
A Baby Came out of my Vagina!!! At Home!!!!

Or how we do birth at Nottingham Home Birth Group

Nicky Grace

There have been several incarnations of a home birth support group in Nottingham. At present there is one main group which meets on the third Friday of each month at the Iona Steiner School in Nottingham. This particular group was started by my friend Andrea Lee and me in about 2008 and is still going strong. Members of the group include women planning or considering a home birth, their partners and family members, postnatal women, midwives, doulas, and other birth workers, along with 'old' members who return sometimes to tell us how they are getting on. Together we create a safe space which provides loving, non-judgmental support. In case this sounds rather woolly, let me also emphasise that there are many practical tips on offer, along with loans of books and equipment such as birth pools, TENS machines and slings. We decided to keep the name 'home birth group' even though some of the members have hospital births. This is because it was felt that home birth is marginalised, even endangered, and we want to emphasise it is a reasonable choice for many women. However, the group itself is open to anyone even if home birth isn't the right choice for them.

We have a fairly informal format which has evolved over the years. When we had our first gatherings, we used to meet and sit or stand around drinking cups of tea and spend the whole two hours mingling. I am eternally grateful to one of the early members, my dear friend (and ex-client) Verity Croft, who had the courage to say that she thought we could improve the format. It sometimes had a rather hectic feel as we welcome other family members including small children, and it could be a challenge to hear all the voices and give individual attention where it was needed. After some thought and discussion with the group, it was decided that the first hour would remain as mingling and catching up (which we all enjoyed), but that we would then sit down together in a circle. This would allow individuals to ask questions or tell birth stories. We also occasionally have a speaker who describes something of interest – for instance, hypnobirthing, cranio-sacral therapy or placenta encapsulation.

So this is how it is now. We meet up and usually there is a new baby (or two or three) to welcome. Many of our new parents wear their babies in slings and the atmosphere is friendly. We used to sit on comfy squashy sofas, but came in one day to find the school had disposed of them, so we now sit on children's chairs round a large low table (good practice for squatting!) which may look a bit comical but works quite well in practice. It gives us somewhere to put drinks, books, biscuits, crochet and other important items.

After the first hour, I (or whoever is facilitating) ask for quiet. We go round the table introducing ourselves, and

sometimes there is some 'business' to discuss – perhaps about the pools we lend out or whether we should invite a particular speaker. Then comes the moment we have all been waiting for when each new mother in the group tells her birth story. This storytelling is (for me) the heart of the group.

Birth stories – the heart of the group

Each woman shares her story without significant interruption. Sometimes someone may ask a question, or make a comment, but on the whole what happens is that the woman tells her story in her own way. Every other person in the group listens quietly to the story. We have never had any rules or even much guidance, yet I have never heard any one judging or critiquing another in that space. There is an underlying powerful yet largely unspoken message that we are there to support each other. It gives every woman an opportunity to reflect on her birth journey in the company of others.

Each story is unique. There is no demand for eloquence or a particular style of report, yet many women, even those who would normally shy away from public speaking, tell their tale with the eloquence born of passion. We hear about the intense, joyful, passionate, primal experience of birth. Often the stories are celebratory, even triumphant, in nature. Then again, there are stories which tell of the unpredictability of birth, of journeys which did not follow the plan, though many of these still have a positive message of empowerment if the woman is fully involved in the decision-making process. Occasionally we hear a truly sad story, or are shocked by a traumatic experience, though this is relatively rare. Overall the strength of the group means that all stories can be encompassed, whether notionally 'good' or 'bad'. The concept of witness springs to mind; we each bear witness to the joys, pains, triumphs and griefs of each woman in turn. It feels momentous to me each time we hear a story – I never get tired of it! And though there are sometimes tears, there is also a great deal of laughter.

I think it's important to everyone to feel they are among like-minded people, because when women are planning a home birth, or a hospital birth with as few interventions as possible, women and their partners can feel quite defensive. They often have to contend with negative comments from well-meaning (or ill-meaning!) family, friends and even health care providers, so it's important that the home birth group provides a generally positive and encouraging atmosphere so people can plan the best birth for them in their own individual circumstances. I particularly love the democratic nature of the group. We are all equals, and though there is usually a facilitator (often me as the old-timer) we all learn

