertified midwife at home, twice. And I've done my own prenatal care, as well as an unassisted birth. So, I've personally experienced the spectrum and my words of wisdom in regards to prenatal care is that regardless of what we do on the outside - who we see, who we make an appointment with, what tests we choose consciously to participate in or not - no matter what those things look like, each of us still has the choice to participate in fully giving ourselves self-care. I don't know a better way of saying it.

Self care. That is my topic of passion: is how do we take care of ourselves during pregnancy? And how do we believe, legitimately, that this is enough? You know, I've met many women planning unassisted births, for one reason or another, and of these women, there are still a *really* high percentage that believe and feel they need to physically check in with somebody during a pregnancy. Now I'm not saying that's right or wrong, because people have various reasons for doing things. And I can think of one woman who did that because it was important to her husband that she check in with somebody and make sure everything was okay. But many women will choose that because *they* want it, and they're *still* looking for something from the outside to say, you know, *is* my baby growing well? Or sometimes there aren't even concrete questions they're really asking; it just gives them a sense of peace to have *seen* somebody and heard from somebody else, "Yes, everything looks great."

Now I've been there too, even with unassisted care with one of my pregnancies. I've had midwife friends check in, or just say to them, you know, after we had lunch out one day, "Hey, would you mind feeling my baby?" Not because I thought anything was wrong but because sometimes it's *really* nice to have another woman, especially one that's really knowledgeable,

and who really knows you and loves you and your baby, put their hands on your belly and say, “Oh, that’s great!” “This baby,” you know, “This baby just feels perfect!” or, “What a happy baby!” And I think looking for that kind of outside confirmation, at least for me, can often feel really right. So, if I felt something was wrong, I might also choose to do that. But, so far, it’s just been when I *know* everything is right and I know everything feels good. But there’s something about, you know, in certain points in pregnancy, especially emotionally, having another woman say, “You’re on track. You’re doing great.” You know, “You’re being a great pregnant woman” and that’s all you need to hear. And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

I think self-care can include our outside world, especially in the form of our partners, our best friends, our sisters, our aunts, our midwife sisters. I think that’s totally appropriate, if that’s what we feel. There doesn’t have to be any measuring or anything real clinical done, but just the simple inviting them in to your space, if you feel safe with that. Just the way we do, or just the way we *may* choose to in birth: inviting another woman into our space, or our partner in and saying, “I’d like you to be a part of this with me. I’m not asking, you know, for you to play God and tell me everything’s going to work out great or that it’s not or anything like that. I’m just inviting you into my space.” And I think having done my own prenatal care, it’s really important for me to realize that I *still* need that connection. I don’t need anybody measuring my belly or listening to my baby’s heartbeat because I *know* it’s there, and I know my baby is fine. *But that connection.* And I think having gone through, you know, six babies, or five babies, I suppose, before reaching that point: That’s what I’ve always craved! And I think that’s what most women crave when they sign up for prenatal care.

There’s an element of fear that’s been injected into this society about pregnancy and testing and playing God; making sure that everything’s perfect. But in the end, most pregnant women are in a place where they want *a connection* with somebody. And unfortunately, many, without even consciously thinking, are choosing a doctor and not getting that connection. At least I didn’t. I don’t think many people do. I’m sure there are doctors that offer that, but as a rule, there just isn’t time and money and space for doctors to offer the kind of relationship and connection that other women can offer women. But I think that’s the motivation behind most women choosing to check in for appointments. There’s the testing and the distancing they get, sort of by default from their own pregnancy, but what they really want is somebody to listen to them and hear about how they’re feeling. And what’s going on in their house, and how their relationship is with their partner, and how their kids have been lately and what they’re craving and what doesn’t sound good and what they think about this baby coming and how they plan to parent this baby when it comes. These are the things that women want to talk about.

So, I’m offering that we reshape prenatal care. That women that want testing and options such as that, still have access to them, *with true informed choice*. Not informed consent, not bullying them, or not telling them that there’s a choice, but true informed choice. And then alongside the testing is a relationship. And the truth is, that relationship can be had most easily with a midwife. Or a best friend. You know, there are plenty of homebirth midwives that don’t make the time or space for true relationships either. Although, much less frequently than a typical doctor. So it doesn’t have to be a care provider. It doesn’t have to be somebody that you think knows *more* than you. It can be your best friend, and *she* can feel your belly, and you can let *her* listen to your baby. Or your partner. That you feel that you can invite in whoever it is that you *want to* invite in, because that’s what you require.

This aspect of pregnancy is just not addressed. That there's not just a *physical* pregnancy going on. And again, I keep talking about the testing, but the testing is pretty much all that's done when you see an obstetrician. There *isn't* talk about diet, or lifestyle, or emotional well-being or spiritual well-being. It is *purely* physical. So by agreeing to that sort of prenatal care, your average woman is not acknowledging, *even to herself*, in most cases, that pregnancy is multi-layered and multi-faceted and really pretty complicated, when you get down to it.

