

A Conversation with Ina May Gaskin Leader in America's Natural Childbirth Movement

by Gail Condrick



Ina May Gaskin is the author of *Spiritual Midwifery* and *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*, developer of the Gaskin maneuver for shoulder birth complications, and founder of The Farm Midwifery Center, in Tennessee. Since 1971, she has influenced and inspired women around the world with her views on natural childbirth.

Q. You have been called the nation's leading midwife and the founder of the natural childbirth movement in America. How did you get started?

Like many women, I had tried a hospital birth and vowed never to be treated that way again. It was the late 1960s and Americans were in rebellion. Women began demanding access to birth centers and midwives.

At the time, my husband Stephen and I were traveling on a cross-country lecture tour with a caravan of 50 school buses; along the way, babies were born and we midwifed each other. We began to coalesce into a community, finding roots and settling in Tennessee, where we founded The Farm. Some members of our community were doctors and nurses and we made contacts with local hospitals and health authorities. We had good outcomes with our pregnancies and breastfeeding rates right from the start. Our on-the-job training grew as we learned from each other as midwives and friends.

Q. What do women and their partners need to know about natural childbirth?

Women need to know that their bodies work better than they think they do. It is vital to trust the process of nature. We must believe that women's bodies are perfectly made for childbirth and the natural rhythms of giving birth. When our larger culture understands how women's bodies work and we trust that ours will work, we will have an entirely new psychology of childbirth.

Natural childbirth can provide a holistic approach to childbearing, one that includes the physical and emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs of each unique birth. To attend the birth of another person is a great, humbling, wonderful opportunity.

Q. Why does the mind/body connection play a key role in childbirth?

When the biological process is allowed to unfold in the most peaceful way, the mother experiences the natural release of a mixture of ecstatic hormones, oxytocin and beta endorphins. Birthing mothers actually have the ability to become more fluid and are able to relax the muscles that need to open. If the body senses fear, the muscles of the involuntary system become rigid and inflexible, which makes it hard to change shape. Then, the immobility escalates, causing extreme pain where normally, labor would continue unimpeded. Fight-

ing this natural functioning wastes a lot of energy.

Yet, a birthing mother can make an instant change and release the ecstatic hormones naturally, simply through deep breathing, laughter and even experiencing gratitude for those helping her. All of this works best in an atmosphere of privacy and calm.

Q. Will you explain what you refer to as our country's "big secret" regarding childbirth?

There is a generally held belief that childbirth is safe in the United States while, in reality, we lack accurate reporting on this country's rising maternal death rate. The reports we do have, based on long-term data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and a later *National Vital Statistics Report*, reveal a doubling of the annual maternal fatalities tracked per 100,000 live births, from 7.5 in 1982 through 1996 to 15.1 in 2005. Given suspected under-reporting due to misclassification, some estimate that the number of deaths attributed to pregnancy and its complications (which include Cesarean births, or C-sections) may be as high as three times that.

Q. What can families do to ensure a more natural birthing process is available to us and our daughters?

We need to do a lot of rethinking. Americans believe that the more technology we throw at problems, the better. But, that is not necessarily true in giving birth. We need to study why the death rate is rising and take major steps to turn it around. We need a national system collecting data, more midwives, a revolution in obstetrical education and a national health-insurance system, with better prenatal and postpartum care for all women. Families must insist on it. All of this is possible.

*For more information visit InaMay.com and consult a health care provider. Ina May Gaskin's latest book, *Ina May's Guide to Breastfeeding*, will be released this fall.*

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