*Response to the Innovative Service Article,
“Quality Perinatal Nursing Education Through Coteaching”
Implementing Coteaching in Childbirth Education Classes*

Wendy C. Budin, PhD, RNC, FACCE

WENDY BUDIN is an Associate Professor and Program Director of the Lamaze International Childbirth Education Program in the College of Nursing at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. She is a Fellow in the American College of Childbirth Educators and a member of the Lamaze International Faculty.

Abstract

In response to the article “Innovative Service: Quality Perinatal Nursing Education Through Coteaching” [*Journal of Perinatal Education*, 8(4), 27-35], the author of this column conducts an interview with two Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educators who share their experiences as coteachers.

Journal of Perinatal Education, 8(4), 36-39; coteaching, teaching and collaboration, team teaching, childbirth education.

Carolyn Fuerstenberg and Elizabeth Cappel, two Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educators, have been coteaching a variety of classes for the past four years. Fuerstenberg’s background is in education. She taught elementary school before taking a leave of absence to raise her two daughters. She first began teaching health-care-related courses (i.e., CPR, safety classes, etc.) and, several years ago, she became interested in childbirth education. Cappel holds a business degree and was employed at the New York Blood Center in public relations. She explains that childbirth education seemed like a perfect way to combine her interest in health and business. Cappel has three young children and found that giving birth was the most amazing moment in her life. She decided that she, too, would like to get involved with teaching childbirth education. Since becoming certified in 1997, both Fuerstenberg and Cappel have cotaught Lamaze and Lamaze-related classes (e.g., infant care and sibling preparation classes) at St. Peter’s University Hospital and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, both in New Brunswick, New Jersey. They also coteach

in private classes. In this article, both Fuerstenberg and Cappel are interviewed about their experiences with coteaching.

Wendy Budin: How long have you been coteaching childbirth education classes and how did you first become involved in coteaching?

Carolyn Fuerstenberg: Elizabeth and I began coteaching even before we began teaching childbirth education classes. We have been good friends for quite some time and first used coteaching in the basic life support classes that we provided in our community. We also did some coteaching as we prepared to become Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educators. As part of our student teaching, we cotaught a full series along with an experienced Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator, Katie Greenhalgh. Since becoming certified, we expanded our coteaching to include Lamaze classes.

Budin: What has been your personal experience as a learner in a coteaching environment?

Fuerstenberg: My experience as a learner in a coteaching situation has always been positive. I, for one, always enjoy classes taught in such a manner, provided they are done properly. By that, I mean the instructors share a similar philosophy of teaching methods and mutual respect for one another's opinions and differences. I particularly enjoyed the coteaching experience that I had at my seminar for Lamaze certification, provided by Wendy Budin and Mary Healy. In learning from coteachers, one gets the chance to hear different anecdotes, experience, and points of view.

Cappel: As a learner in a coteaching environment, I have found coteaching to be a positive experience, as long as the instructors are both energetic. I have found that, when one speaker is more monotone or less expressive, I would be more likely to lose interest in that speaker.

Budin: Describe how your collaboration as coteachers works. In other words, who does what, what are shared responsibilities, and who makes these decisions?

Fuerstenberg: Our collaboration on coteaching depends on what kind of coteaching we are doing. By this I mean teaching an entire course together or just doing parts of a series individually. When both of us are present for all the classes, we do what I call "tag-team teaching." One of us lectures and the other jumps in at certain spots to

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add stories, examples, or footnotes. The other way we collaborate is by dividing a series into individual classes for which we are each responsible. For example, I may teach classes 1, 3, and 5 while Elizabeth may do 2, 4, and 6. The collaboration and division of work is different based on which method of coteaching we are doing. Normally, we both prepare for the class individually and then consult before a class to see if anything new has come up.

Cappel: We equally make shared decisions on our method of teaching. We often take turns teaching different sections of the class. We also keep a very open format where we can both add points and comments.

Budin: Describe some of the barriers or difficulties you have experienced in coteaching.

Fuerstenberg: There are a variety of difficulties in coteaching. The most obvious one I can think of is when you and your partner disagree on a topic (for instance, the issue of circumcision). It's hard to teach a class and know that the information one instructor is giving may be very different from yours. It is also very difficult to know when to "bite your tongue." If you are coteaching a class and the other instructor is having a tough time getting a point across, it's hard to know when to intervene and help her out of a tight corner or when you may say too much and make her seem incapable—that, to me, is one of the hardest barriers to overcome. Also, I have sometimes had a hard time giving up some of the control in my classes, which I was very accustomed to having when I taught alone.

