

Childbirth and Newborns:  
Challenges and Opportunities Depicted Across Mediums

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### Abstract

This paper includes peer-reviewed articles, and website articles that portray the birth and neonatal stage. The paper will start with an introduction of birth and newborns by focusing on biological, cognitive, social, and emotional developments. After that, the paper will point out major developmental challenges and opportunities of this stage, such as stillbirth and the usage of doulas. Lastly, this paper will analyze a popular film that portrays this developmental stage. The movie used is *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, a drama targeted for young and older adults.

*Keywords:* Birth, neonatal, childbirth, development, labor, doulas, stillbirth

### **Introduction to Development During Birth and Neonatal Stage**

Childbirth is a universal concept. Delivering a child to the world can bring infinite happiness to many mothers. To others, it brings unpleasant emotions. Importantly, the birth and neonatal stage does not solely concentrate on infants, but also on mothers. Further, many pregnant women share troubling emotions such as stress, anxiety, and fear. For example, pregnant women develop concerns regarding birth, such as what are the best childbirth attendants, birthing techniques, and medications to use. This is taken with caution because anything that can affect the mother could potentially affect the fetus. Hence, birth and the neonatal stage is a complex event, which impacts both the mother's and the infant's biological, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

To start, childbirth attendants are becoming more diversified. Childbirth attendants are the assistants who support the mother and/or their birth process. Nowadays, mothers choose who will assist them during labor. According to Hirsh (2015), "most women choose an obstetrician (OB/GYN), specialists who's trained to handle pregnancies (including those with complications), a labor, and delivery" (para. 7). This means that medical doctors are the most commonly used childbirth attendants. Other attendants that are highly used are midwives and doulas. Doulas, unlike most midwives, lack proper education and certifications. However, doulas do provide social, emotional, and psychological support to mothers, during and after birth. Other important childbirth attendants include partners and family members. Similarly, Saxbe (2017) notes that "among 2,400 mothers, 99% reported receiving some kind of supportive care during labor" (p. 83). Hence, childbirth attendants help expecting mothers receive the support they need to be able to enhance their social and emotional growth.

Next, many women give birth in specialized manners; some women give birth traditionally, while others opt for different methods. Among some of the most popular childbirth techniques, one of them is the Lamaze method. The Lamaze method uses breathing techniques to help women relax and endure contractions. Another widely used technique is the Bradley method. This method maintains birth as natural as possible by opposing the use of medications. Additionally, the father in this method plays an important part by providing his partner with social and emotional encouragement. Moreover, hypnobirthing is another technique that utilizes self-hypnosis to ease discomfort. Lastly, some women give birth through water birthing. In this method, women give birth in water, most frequently in a tub, or in an inflatable pool. These methods are often chosen by pregnant women to help them experience birth biologically, emotionally, and socially better. Further, some women decide not to use any medications that will affect them physically. However, many women do use them. For example, some women get epidurals to decrease their physical pain. Also, they can choose how to give birth, either vaginally or through a C-section. Though, in most cases, women must have cesarean births, because of labor complications. Related to this, one study identified that “those who had a vaginal birth were more satisfied with their birth experience” (Murry-Davis, McVittie, Barret, & Hutton, 2016, p. 285). Hence, women give birth based on their social and emotional views of medications, and labor processes. However, like mentioned, uncontrollable circumstances might impair their options.

Finally, birth starts when labor begins. Certain hormones signal the body when the fetus is ready to be born. Two important hormones involved in labor are corticotropin-releasing hormones and oxytocin. A corticotropin-releasing hormone is a stress hormone that increases in amount, days prior to birth. This hormone is specifically involved in initiating labor. On the

other hand, oxytocin is a hormone that helps maintain the progression of labor. This hormone tells the uterus to contract. And contractions signal the mother to push the fetus outward. Furthermore, some bodies might not be able to release oxytocin. In this case, a “synthetic oxytocin (Pitocin) can be administered to induce labor” (Saxbe, 2017, p. 82). Therefore, because of biological developments, such as hormones, the process of labor begins.

