

10 steps to a peaceful, powerful birth



I'm **Olivia Southey**, a London-based hypnobirthing teacher, doula and mother of two. My daughter was born in 2012 and my son in 2015. As I prepared for my daughter's birth I went from knowing nothing about birth (and feeling clueless and terrified) to trusting my body and having a transformative, positive birth experience at home. I learned the value of preparing mind and body first hand. I love watching my clients' confidence grow as they make their own birth choices.

I am beyond passionate about the power of birth and the possibility of truly positive birth experiences. I believe that a mother should be respected and in charge of her birth and that supporting women during pregnancy and birth creates the best start for the joys and challenges of early motherhood.

I am so glad that you have got your hands on a copy of *10 steps to a peaceful, powerful birth*. Here's to a wonderful ride to meet your baby.

This is for you

Maybe you are pregnant now and wondering how best to prepare for a positive birth experience. You might be loving your pregnancy or you might be finding it hard. You might be excited about giving birth or you might be feeling anxious about it. You may have conceived easily or you may have gone through a difficult journey to get where you are today. You may have recently started to prepare to become pregnant or perhaps the idea of a pregnancy is just growing in a corner of your mind.

Whatever stage you are at, I have made this guide as a gift to bring you closer to a positive birth. This guide is a springboard for your birth preparation journey, equipping you to find your own best way forward.

The 10 step structure covers 10 different areas of focus within birth preparation. Each step includes a mantra, a practical activity and a 'must try' take-away tip so that you can try out the ideas included.

Why a peaceful, powerful birth?

Every birth is unique and cannot necessarily be predicted or controlled. Different women also have very different aims when making decisions about their preferred birth situation. Maybe you would love to be in a spotless hospital room with the reassuring sight of medical equipment and a team around you. Maybe you really want to put a candle on, get on your birth ball and not leave your own bedroom. Birth doesn't need ideology, it needs mothers to feel listened to and lovingly cared for so that they look back on their birth with pride and positivity. Birth is powerful - it can be intense, challenging, euphoric, long, short, supported or solo, quiet or loud, surgical or in a bathtub. Mothers are incredibly powerful while birthing, and this power can best express itself in a peaceful atmosphere - an atmosphere of respect and safety. Enjoy exploring 10 steps to YOUR peaceful, powerful birth.

1. Discover what you truly want

As I learn about birth I learn about myself

When you become pregnant for the first time you may not have thought, read or discovered much about birth yet. But birth is a hugely transformative event in your life and the lives of the whole family, so it is important to find out what vision of a positive birth *you* are preparing for. This positive birth vision can act as a filter for your choices throughout your birth preparation.

Reading positive birth books and hearing a range of positive birth stories can open your eyes to what your birth possibilities are. It is the first step towards empowering yourself with good knowledge. On the other hand, listening to horror stories and uninformed advice can make you fearful and does not help your decision making. Take charge of your journey to birth now by zoning in on helpful books and resources.

As a starting point, try these fantastic titles on birth and pregnancy:

The Calm Birth School by Suzy Ashworth
Ina May Gaskin's Guide to Childbirth by Ina May Gaskin
The Gentle Birth Method by Dr Gowri Motha
The Happy Birth Book by Beverly Turner and Pam Wild
Men, Love and Birth by Mark Harris

In good old real life you can join the grass-roots network of Positive Birth Movement meetings that are occurring monthly worldwide. Invaluable as a source of support, they are free to attend and are a fantastic way of meeting other mums and people who care about birth in your area. Find your nearest group at www.positivebirthmovement.org

Activity: Take an undisturbed half hour or so to build up your own personal positive birth vision. You might like to visualise this in detail, or draw pictures of its different stages, or write it down as a story - if you write it, use the past tense, so that your mind creates a positive 'memory' of birth. What are the aspects of this birth that make it feel so positive to you? Where are you? How are the people around you behaving towards you? Notice what is important; these are things to share with your birth partner so that they are aware of what matters to you most. No-one can predict the exact details of their birth, but this is a powerful exercise to uncover your hopes and values and to nurture a sense of looking forward to birth with strength and optimism.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this...Connect with a mother you know who has had a positive birth experience and ask her to tell you her birth story.

