

Several months ago, I attended my friend Megan's home birth in what was a new role for me; as the support person for her 3 year old daughter Eleanor. Eleanor and I had a marvellous time; we played in the garden, shared chocolate, visited Megan from time to time to see how she was doing in the water pool and spent so long choosing the video we were going to watch that, by the time we had chosen "The Tweenies", Megan was nearing the second stage of her labour. At Eleanor's request, we went to sit next to the pool and watch the baby being born.

The reason I am writing about Megan's birth (with her blessing) is that I was so amazed by Eleanor's instinctual behaviour. As a midwife, I have always welcomed children to their sibling's births, on the understanding that, like Eleanor, they have a support person who can meet their needs without removing attention or energy from the labouring woman. During my time as a midwife, there has been debate about whether or not it is appropriate for small children to attend births; for the majority of women who give birth in hospital this has not yet become a realistic option. After this experience, I am convinced that we are missing the point; by focusing on the debate about whether they should be there or not, we are not attending to the things we can learn by watching children at birth.

Megan had warned me that she tended to have a very fast and intense second stage. When she started reacting verbally to a few massive and intense contractions, I tried to make this okay for Eleanor by chattering softly in her ear, letting her know that Megan was fine, and that having a baby was hard work. James, her dad, joined in this reassurance. Megan was getting no relief between contractions and for a while was unable to reassure Eleanor herself. Eleanor was a little scared initially – and what three year old wouldn't be? – but soon turned around to me and confirmed, "It's hard work having a baby, isn't it?" This having been established, she then snuggled into my lap and reached out her hand to pat Megan, in a gesture of support. She reminded me of Joshua, the

four year-old son of another woman I attended a few years ago, who spent over three hours leaning over the side of a pool pouring water over his mother's back from a paper cup because she found it soothing. This woman's husband and I both felt there was no way we could have kept the monotonous movement up for that long!

As baby Rachel began to emerge, I asked Eleanor if she would like to see. She nodded, and we moved to the other end of the water pool. As Megan was on all-fours, we could see baby Rachel's face. "Oh, it's a bit scrunchy," Eleanor said. "Let's go see mummy again now." So we went back to Megan's 'head-end', where, as baby Rachel was born and passed under Megan's legs, Eleanor leaned over to give Megan a kiss "well done". The intensity of Megan's second stage meant that we were all concerned afterwards that Eleanor might have been affected by it. Our desire to ensure that she understood birth to be a normal, natural event was tempered with our need to help her understand that it wasn't always a silent time, and that the feelings Megan experienced were intense.

We worry about the effect that watching the intensity of a woman verbalising her labour and birth experience will have on children. Yet Eleanor seemed to take it all in her stride and, despite their bringing the subject up on a few occasions, Megan and James have never seen any evidence that she was worried or disturbed by her experience. Of course, all children are different, but I keep asking myself how much our concern about having children at birth is about our fear rather than the fear of our children?

As we waited for Megan's placenta to be born, Eleanor stayed on my lap and we all chatted as we admired baby Rachel. I was a bit surprised that Eleanor was so matter-of-fact about the whole thing, especially after seeing Megan experience such an intense labour. At one point, I leaned over the pool side to hold Rachel next to Megan's skin while she reached down to catch her placenta. Eleanor was still on my lap. A few minutes

later, after James had taken a series of photos of Megan, Rachel and the placenta, I realised I was no longer holding on to Eleanor. She was still on my lap, transfixed by the scene in front of her, holding on to my clothing like a baby monkey holds its mothers fur!

Eleanor is one of those children who is sometimes described as an “old soul”. We surmise that babies and young children are much more in touch with ancient, “otherworldly” things than we who have

reached adulthood and forgotten what we knew then. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Eleanor knew more about what was going on than anyone else in the room. She might not have had the words in our language, but she seemed to have an instinctual knowledge about birth, and about being with her mother in labour. She was infinitely patient with the journey of birth, primal in her responses. I'm sure we have more to learn from watching our children at birth than we could ever imagine.