

A Childbirth Reality Check

New Book Explores Labor Pain and Options for Relief

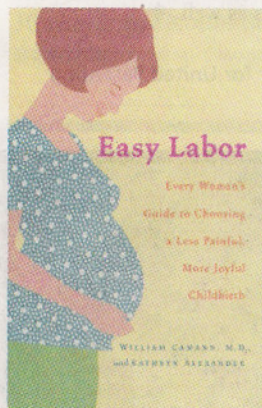
By Alison O'Leary Murray

After all a pregnant woman goes through – from perfect strangers' horror stories about birthing to worries about those prenatal medical tests for “abnormalities” – it's not surprising that most of them would initially scoff at a book entitled *Easy Labor*. As a society, we're almost resigned to having a rough childbirth experience as part of our quest to bring home a healthy baby.

The authors of *Easy Labor*, both with Boston connections, knew that the title would be a lightning rod when it was published in April. But, they say, the book's mission of giving birthing women a menu of pain relief options and a clear picture of the issues surrounding each is important enough to transcend the title.

Against the Grain

“Books about childbirth are often biased,” says co-author William Camann, M.D., director of obstetric anesthesia at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. “This one is comprehensive, fair and balanced.” The best birth situation is one where the mother has the best medical and alternative techniques available to her and the freedom and ability to choose, he says.



The book starts with a comparison of facilities available to birthing women and the pros and cons of each, including who uses doulas, whether obstetricians deliver babies at birth centers and what kind of pain relief is available in each situation or location.

The authors also examine types of pain relief and provide some little-known facts. For instance:

- giving birth in a tub of water, known as waterbirthing, may not provide much pain relief but women who choose that method report low use of pain relief medication because they are committed to a medication-free birth experience;
- epidural pain relief may prolong labor;
- studies show that women who control their own dosages of pain medication through a patient-controlled epidural may use less pain relief medication than an anesthesiologist would likely provide; and
- use of Lamaze and hypnotherapy, as well as other stress-reducing techniques, will likely result in an easier and/or more positive birth experience.

The book also attempts to quantify childbirth pain, both in words and philosophies. Authors Camann and Kathryn Alexander acknowledge up front that many people believe pain is a necessary part of childbirth while others consider the pain to be a form of suffering that detracts from a satisfying birth experience. They make it clear that the intensity and discomfort of childbirth pain varies widely from one woman to the next.

The Birth of an Idea

Easy Labor was Alexander's idea. When she had her first child nine



In their book *Easy Labor*, authors William Camann, M.D., and Kathryn Alexander explore the issue of pain relief in childbirth to try to reduce the confusion and guilt that surrounds the choices pregnant women must make.

some strident natural birth practitioners may believe, she says.

“I think it's important to know that one woman's suffering is another woman's highly rewarding birth experience. It's important to make that distinction,” says

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– Kathryn Alexander, co-author of *Easy Labor: Every Woman's Guide to Choosing Less Pain and More Joy During Childbirth*

years ago, she felt that books and childbirth professionals alike dismissed the fear and anxiety about labor pain that pregnant women experience as their due dates approach. She didn't like the sense that she would feel inferior by choosing pain relief during childbirth. That kind of guilt clouds what should be a joyous experience, she says.

“We take it head-on,” she says of the book. “I'm betting that more women feel more information is better, even if they're uncomfortable with some of it.”

Taking advantage of pain relief medication during childbirth should not be seen as anti-feminist, as

Alexander. “My own experience led to me feeling frustrated because I felt there was a better way to give birth that didn't involve feeling reluctant to access pain relief.”

Boston resident Lorene

Whyte, who is pregnant with her first child, agrees that the book covers many important questions. She has already recommended it to friends who are also expecting.

“I found the book to be more helpful than saying, ‘You will forget everything once the baby is born,’” Whyte says. “I want to be more prepared than that and this book was very realistic, understandable and not alarmist.” ♦

Alison O'Leary Murray is editor of *The Boston Parents' Paper*.

RESOURCES

Books

- *Easy Labor: Every Woman's Guide to Choosing Less Pain and More Joy During Childbirth*, by William Camann, M.D., and Kathryn J. Alexander, Ballantine Books, 2006.