2. Prepare your mind

As I birth my baby I am peaceful and powerful

Your mind can be your greatest ally during birth. Build on the positive inspirations you have found by securing a good knowledge of how birth 'works'. Make sure that you understand the role of the near magical birth hormones and how to protect them during labour and birth. For an upbeat overview of the essential role of hormones during birth, I recommend [this article](#).

This knowledge will anchor your trust in your body. We think that we have to learn how to give birth, but our body already has this covered. Birth is an automatic body function, just like digestion or circulation. Rather than learning how to give birth, learn to release the stress and anxiety that can interfere with birth, just as it can interfere with other physiological functions. Do you notice, for example, that you are more likely to catch a cold when stressed? Stress can negatively affect your immune, digestive and circulatory systems just as examples.

However your baby is born, and whatever your journey to conception was, your body is doing an incredible job. YOUR body - your beautiful body.

A well-prepared mind can be a highly-tuned coping mechanism during the intensity of birth. This is why hypnobirthing is so popular and so effective. By harnessing the power of your mind to stay relaxed, to distract you from pain, to keep your confidence high and to release fears beforehand, hypnobirthing is a win-win birth preparation tool. Every thought creates a chemical response in the body, which affects your birth hormones - so changing your thinking can literally change your birth. Hypnobirthing is not reserved for unmedicated births. Using tools like positive breathing, relaxation and visualisation can allow mothers to transform their experience of induced or Caesarean births too. Hypnosis techniques can also assist conception.

Activity: From now on, take 5 or 10 minutes each day to stop what you are doing, close your eyes and breathe softly into your lower belly. Rest your hands on your lower belly, and feel your bump gently rise and fall beneath your hands. Let your shoulders fall and your jaw relax. Make sure that your hands and fingers are soft. You don't have to make your breath unnaturally long, just keep sending it down into the lower belly. Once you are breathing in this relaxed way, start to imagine a place where you have felt relaxed and happy - a place that you found beautiful. Let your mind see, feel, hear the details of this place. Go into as much detail as possible. This is your daily 5 minute holiday, and practised regularly will give you a taster of the peace and positivity that hypnobirthing offers. You can go somewhere different every time, or revisit the same place as many times as you like.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this...try listening to a hypnobirthing audio track to see if this technique might be enjoyable for you.

3. Prepare your body.

I love and care for my body

Caring for yourself during pregnancy is also caring for your baby, who shares everything with you.

Yoga is a beautiful way of keeping strong and calm, and can be done in the comfort of your home if that feels easier. Try the pregnancy section at [Movement for Modern Life](#) or Tara Lee's [Pregnancy Health Yoga DVD](#). Other recommended forms of exercise are walking, swimming and Pilates.

A really bad piece of advice that you are likely to get is that now you are pregnant you can go to town on all the foods you would normally eat in moderation. Let yourself have a few enjoyable treats, but actually it is wiser to steer away from refined carbohydrates and sugars during pregnancy. You may be finding certain foods intolerable or irresistible, so prescriptive pregnancy diets are impossible - eating is personal and you may be craving certain nutrients. But focus on always fresh, organic where possible and keeping hydrated. Keep your treats fresh too - for example a cake baked with real butter that morning will not contain unnatural fats and preservatives.

Support your body during pregnancy with safe, effective alternative therapies such as reflexology, pregnancy massage, Bowen technique, or shiatsu. If you can schedule a treatment once a fortnight, or even once a month, it will help your body to approach birth balanced and energised. These therapies can also help you to enjoy your pregnancy more, relieving aches and pains or issues like heartburn and nausea. Building up a relationship with a therapist who is experienced in pregnancy treatments is also a great source of support and advice. Some of the best advice I received during my first pregnancy came from my brilliant reflexologist.

Activity: try on some of these quick, easy physical health tips for size as you get used to treating your body as an uh-mazing thing.

- *Get friendly with your friendly bacteria. Healthy gut flora safeguards both the health of you and that of your baby and the extent of its importance is only starting to be understood. Experiment with fermented foods or drinks such as sauerkraut or kefir. I love this dairy and sugar free [coconut milk kefir](#) which is a great replacement for sugar laden yoghurts.*
- *Use an exercise ball instead of an office chair if you work at a desk. Also try sitting and circling and bouncing gently on a ball instead of collapsing into a sofa while you get your Netflix fix. This will help your baby's positioning and open and relax your pelvis. Never continue if you feel pain or discomfort.*
- *Instead of bath products that are filled with synthetic fragrances and foaming agents, have an Epsom salt soak. This increases your magnesium levels, an essential mineral during pregnancy. Add two cups of Epsom salt to a warm bath and soak for at least 15 minutes. Benefits include increased nutrient absorption, reduced inflammation and muscle pain and getting rid of toxins from the body. More in-depth information [here](#)*

- ✓ If you try one thing try this...Find a pregnancy yoga or pilates class local to where you live and go along for a trial class.

