

Jen Hamilton

BSN, RN, CEN, RNC-OB

birth vibes

Stories and Strategies
for an Empowered Birth

"The book every expecting parent needs."

—EVE RODSKY, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Fair Play*

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*To the patients who have allowed me to walk
with them through the moments that changed
everything, it has been the honor of my life.*

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author's note

THE PROGRAM DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A substitute for medical care and advice. Please consult your health-care professional with regard to all matters relating to your health, including matters that may require diagnosis or medical attention. In particular, if you have any special condition requiring medical attention, or if you are taking or have been advised to take (or to refrain from taking) any medication, you should consult regularly with your physician.

The identities of some of the patients referred to in this book, and certain details about them, have been modified or are presented in composite form.

The information provided in this book is based upon sources that I believe are reliable, and information regarding products and companies is current as of September 2025.

introduction

I'VE GOT YOU

I blinked back tears as I stared down at the pregnancy test in my trembling hand. As a nursing student, I was used to taking tests, but even as I looked at the results, I still wasn't sure whether I had passed or failed. In my experience, it doesn't matter if you've tracked your ovulation and timed your adult gymnastics down to the second or if, like me, a pregnancy caught you off guard: Either way, discovering you are pregnant finds almost all of us feeling some combination of joyful terror. The excitement—of decorating a nursery, picking out little onesies, and naming a whole new person—coexists with the anxiety of the unknown and also the inescapable task of getting this little biscuit out of you. At the moment I realized I was pregnant, I was terrified.

But as I write to you now, I'm a more grown-up version of that scared nursing student. You may not be as terrified as I was, but there is also fear to be found in the unknown. The unwritten story of what's yet to come. I'm here to tell you the thing that I most needed to hear back then: *It's okay to be scared, because I'm not.* I've not only experienced this feeling and come through the other side, I've also helped thousands do the same. Which brings me to this book.

I want you to think of me as *your* labor and delivery nurse in these pages. I help pregnant friends walk through the twists and turns of labor and birth, and I want to help you do the same. The strength it takes to carry, birth, heal, and parent isn't ordinary, it's miraculous. And I'm honored to spend my life bearing witness to that. If you've picked up this book, maybe you're

experiencing that same joyful terror I experienced those years ago. Maybe you *hope* to experience that joyful terror one day. Or maybe you've already brought babies into the world and you're searching for healing from an experience you didn't expect. Some who are reading this may be nurses, or nurses-to-be, or readers who just want stories of human connection from behind the door where life itself is born. I welcome you all.

I began my career in health care fourteen years ago—as an ER nurse actually—but it wasn't until I began working in Labor & Delivery that something clicked and I felt that I'd found my calling. In 2019, my second baby went off to big boy school (a.k.a. preschool). For the first time in more than a decade, I found myself with a little extra time on my hands. Now, a disciplined and responsible person would have put that time into something grown-up, even productive, maybe a hobby like gardening or folding the laundry that piled—but, alas, there is very little discipline to be found here.

I did the next obvious thing and went down a rabbit hole looking for funny videos about chickens. Okay, not immediately, but I did decide to download the newest social media app at the time, TikTok. My buddy and fellow nurse, Lauren, was already on it, and she told me that there would be chickens. (I know you and I are just getting to know each other, so one of the most important things you should know about me is that I have indoor chickens. They wear diapers that look like blue jean overalls and I love them.) What started as a way for me to watch funny chicken videos quickly became something much more as the algorithm quickly figured out that, in addition to my being a lover of diapered chickens, I was also a Labor & Delivery nurse.

My personal feed started serving me all kinds of birth-themed videos, many from newly pregnant people who were looking for everything from baby names to advice to solidarity for all the weird and unexpected things their bodies were suddenly doing. I also saw a lot of newly *unpregnant* people, many of whom detailed their birth stories. On top of all this, I was showered with content from TikTok creators of varying qualifications, offering medical advice and information about pregnancy and birth.

(Speaking of which, not everyone you see giving medical advice online has your best interest at heart. Always be suspicious of anything you see online. Even my stuff. Take what you see as good talking points to discuss with your trusted health-care provider. More on that later.)

Watching these videos was like opening a portal. Of course, I had expertise being an L&D nurse, having helped people in delivering lots of babies in real life. But on TikTok, I found myself learning much more about the patient experience. I began to understand some of the concerns of pregnant friends on a deeper level, such as the fear of being forced to do something they didn't want to do in the course of labor, or the fear of feeling like an animal in a zoo, with strangers watching them in a vulnerable state. And the biggest game-changer for me was realizing that so many of the things that people feared, or that had a negative impact on someone's birth experience, could be prevented (or at least hugely minimized) by timely, empathetic, and compassionate human connection.