from each other. I know as a midwife I feel valued and nurtured by the group and in turn that allows me to value and nurture the other group members and my own clients. I should probably also mention the Facebook group – this is a bit broader than the real life group with a current membership of around 150 and includes some people who don't manage to make meetings. I'm delighted to say that we have lots of midwife members of the Facebook group including some midwifery managers, so it's a good informal way of women and midwives keeping in contact with each other. Positive ways of using social media to enhance maternity care (or arguments why we should avoid social media!) would probably make another article, but suffice to say, by keeping things fairly simple and not using the group to air controversies, we have created another avenue for support and encouragement. It's particularly inspiring to see pictures of new babies and happy birth announcements. These can be very moving, especially when everyone in the group is aware of a previous traumatic experience, or some

other complication which means the dream of home birth or even vaginal birth is especially precious. This was epitomised by Verity Castledine who posted the 'A BABY CAME OUT OF MY VAGINA!!! AT HOME!!!!' comment on Facebook. I love this comment because it is so celebratory. Without at all wanting to denigrate or criticise hospital birth, let's jolly well celebrate home birth when it happens – like an endangered species, home birth needs our protection and care. Hopefully we provide this at the Nottingham home birth group.

Comment made by Verity Castledine following her vaginal birth after caesarean (VBAC) at home in 2013. Capital letters and exclamation marks obligatory! (Verity is a home birth group member, mother, and crocheter extraordinaire.)

We really owe a debt of gratitude to the Iona School. They have facilitated our group for many years and don't charge a fee for the room. Hopefully it is of mutual benefit, as quite a few members fall in love with the place and with the Steiner philosophy and end up with children at nursery, kindergarten and beyond.

Nottingham Home Birth Group members write:

My mum had five home births and my sisters both had hospital births.

I was 20 years old when I had my first pregnancy and never contemplated home birth until someone made a flippant remark about why not consider home birth. The seed was planted.

Fortunately I was supported by an excellent midwife (Kerriane Gifford) and was able to have successful home birth. I did not manage to research very much on relief or relaxation and, looking back, I may have been slightly naïve. However, I am proud of what I achieved against the odds and the system trying to decide I was to birth in hospital.

When it came to pregnancy number two, having had one home birth, I thought a second home birth would be perceived as positive, however it wasn't. I wish I knew of a home birth support group back then, as I felt quite alone in my choice.

I did, however, achieve my home birth and was greeted by a midwife I had never met but who was fantastic (Alison Rushton) at supporting me through a long birth even through my requests for an epidural during the second stage!!

For my last and final :(pregnancy I was made aware of the support group. I only managed a couple of sessions due to a poorly pregnancy and lack of transport following birth. However, I have and still do enjoy the knowledge it's there – hearing stories on Facebook and seeing women empower one another.

I might add for my final birth I went to St Mary's at Melton, achieved a fast water birth which was fantastic as I really wanted breast feeding support, having failed twice previously. I somehow overcame mastitis five times, weight gain issues and

unsupportive local midwives but managed to feed for seven months until my little one refused it. I cannot recommend home birth highly enough. I had amazing experiences and have been privileged enough to see others birth at home and still the miracle of life never fails to amaze me!

If only all midwives were as supportive and caring as those I have had the pleasure of caring for me.

Nasha Hayes

My home births have without doubt infused my journey into parenthood with a deep sense of confidence. Birthing naturally in our home not only gave me unhurried, gentle births but encouraged me to trust my intuition as a parent. Being able to observe my body birth free of any intervention left me with more confidence in my own abilities, more emotional strength and determination, and a deep sense of trust in my own body.

Becky Rutter

mother, medical herbalist and yoga teacher

I wish women understood how different birthing at home is to birthing in hospital. The experiences are completely opposite. Homebirth groups should be a resource within every community, supported by all midwives who signpost women to these groups. Many women don't know home birth is an option, or if they do they are undecided, perhaps influenced by a misplaced mythology that home birth is archaic and dangerous.

I really don't think women can make an informed choice about place of birth until they have met other women who have experienced it, and had the opportunity to explore it as a realistic option. Homebirth

group gives women this opportunity, and opens up a whole new potential for women to experience birth in a deeply connective way whether they end up having their baby at home or at hospital.

Sophie Fletcher

mother, doula, hypnotherapist

author of "Mindful Hypnobirthing: Mindful Hypnobirthing: Hypnosis and mindfulness techniques for a calm and confident birth"

Home birth group gave me the confidence to trust in my body and its ability to bring my baby into the world. I think having a home birth has also shaped how I parent my child; trusting my instincts, and not following the majority just because it may be perceived as 'right because everyone else does it'.

Nicola Ramsdale

home birth group member and mother

