

Can You Really Plan for Birth?

Women's views and experiences of birth plans

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What is a birth plan?

A way for women and their partners to express preferences, choices and wishes for their care during childbirth – including such things as pain relief, positions for labour and birth, and care of the newborn baby.

From early views (1985)...

'A steady trickle of strange ladies is infiltrating the system and arriving in labour wards up and down the country with a familiar shopping list of demands telling doctors and midwives what to do... These patients tend to arrive, without warning, in the labour ward with their lethal shopping lists... They are not entitled to tell doctors how to do their work. They are not entitled to ask us to lower professional standards and to jeopardise babies' lives.'¹

...to contemporary policy (2003)

'We will encourage local services to offer all women the option of having a birth plan. This birth plan should clearly set out what options are available, for example home or hospital birth, and record each woman's preferences for pain relief, food, movement and so on. A birth plan is not of course an end in itself. It needs to be discussed throughout pregnancy to the point of birth and beyond and amended to take account of any changes in a woman's choices of situation.'²

What's included in a birth plan?

There are many different types of birth plan, and most NHS trusts include a template for women and their partners to use when thinking about their labour and birth preferences.

One issue is the wide variation in templates – they can range from an almost blank page to a detailed description of available options and choices.

References

1. Beech B (2011) Challenging the medicalisation of birth. AIMS Journal 23(2).
2. Department of Health (2003) Building on the Best: choice, responsiveness and equity in the NHS.

What do women think?

Exploring women's views

We posted a series of questions on the discussion boards of two well known parenting forums, asking women about their views and experiences of birth plans – for example why they wrote a birth plan, who helped them to write it, and whether their birth plan was followed during labour. We also wanted to hear from women who chose not to write a birth plan.

What we found: mixed views!

A birth plan is a way of communicating things to your midwives and of making informed decisions ahead of time which leaves mums alone to concentrate solely on the task of giving birth

I think it's good to think about how you hope things will go, research what is on offer for pain relief etc. and make up your own mind

I wrote an epic birth plan, then had a planned section for a breech baby. I'm not bothering this time!



I believe that they are a major factor in so many women feeling like failures when their labours don't go to plan

I think the term 'plan' is the problem. It suggests that you might have an element of control over the situation, which isn't always the case

Don't waste your time. Nobody can predict what's going to happen during labour.

My first midwife didn't follow anything on my birth plan... The second time, I mentioned my birth plan after delivery and the midwife said she didn't realise I had a birth plan because she didn't check

Conclusions and next steps

Formal, written plans may not enhance women's experiences of labour and birth, and women continue to express a range of opinions about them. However, it is important that women have opportunities to explore and discuss the options available to them, and to be supported in their preferences during labour and birth. Next, we're going to ask midwives about their views and experiences of birth plans.