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Cappel: I believe that it is important that both teachers have equal time teaching. The class needs to feel comfortable with both of us. Difficulties can arise when the instructors do not agree on teaching styles or content. This is why it is so important to discuss the class content and format prior to the series.

Budin: Describe some of the benefits or advantages you have experienced in coteaching.

Fuerstenberg: The benefits in coteaching are that you have more flexibility in your schedule. If you are unable to be at a class, you are almost always assured that the other instructor will be there and the class will continue. There is very little need to reschedule classes. Also, reality dictates that there are always people in a class that you may not click with for whatever reason. Having a co-teacher present enables you to handle most any situation. There are times when you try to get a point across and, no matter how many different approaches you try, you just can't seem to make a class "get it." When you are coteaching, there is another person with a different set of perspectives who may be able to get a point across.

Cappel: There are many advantages to coteaching. For example, learning new information from your peers, adapting to different teaching styles, and having more flexibility in your schedule.

Budin: How does coteaching improve the quality of your classes and enhance the learning experience for your students?

Fuerstenberg: Coteaching gives the students the benefit of more than one viewpoint on issues. Having two teachers in a Lamaze class can be an asset. For example, while one instructor is doing breathing exercises, the other can walk around and give pointers on massage, relaxation, and positioning. The quality of the classes can be improved because parents may perceive that they are getting additional personal attention.

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Cappel: The students get the benefit of sharing the knowledge of two instructors. When we teach relaxation, one instructor demonstrates the technique while the other walks around the room and evaluates the couples performing these skills. The couples have two instructors to ask questions before and after class as well.

Budin: Describe how your teaching styles and personalities complement each other.

Fuerstenberg: Both our teaching styles and personalities are very similar. We are both outgoing and enthusiastic. We use humor to convey our messages. We have very similar backgrounds as well. I believe this is really important. We come with similar birth experiences, which also helps teaching childbirth education classes. I think when coteaching, your personalities and teaching styles should be similar; otherwise, you could have fundamental problems with the way in which you get your messages across.

Cappel: I agree that we have very similar personalities. We both like to add humor to our classes. Because we both attended the certification program together at Seton Hall [University], our classes have evolved in a similar fashion.

Budin: What are the reactions to coteaching from your employer? Are they supportive?

Fuerstenberg: In our situation, we do most of our coteaching during Lamaze classes that we set up privately, so there is no employer involved. However, the only problem I can see that an employer may have is the issue of paying two instructors for what, theoretically, one instructor could do. On the other hand, if class size could be increased so as to warrant the cost of two instructors, then employers would probably be more receptive to the idea of coteaching.

Cappel: The hospital where we teach has been receptive to many types of coteaching, such as grandparent classes and sibling classes. Coteaching also helps with scheduling problems. One member of the team can always cover for the other when both cannot be present. Coteaching also makes the educators very cohesive and fosters a warm environment that improves class evaluations. This may improve the marketing of the childbirth education classes at a health care facility. The negative side is that the hospital has to pay two instructors. The parent education department at most hospitals are typically under

tight budget constraints, which could prevent them from being receptive to coteaching.

Budin: Describe the reactions to coteaching from couples attending your classes.

Fuerstenberg: From the classes we have cotaught, our couples have always seemed to be quite satisfied. Evaluations have been positive. We have never had any problems that we're aware of in which there was a conflict with teaching style or personality that affected the ways in which our students learned.

Cappel: The couples seem to enjoy the coteaching environment. They seem to stay interested with different instructors covering new material.

Budin: What would you do differently in the way you coteach, if you could? What wouldn't you change?

Fuerstenberg: I wouldn't do anything different. I'm very comfortable working together because we complement one another.

Cappel: I think it would be helpful to inform the couples prior to their first class who the instructors will be and to describe the format and structure for the classes. One

area that I would definitely not change is the ability to add points and interact with my coteacher during the class.

Budin: What suggestions could you offer other instructors thinking about coteaching?

Fuerstenberg: My suggestions to other instructors contemplating a coteaching situation would be to make sure they have a good relationship with the other instructor, based on respect and admiration for their knowledge and skills as a teacher. Make sure your personalities and beliefs are in sync with one another and that, when your opinions differ, you fully understand one another's point of view. Coteaching can be a lot of fun and a great way to share the responsibility of teaching that often falls upon the shoulders of just one instructor. However, if it is rushed into or is done without a lot of preparatory work, it could be a situation that you both may find less than ideal.

Cappel: Make sure that you are very compatible with your coteacher. You will spend many hours together both in person and on the phone to discuss the class before and after. Having a similar personality and philosophy of teaching and learning is also important.