4. Find your tribe

I am supported throughout my journey to birth

Choose your antenatal course...well...choosily! Remember to apply the filter of your positive birth vision. Talk to the course leader before you book and bring up the points that felt most important to you. You will be a good match if she/he is receptive to your hopes and has ideas on how to practically support them. Consider who will be made available to you during the course - will you only be hearing from one person or have they gathered together a group of experts? Will you be able to receive information from a medical professional during the course? Is this important to you or not?

Antenatal courses are not only meant to support your birth preparation but also to introduce you to other expectant parents who are having babies at similar times. This will make the early days less isolating, and you may make some close friendships. Ask about the social aspect of the course and how the parents-to-be keep in touch. It is a good idea to talk to a few different course leaders before you commit.

In London I love [The Happy Birth Club](#) founded by Beverley Turner who is totally passionate about pregnancy and birth and provides amazing support. Attending her course has been described as 'like winning the lottery'.

Activity: organise a positive birth party to which you invite mothers that you know and admire, or who you know had a positive birth experience. This could be instead of or as well as a baby shower. Ask them every question that you have on your mind and encourage them to share what has helped them. Make it celebratory with music and tasty food. When women gather together in groups, their oxytocin levels go up - you are literally having a positive impact on your hormones by organising a happy, supportive group activity. Quality is more important than quantity, it doesn't matter whether you know 2 people who fit this bill or 20.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this... Compare 3 different antenatal course options that are open to you.

5. Create your team

Peace and positivity surround me as I birth my baby

Mama's hiring! Whether literally or not, this should be your approach to the team you assemble to support you through your birth journey. When choosing who will be with you, think carefully about why you want them there and whether they will be bringing calmness or anxiety to your birth environment.

Birth partners are most usefully thought of as protectors of your birth space and advocates for your wishes. You do not need them to tell you how to give birth, but you might need their calm encouragement and love. You might also want back massages, compresses and specific snacks or music. Make sure you have birth partners who will fetch and carry happily for you.

If the father of your child is going to be at the birth, be aware in advance that it can be a strenuous and emotional time for him. If he is not an experienced birth attendant it can be overwhelming to be the primary birth partner without support. This is where doulas are incredible. A good doula will back you up, respect your wishes and provide all manner of practical and emotional support during labour and birth. A doula also provides continuity of care as she will meet you several times before and after birth as well as being present throughout labour. Rather than interfere with the intimacy of meeting your child, a doula supports the whole family and the reassurance that she gives the father or other birth partners can enable them to really be there for you.

In the UK, go to www.doula.org.uk to find doulas working near you. You can choose a mentored or more experienced doula and it can be a good idea to meet a few doulas in order to find one that you really gel with. Often pregnancy yoga, hypnobirthing and other antenatal teachers also work as doulas, so you may meet a good match this way.

My favourite quote for putting you and your supporters in the right mindset for birth is from American midwife Ina May Gaskin: 'If a woman doesn't look like a goddess during labor, someone isn't treating her right'.

You are strong enough for all the sensations that you may experience if you are treated right.

Activity: make a simple list of the types of support that you are hoping for during birth, e.g. massage, driving me to birth centre, communicating with medical team, breathing alongside me, running me baths at home, making sure I don't have too many people around me etc. Now honestly consider who will be best to carry out these for you. Understand the role descriptions that you are filling. In my own experience, I found having a doula as a first time mother kept me calm and reassured me that what I was feeling was safe and right.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this... Make sure that your birth partner understands the importance of a peaceful atmosphere during birth.

6. Get your money priorities straight.

I value myself and my birth experience

Most people spend more on a buggy than preparing their own precious body to give birth. Ideally, we would see taking charge of our birth experiences as at least as much of a priority as a wedding or big holiday.

