Letter from the Editor

The Synchrony of Mother-Infant Needs

Abstract

Growing evidence continues to demonstrate the benefits infants derive from breastfeeding, and the connection to natural births and breastfeeding is made apparent; however, mothers may misunderstand. They may mistakenly believe they must sacrifice in order to give their infants the best start in life. Childbirth educators can help mothers understand how they, too, may personally benefit from natural childbirth and breastfeeding. These mother-infant needs are not competitive; instead, they are synchronous.

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In a number of settings, recently, I have heard it recognized that the childbirth experience forms the foundation for breastfeeding. As the benefits of breastfeeding continue to become more and more conclusively documented, this connection can be used to help motivate parents to work for and plan natural-birth experiences. When both infant and mother emerge from the birth experience alert and ready, breastfeeding can ideally be launched. We know the unmedicated infant is more alert in the first hours after birth than he or she will be in the next few weeks. This fact is widely discussed in conversations about promoting bonding. It is equally useful in conversations about promoting breastfeeding.

What often gets lost in conversations about natural births is the long-term benefit to the mother. If a mother believes that to give her infant the best start in life she must make a painful sacrifice in her own experience of the birth, then right from the start she envisions her own needs in competition with the infant's needs. The act of parenting an infant from the beginning and through the next couple of decades truly will require the sacrifice of effort and convenience on numerous occasions. However, I believe that in the long run most parents come to understand that they *gain* far more than they *give* by being parents. Thus, in the childbirth educator's work to launch new families, it is useful to help mothers realize early on the benefits to themselves from experiencing pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. In the long run, Mother Nature has planned a synchronous, not a competitive, model in meeting mothers and infants' needs.

It is also imperative to help the health care community understand the synchronous versus competitive mother-infant needs model. We know that parties with financial incentives are pushing both artificial milks for infants and epidural or cesarean births for mothers. Many of the health professionals who go along with these influences mistakenly believe, at some level, that they are relieving mothers of unnecessary *burdens* and *sacrifices*.

The contrary evidence is that the research continues to make clearer statements about the *benefits* the mother derives from breastfeeding her infant. For the exclusively breastfeeding mother, these benefits include the following: returning to prepregnant weight faster and potentially losing weight disproportionately from their hips and thighs; promoting bone remineralization in the postpartum period, which later reduces hip fractures in the postmenopausal years; and providing increased levels of oxytocin, a hormone associated with mood and affection (Humenick, 2000).

Less well known is the fact that research supports the *benefits* mothers receive from experiencing childbirth. Given that no strong mandates for this research exist, less evidence supports these benefits. However, Nichols and Gennaro (2000) summarize some of them. They cite the evidence base that the childbirth experience is a transcendent, long-remembered event. The literature consistently describes the childbirth experience as a significant event of great psychological importance in a woman's life. It is said that the experience of childbirth forever shapes women's thought of themselves and may affect relationships with other family members. In studies, women with childbirth preparation have described labor as hard work—but work that is intensely rewarding and satisfying. Women have reported experiencing rapture or near mystical bliss during natural childbirth. In one study, 14% reported they were ecstatic at birth. Birth satisfaction has repeatedly been shown to be associated more with active participation and mastery of the experience than with pain reduction. Anesthesia, including epidurals, has not been associated with increased birth satisfaction. In contrast, multiple studies demonstrate that childbirth education has consistently been associated with birth satisfaction. Measures one would expect to be relatively stable—such as independence, decisiveness, locus of control, and confidence—have been shown to increase between the prenatal and postpartum period in conjunction with active participation in birth. Nichols and Gennaro (2000) conclude that childbirth must be accomplished in a manner that promotes more than biologic safety. The psychological

health and emotional needs of the woman are of equal importance. (See commentary on page 38.)

The childbirth experience has been described as an important opportunity for women to find their strength. Another name for this type of strength is *self-efficacy* or *self-actualization*. These are positive, personal attributes with lifelong implications. An important role of the childbirth educator is to help parents and health professionals to understand the potential benefits the mother can derive from a natural birth experience. A low- or no-medication birth certainly benefits the infant, but this is not in competition with the mother's needs. She, too, stands to gain important benefits. An assignment for couples in childbirth classes might be to explore the question: "To what extent do you believe that, in relation to childbirth and breastfeeding, the needs of one's infant are in competition with the mother's own needs?" A letter to the editor or an article describing what you learn from follow-up class discussions would be welcome.

—Sharron S. Humenick, RN, PhD, LCCE, FAAN

Reference

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Both Sides Now

I happen to feel that the degree of a person's intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting attitudes she can bring to bear on the same topic.

—Lisa Alther (in her book, *Kinflicks*)

No trumpets sound when the important decisions of our life are made. Destiny is made known silently.

—Agnes DeMille