I noticed pretty quickly that the majority of bad experiences I saw described might have been completely avoided through honest communication, genuine connection, emotional support, and a therapeutic environment. It seemed to me that too many people went into labor lacking something truly solid, something they could rely on in any scenario: namely, a plan based on the elements of birth that are *constant*—no matter what surprises or unexpected developments pop up along the way.

This online experience helped give language to what I'd long sensed but never put into words: Experiencing a positive or negative labor and birth is often much, much less about the logistics of *what* happens and much more about *what you feel while* it's happening. I knew: A birth could unfold exactly to plan on paper, and yet you could still walk away from the experience feeling unheard, unimportant, or disrespected. On the flip side of that, you could also have a birth that goes completely off the rails, but if you were given the emotional and physical care you deserved, you could leave that experience feeling empowered, in control, and respected—all because you were able to make your own informed and empowered decisions at every

turn in the road, with the collaboration of a team that cared about you as a person. If I have learned only one thing in my years as a nurse, it is the biggest common denominator of a positive experience is human connection.

It's like this: Let's say you get a little GI bug. Now, I know labor is a much more fulfilling and transformative experience, but even if your labor is unfolding perfectly, there always comes a time that you're desperately wishing it to be over, just like the bargaining you do with God when you're sharfing (that's shitting and barfing at the same time). In one version of this story, you're safe and snug in your bed, lying in a cool room with your momma giving you Gatorade slushies and gently placing a washcloth on your forehead. In another version, you end up getting that bug while camping with your high school bullies. No mom. No Gatorade slushies. No forehead washcloths. But it's hot, there are hella mosquitos, not to mention both the fear of humiliation and the possibility that a snake might bite your bare butt cheeks as you balance over a hole in the ground. Look, in both versions, the same physiological process is happening. In our example, that process is your body behaving like a busted soda can, spraying out of both ends. But I'm willing to bet that the second version of the story is going to take root in your mind much more traumatically than the first one. Likewise, the way you look back on your baby's birth story will depend much more on how you felt emotionally and mentally than on the plan itself.

So, how *do* you cultivate the birth experience you want to have? Realistically, there is no way around the fact that this is a deeply vulnerable situation that requires you to surrender—not only to your own body, but also (sometimes) to circumstances you never imagined. The loss of autonomy that many feel can be managed by creating a birth plan. A guiding companion to steer your birth in the way you hope for it to go. There can be a lot of calm generated by researching birth scenarios ahead of time, deciding exactly which interventions (the tools or procedures that can be utilized during labor) we feel good about and which we don't want. And that's fantastic! I love an informed queen who knows what she wants, and, honestly, this helps me advocate for my patients better. Birth plans can give

you peace of mind as you approach the big day and empower you during labor. All of which is comforting during a time when so much can feel beyond your control.

However, what happens when things start to go differently than you thought? For example, what if your water breaks but contractions never come? Or what if your baby ends up in a position incompatible with vaginal birth? How about if your older kid gets sick the night before your delivery and you're exhausted before you even begin the unmedicated labor you planned? A birth plan in and of itself does not guarantee that your experience will unfold exactly as you hoped or leave you feeling completely fulfilled.

In many labors, your body and your baby will do exactly what you intended for them to do, and each birth plan box can be easily checked off. However, in labors where things begin to go differently than anticipated, clinging to every detail on a carefully considered list, even when presented with new circumstances, can actually take you further away from the kind of birth you hoped for. Being able and willing to tweak your plans when new information arises can steer you back on track—or closer—to the kind of birth you want. This doesn't mean accepting every intervention that is offered to you. It means getting all the information you need to make those informed and empowered decisions. It means thinking of interventions as tools to use as needed and not as inherently evil or good.

Knowing this allows us to ask a more realistic, accurate question: How do you thoughtfully prepare for the birth you want while also giving yourself permission to pivot—without disappointment or shame—if the circumstances or plan changes? Over the years in helping thousands of pregnant friends bring their babies into the world and seeing a wide spectrum of all kinds of births, I have witnessed the factors that make for a positive experience versus a negative one. When I saw online how many people looked back on their births with a sense of fear, trauma, guilt, or sadness, it lit a fire in me. I wanted expecting parents to have all this information—and well before going to hospital—in order to make the