The memories of birth last forever and we can emerge from pregnancy either strong or depleted depending on how well we have treated ourselves and how seriously we have taken getting the right input from trusted people. Maybe you would like to feel emotionally supported during birth by a doula but have been eyeing up an £800 machine for pushing baba down the road. Or you dream of working with an independent midwife but also want to kit out the nursery with fancy furniture. If you know you can't budget for both, have a go at flipping those priorities. If you can do both then go ahead and enjoy the whole shebang and make sure you aren't valuing yourself below your décor!

Be reassured that new-born babies need only a few essentials during the first weeks of their life. Remember your positive birth vision and use it to prioritise your to-buy list. Is anything on that list helping you with your positive birth? And what do you feel you need to buy or spend to help you get closer to your ideal birth? Cover these expenses first.

Activity: Create your pre-baby wish list, but this version is only allowed to include things that you will benefit from, consume or experience. All babies need vests and a car seat. What do YOU need? Your list could include things like reflexology treatments, a hypnobirthing workshop, hiring a birth pool, a birth ball, a homeopathy kit for labour, some gorgeous natural body oil for your bump, babysitting for your older children during the postnatal period, a night away by the sea to de-stress, an organic veg delivery - the options are endless. Have fun choosing!

- ✓ If you try one thing try this... Choose a nurturing treatment like reflexology or pregnancy massage and treat yourself (and your baby) to it.

7. Empower yourself with a practical 'birth toolkit'

I work with my body and my baby through every stage of birth

Wherever you choose to have your baby, there are some things that are always really useful to have ready as practical ways of supporting your labour. I have compiled a list that you might like to consider. You can't always predict what you will instinctively want to use in the moment, so having a few options is great preparation and will contribute to your peace of mind as you wait for your baby to arrive. During my first labour I found a birth pool a godsend, but during my second I laboured on dry land and was inseparable from my birth ball.

You might like to try:

- A birth ball - fantastic for pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period.
- A birth pool - these are usually available in birth centres, sometimes on labour wards and can be bought or hired for home births.
- You can also use hot water in a shower or bath. Baths are most helpful in early labour as they are good to relax in but can restrict your movement later on. Plenty of babies are born in bath tubs however!
- Your own pillows, duvet and blanket/shawl which will be more comfortable than hospital ones and smell safe and familiar.
- Homeopathic remedies for labour are safe and easy to use.
- Essential oils such as Clary Sage, Lavender and Rose all have potential benefits during labour.
- LED candles are brilliant - you don't have to worry about naked flames and the ones made out of real wax that flicker are very soothing.
- Audio tracks that get you in the zone. You can use hypnobirthing tracks, birth affirmation tracks and music that you have practised relaxing to during pregnancy.
- Light, nourishing snacks and drinks for you and your birth partner. You might feel like eating through much of your labour, and your birth partners will need sustenance. Don't rely on the vending machines if you are in hospital late at night! Coconut water, diluted fruit juice or herb teas are lovely. Have some bendy straws so you can be offered hydrating sips in any position.

Activity: Assemble a build-your-own-nest that is ready for the birth. Include a really comfortable pillow, your favourite smells, a soft snuggly shawl which you might wrap around you during skin to skin with your baby, an eye mask if you want to be in your own world, and a way of listening to music through headphones. You can keep this in the car ready if you will be driving to a birth centre or hospital, or tucked away at home ready for your homebirth. If you are planning a homebirth, get all your essentials together in a box or crate. They will be easy to find, and can be picked up and put into a car or taxi if you do go to hospital at any point.

✓ If you try one thing try this...get a birth ball!

8. Factor in your 4th trimester

I rest and let myself fall in love with my baby

Have you heard of the 4th trimester?

This magical concept brings home the fact that birth is one stop on your journey, not the end of your baby's 'gestation'. During the first 3 months of life babies are utterly dependent, tiny and love being either in arms or a sling. Looking ahead from your due date, what can you clear from your diary? And who can you draft in for support?

Parenting a newborn can be intense as you adjust to different sleep patterns and the huge identity shift that is taking place in your life and relationships. Thinking ahead to this time can make things easier and more joyful. You don't need to cloister yourself at home if you love seeing friends and taking strolls, but keeping social occasions casual and booking in help to enable you to take naps will do wonders.

Be warned that books by 'baby experts' may end up making you more stressed. You may feel like a terrified novice, but it won't take you long to get a handle on the basics of feeding, changing, comforting and transporting a baby. Books that explore the experience of new motherhood can be much more uplifting and helpful than 'methods'. You are undergoing a truly incredible learning curve and you might not even realise how much of an achievement looking after a baby all day is.