Labor is categorized into three stages. The first stage of labor is the longest stage. In this stage, contractions begin. Contractions enter with less intensity, and they gradually increase in pain, and in frequency. Further, during this stage, some women’s water break, but not for all. For example, Ben-Joseph (2014) states that “only 1 in 10 mothers’ water breaks before labor contractions begin. Some women never experience it – a doctor may need to rupture the amniotic sac (if the cervix is already dilated)” (para. 2). Moreover, this stage typically lasts 8 to 12 hours. And it is not complete until the cervix has been dilated at least 10cm. The second stage of childbirth roughly lasts 90 minutes. During this stage, the neonate is discharged by having had passed through the cervix and the birth canal. In the last stage, the placenta and umbilical cord are removed from the mother's womb. The umbilical cord is also clipped, separating the newborn from the placenta. Lastly, this stage is considered the quickest stage. Hence, the birth process is long and complicated.

After birth, neonates gradually adjust to the outside world. For instance, neonates use their reflexes to help them adapt. For example, a newborn might suck to seek a pleasurable stimulus, such as food. In addition, they involuntarily make bowel movements. For instance, Galvin (2014) states that “newborns may have just one poopy diaper a day at first. Poop is dark and tarry the first few days, then becomes soft or loose and greenish-yellow by about 3 to 4 days” (para. 5). Moreover, during this time, neonates are sensitive to taste, smell, sound, and

touch. For example, they can distinguish their mother's voice and smell. In addition, their seeing capabilities during this stage are not fully developed, so they can only partially see. Lastly, newborns grow rapidly, “about 1 to 1 ½ inches (2.54 to 3.81 centimeters) during the first month” (Galvin, 2014, para. 7). Therefore, after birth, newborns keep developing cognitively and biologically.

Newborns can learn early on in life. For instance, through habituation, they further improve their cognitive abilities. For example, because of habituation, they will place their attention on specific objects but later decrease their focus on them, finding others more appealing. Furthermore, social and emotional aspects also occur at this stage. For example, neonates bond with their mothers. This typically occurs when a newborn and their mother first meet, particularly after birth. Furthermore, bonding helps newborns and their mothers secure a strong emotional relationship. Interestingly, newborns can also imitate others, which allows them to acquire social cues. In all, newborns can develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

Altogether, birth and the neonatal stage is a multifaceted process. This process allows fetuses to develop and come into the world. During this stage, mothers are as important as their children. Because of this, mothers also face cognitive, biological, social, and emotional developments. Moreover, once neonates are born, they will start adjusting to their outside environments. For example, they start growing, learning, building emotional connections, and imitating others. Hence, there are biological, cognitive, social, and emotional developments in this stage which set the foundation for future growth.

### **Challenges and Opportunities During Birth and Neonatal Stage**

The birth and neonatal stage presents newborns and parents with major challenges and opportunities. Many of the challenges, can be controlled but in many cases, they cannot. Two of

the major challenges are stillbirths and teratogens. On the other hand, various opportunities come from parents' birth experiences and evolving medical practices. Hence, this stage incorporates a mixture of negative and positive consequences.

Today, stillbirth is still prevalent. For example, McDorman and Gregory (2015) reported that "a total of 23,595 fetal deaths at 20 weeks of gestation or more were reported in the United States in 2013" (p. 1). To Cacciatore, DeFrain, and Jones (2008), "a stillborn baby is one mature enough developmentally to have lived outside the womb but for some reason was born dead" (p. 443). Unlike a miscarriage, stillbirth occurs 20 weeks after a baby was conceived. Moreover, loss of a baby, which happens uncontrollably, affects family members. Most often mothers feel guilt, depression, confusion, along with other negative emotions. Cacciatore, DeFrain, and Jones also note that after a stillbirth a mother "may no longer trust her own body and may wonder if her partner feels the same. This emotional burden may impede a woman's desire for intimate contact" (p. 452). Thus, stillbirth could cause long term emotional damages, specifically to mothers.

Teratogens are also a major problem, primarily those consumed by pregnant women. Teratogens are agents that impair development of an embryo. For example, they can cause labor complications, preterm deliveries, miscarriages, and other severe birth defects. A teratogen can be anything, such as an illegal substance or even pollution. Kharkova, Grjibovski, Krettek, Nieboer, and Odland (2017) studied smoking behaviors of mothers before and during pregnancy, and they found out that "mothers who smoked 11 cigarettes per day while pregnant were 2.1, 5.4, 5.2 and 2.1 times more likely to deliver an infant with low values of birth weight, birth length, head circumference and Apgar score at 5 min compared to non-smokers" (p. 5). Moreover, drinking alcohol during pregnancy can also cause fetal alcohol syndrome. Fetal alcohol

syndrome causes "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, aggressive behavior, sleep problems, and anxiety" (Galvin, 2016, para. 4). This demonstrates, how teratogens can cause major challenges to infants during pregnancy, ultimately, impacting them after birth. Therefore, exposure to teratogens during pregnancy can generate great difficulties to a neonate's overall development.