So prenatal-care, to me, is, when a woman can acknowledge and respect and include all the aspects of her being pregnant. Some of which are really pleasant and fun and happy, and some of which are not. There's a lot of depression for some women. There's a lot of struggle. There's a lot of anger. There's a lot of unhappiness, in some pregnancies, for some women, or even just certain moments of. So this idea that prenatal care is something we do on the outside; that someone else does for us; that we simply are *victims*, for lack of a better word. Patients. That something is done *to* us, is all wrong. And the most concerning thing about viewing prenatal care like this is that *it matters*. That's my point today, as well.

Prenatal care can be many things, but in the end, it's self-care. It's self-love; self-nurturing; including your community and whoever you choose to. That's what prenatal care *really* is. And the more we can acknowledge this, I really believe we will see better birth outcomes.

Better birth outcomes in the sense of, *Yeah, for sure!* Non-interventive births, more undisturbed births, more births where the body takes over and the baby comes out and the mom and baby bond and breastfeeding is successful; and the woman feels a sense of accomplishment about her birth, even if she worked really hard, even if it *was* hard. That because she addressed all of these issues in pregnancy with herself and didn't rely on anyone else to take care of them for her; and didn't believe that pregnancy was just a series of tests and fears, that her birth experience is exactly what it needs to be. And is true to her and her baby. This is so important to me. And in my own experience, I can tell you it *does* matter. It most certainly does.

My hospital experience was far from what I ever imagined birth to be. And although I am 100% grateful for the experience that I had, and 100% grateful, of course, for my beautiful, wonderful daughter, it was a direct result of the responsibility I had given up, in my pregnancy, by looking to the outside in such a high degree; by trusting in the testing and the technology and someone else's words and someone else's hands.

In contrast, my sixth pregnancy and birth were worlds different. 10 years later, worlds different. The birth itself was difficult, physically difficult. And there were elements of it being unassisted that made it difficult, as well. Just because I was *still* struggling, to the very last moment, with placing *any* responsibility in anybody outside of myself. But the fact that I was responsible 100%, took responsibility 100%, for my pregnancy with the sixth time, made all the difference. And it didn't mean it was a super-easy pregnancy. I had lots of fears, emotional issues to work out; lots of changes in my life, in general, not just with the pregnancy. But I accepted it. And I went within and I met my baby and I connected with this baby. And when I would feel fearful, or out of control, I would go within. And for me, doing testing was not an option. I just chose not to do anything. I've been pregnant many times and I feel pretty confident with that choice. But I also chose to not do prenatal care on myself, in a clinical sense. So, even as somebody that's studied midwifery for many years; practiced as a midwife for many years. And having done prenatal care on myself, as a midwife would, previously; meaning, in previous pregnancies, I would do prenats on myself. I would weigh myself and measure my fundus and listen to the

baby's heartbeat and counted. This sixth pregnancy, I really opted out of those things. So it was the complete opposite end of the spectrum from the first time and it was a complete departure even from even the prenatal care I had done myself in pregnancies four and five. The sixth time, I relied on trust. There was no pregnancy test. There was only a waiting for being able to hear with the fetoscope or feel movement. My analytical brain I attempted to subdue a bit, because I *knew* the more I could connect with the pregnancy and *really* provide self-care, true self-care, not clinical care, the better my birth experience would be. And that is absolutely how it went and the connection with this child, who is now 1, is immensely different. Immensely different.

It is our full responsibility, in pregnancy and birth. And that is something to not be taken lightly, and something that many people have trouble digesting or even accepting. But I truly believe it, and I offer this as a thought to you. Consider what prenatal care is to you. Consider where you go; where you think you get it; who you think dispenses it. Does it ultimately come back to you or not? Because, again, no matter who you see, what test you choose, it can *still* come back to you. You can still be the one who's *the most concerned*, and you should be, the most concerned about what you eat and how you sleep and how your spiritual growth is or is not included in the pregnancy. There are so many levels. And the truth is, *nobody* will care about you and all those levels more than *you* ever will. Even a partner, even a best friend. You can use them as feedback, or a shoulder to cry on, or an ear to listen, but *you* are the one that cares 100% about every aspect of your pregnancy.

So I think this ends my spiel this afternoon on prenatal care. I'm sure I'll have more to say in the future. Possibly on sort-of different tangents. But that's my offering of thoughts for you today: is to consider this. Whether you're a mother or soon-to-be pregnant woman. Whether you're a midwife or doula. Think about what is offered as prenatal care, and how what you do and say and believe and offer to other women influences what they think. And how we *all* collectively go forward as a society with women that, for the most part, do not realize the difference here, and think that there is only one way to be be pregnant. There's one way to get prenatal care. There is only a yes or no to a certain test. It's about so much more than that.

So I leave you with those thoughts today. Thank you for listening. I thank you for subscribing to Indie Birth and being part of our mission. So that you and me and women everywhere can realize their amazing power. And together we create this and go forward and birth our babies in love and happiness, because it matters. Thanks again. Have a great day!

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