Books that will make you feel good not bad include:

- *What Mothers Do, especially when it looks like nothing* by Naomi Stadlen
- *How Eskimos Keep Their Babies Warm and other adventures in parenting* by Mei-Ling Hopgood
- *Permission to Parent* by Dr Robin Berman
- *Life after birth* by Kate Figs
- *All Joy and No Fun, the paradox of modern parenting* by Jennifer Senior

Activity: before your baby is born, organise at least two people who will be able to support you. This could be a postnatal doula or a relative or a friend who has some spare time. The aim is to give yourself time to recover and start making forays into the world at your own pace. Make sure that these lovely people are happy to be flexible depending on what you need at the time. The more rest you get in the weeks after birth, the better you will feel as your baby reaches the end of their first three months.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this... Get a sling that is suitable for new-borns. They help you to settle your baby and enjoy some me-time while they sleep snuggled up.

9. Be your own guru

I trust myself, I listen to myself

It is a great idea to get support and to learn from experienced antenatal and birth professionals. BUT you do not need to follow anyone's advice slavishly. No one else can tell you exactly what will create your positive experience of birth and no one can predict exactly what your birth will be like. So never take what 'the experts' say as gospel. Empower yourself with good knowledge and follow your own instincts. You have the best interests of yourself and your baby at heart - you can pick and choose what is going to serve the pair of you best.

Even the most celebrated birth professionals will not always be able to know what will suit your birth needs perfectly. By stepping into your own guru shoes you are taking responsibility for your birth and this will encourage you to prepare your own mind and body well.

Activity: Commit to taking a few quiet moments at the end of the day to reflect on what made you feel good and what didn't during the day (this may change from day to day!). You can either sit quietly to do this as a meditation or you can write it out, maybe as two lists. The goal is to get into the habit of listening to yourself. You are creating the mental space that enables you to access your own wisdom.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this...Create your own birth affirmations. These are most powerful when personal, positive and in the present tense.

10. Get your vitamin N

Nature nurtures me

That is Vitamin N for Nature.

I'm not talking about 'natural' birth or pregnancy. Because what does that really mean anyway? I mean getting into the nature of this beautiful blue and green planet. Depending on where you live, the wild or wildish spaces accessible to you will be different - but anywhere you can be amongst trees and flowers, kick off your shoes on the grass or sand, watch birds on the water or waves breaking, see a sunset, gaze over a valley...you get the picture. If you live in a city, parks will do just fine.

Time in nature lowers stress levels, increases creativity and confidence and gives us a feeling of connection to something bigger than ourselves, whether this is the landscape, the stars and planets, or something spiritual. Going for a walk in a bluebell wood or along a river, sitting out under a full moon or picking fresh strawberries, these experiences fill us with positive imagery to draw on as we practise relaxation and also make us slow down. They take us away from our screens and get us moving and breathing fresher air - indoor air is often more polluted than outdoor air.

Pregnancy can be a precious time of dreaming and imagining your future - time spent in beautiful places during pregnancy can be especially memorable and adds to the positivity of the whole journey to motherhood.

Activity: make a weekly nature date - this could be done by factoring it into your weekend plans, finding a green space that you can spend a lunch break in or planning an evening walk on a full moon. If a place makes you feel especially good, take a photo which you can pin up in your birth space, or revisit it during your visualisation practise.

- ✓ If you try one thing try this... Walk outside every day, giving yourself at least 20 minutes without looking at your phone, instead noticing as much as possible about the natural life around you.

Thank you for reading!

These are my top 10 steps - which did you feel would be most useful to you? I would love to know which steps you feel inspired to take further and which steps of your own you create. Come and tell me on my [Facebook page](#). You can also ask me any questions about the guide or your birth preparation there.

What is your next step with me?

I'd love to talk to you.

You can contact me and claim your free 30-minute birth preparation consultation [here](#).

I serve mothers-to-be through teaching hypnobirthing workshops and offering support throughout the bump, birth and babymoon journey as a doula. I am based in London and run group courses and classes here. For private workshops I travel to my clients wherever they need me. I teach a creative, inspiring, realistic and down-to-earth style of hypnobirthing that gives a mother the tools to relax deeply at will, look forward to birth and use hypnosis, visualisation and breathing as natural pain relief. The tools are transferrable to every type of birth.