On the contrary to challenges, birth can also present major opportunities. For example, parents' positive birth experiences, has increased due to the utilization of midwives and doulas. In one study, the outcomes of mothers with doulas and without doulas were examined. This study revealed that "doula-assisted mothers were four times less likely to have a LBW baby, two times less likely to experience a birth complication involving themselves or their baby, and significantly more likely to initiate breastfeeding" (Gruber, Cupito, & Dobson, 2013, p. 54). Therefore, the assistance that doulas provide has shown to enhance positive labor experiences by decreasing negative challenges. Moreover, the invention of fetal heart monitors has saved many fetuses' lives. This machine can detect heart rates, which helps to determine when a fetus is at risk of death (Marshall, Thompson, Romito, & Gilbert, 2015). Hence, birth can present outcomes that positively affect the health and development of mothers and their neonates.

In all, the childbirth and neonatal stage encompasses both challenges and opportunities. Two major challenges are death and developmental impairments. On the other hand, it also includes positive birth experiences and health outcomes. Hence, this stage, like many other stages of life, holds both negative and positive circumstances.

### **Birth and Newborns in Popular Media**

Birth and newborns are commonly portrayed in the media. In some cases, films incorrectly portray birth and the newborn stage. One popular film that depicts this stage is, *What*



to *Expect When You're Expecting*. This movie is catered to young and older adults. Its accuracy is important because some viewers use films to obtain knowledge. Therefore, this film will be used to depict the accuracy and the portrayal of this developmental stage.

To start, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is about five women, who eventually become mothers. Three of those women experienced labor, the other two faced significant complications. For example, one had a miscarriage and the other one was infertile. From the three that did give birth, one was a fitness celebrity, one was a trophy wife, and the other one managed her own business. They all experienced labor differently. For example, only one had her water break before her contractions had begun. This supports Ben-Joseph's (2014) statement, that only 10% of women's water break before their contractions commence. Another accurate representation was shown when they were told to start pushing only after their cervix had dilated 10cm. In addition, one woman also gave birth through a cesarean because her fetus was having complications. Her baby was losing oxygen and its heart rate was decreasing. She also showed negative emotions towards having to get a C-section. Therefore, Murry-Davis, McVittie, Barret, & Hutton's (2016) statement that women who have a C-section have more troubling experiences with labor was displayed. Lastly, this movie depicted each birth as unique, which helps to demonstrate this as a complex stage.

On the other hand, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* does depict misinterpretations. For example, the youngest mother who had twins did not experience any pain. This scene may mislead viewers to believe that younger women experience less pain and that having twins is easy. However, if having one child produces pain and difficulties, then having two babies can raise those complications. For instance, one twin study analyzed the birth complications that younger women had compared to older women. The author, Branum (2005) concluded that "the

risk for both twins and singletons increases with decreasing age, and the risk for twins is higher than for singletons born to teens and older adults” (p. 232). Thus, its particularly rare that the young mother did not experience any complications, nevertheless any pain. Furthermore, in this movie, the neonates were born without any blood or vernix. This can mislead people to believe that neonates are born clean. However, all newborns are born with vernix and other liquids. Lastly, the film failed to present the third stage of labor, in where the placenta gets taken out. Hence, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* fails to recognize key components during labor and after birth.

All things considered, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* tries to correctly depict the birth and newborn stage. Even though it correctly illustrates some aspects, it fails to recognize some key components. For example, it fails to establish how having twins is not easy, how neonates are born covered with fluids, and how the placenta also gets discharged. Accordingly, a film this popular can steer viewers to develop misunderstandings. Hence, its portrayal is critical for viewers to precisely and efficiently depict the processes, challenges, and opportunities in this stage. Henceforth, this film still needs to be improved to appropriately justify this developmental stage.

### **Conclusion**

As has been noted, the birth and newborn stage encompass vast developments for both the mothers and their infants. This stage includes horrendous difficulties that are caused involuntarily or through purposeful actions. For example, some children may have intellectual disabilities and be born drug addicts because their mothers consumed drugs during their pregnancy. Nevertheless, it also includes positive opportunities such as those raised by new medical technology. For instance, a child may be alive today because doctors were able to detect

his/her heart complications through a heart rate machine. Thus, this stage provides mothers and childbirth attendants the ability to build a strong foundation for neonates, as newborns continue to develop.

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