Incorporating Prenatal Yoga into Childbirth Education Classes

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The essence of yoga can be distilled into four key elements: breath, feeling, listening to the body, and letting go of judgment and expectation (YogaFit, 2010). When considering the essence of yoga, it is easy to see what a natural complement it is to conscious, active preparation for a healthy birth. Most birth educators would agree that paying attention to her breath and to her feelings, listening to her body, and letting go of preconceived expectations of what birth will be like are perhaps the most crucial messages to convey to the pregnant woman and her partner. Additionally, experts widely agree that exercise during pregnancy has beneficial effects for the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems and is associated with physical and psychological well-being. There is also some evidence that recreational exercise may reduce the incidence of premature labor and low birthweight babies (Hyatt & Cram, 2003).

Anyone involved with educating adult learners (in any context) is likely to be familiar with the concept that people are most likely to retain information that they have actually practiced (versus reading about, hearing about or seeing demonstrated). I have found that incorporating a few simple yoga poses into each class session is a beautiful way of illustrating and applying many important elements of childbirth preparation. In approximately 10 minutes of movement, important points can be underscored without having to actually say anything or “lecture” to clients. The hope is that as we move together through a carefully chosen series of poses, subtle emotional development and trust in birth occurs—again, in a more effective manner than by the childbirth educator saying during class: “Trust birth!”

One rationale for incorporating yoga into prenatal classes is as follows: First, people often learn and retain information more effectively by actually doing something. Practicing the yoga poses together allows experiential practice of pelvic floor exercises, pelvic rocks, tailor-sitting, leg cramp alleviation, and back pain coping techniques, to name a few, instead of just hearing me talking!

Second, and most important, Yoga in prenatal classes emphasizes that birth happens in the body. As childbirth educators we spend a significant amount of time talking and sharing information, but birth does not only happen in the mind. Birth happens most profoundly in the body. Not only does birth happen in the woman’s body, but supporting and being with a woman in labor is also an intensely physical process, so it is important for partners to try the yoga series.

People today spend much of their time “living in their heads”, and many of us do not feel comfortable with, or at home in, our bodies. Practicing poses in class helps couples out of their heads and into their bodies and begins a process of feeling comfortable with moving and using their bodies in positive ways. This may help them develop the trust and confidence that will contribute to a smooth and peaceful birth process.

Each pose is followed with a birth affirmation such as, “the magic and mystery of birth delight and amaze me” (Miller, 2003). Positive affirmations help plant positive seeds of confidence and trust in the wisdom of women’s bodies and of the beauty of birth. These cognitive adjustments may also send a welcoming message to the woman’s body and baby as they both prepare for birth.

Opening classes with a series of poses is an effective way to “frame” the class. Class can be opened with a brief check-in period asking how people are feeling, about recent prenatal appointments, and any questions can be addressed. A transition from “regular time” into “class time” occurs with a brief series of simple poses. This routine helps people transition from their normal days into feeling ready and excited for birth class information.

Each pose was chosen because it has specific birth- or pregnancy-related benefits. Begin with healthy sitting—seated crossed legged or tailor-style on the floor with spine straight. Do some neck rolls and shoulder rotations to help release tension. Move into a brief series that includes knee-rocking, leg stretches, Divine Mother Pose, Star Pose, pelvic rock, standing squat, Palm Tree Pose, Half Moon Pose, Triangle Pose and seated Mountain Pose. There is an additional short series of “birthing room yoga” poses described with photographs that is available as a free handout here.

The series is closed with a very brief meditation or visualization exercise. The series of poses and the affirmations are kept the same each week for retention purposes, but the meditation is varied. A quick visualization or relaxation exercise (under two minutes) is often more effective and more readily welcomed by couples than the longer visualization exercises often used in classes (which can seem esoteric to some people). A mindfulness meditation that is effective is:
Inhale and repeat silently: "I exist in the here and now…"

Exhale and repeat silently: "The present moment is all I have to be with…"

Continue inhaling and exhaling as you silently and simply repeat: "Here and now…present moment."

A favorite resource for easily and smoothly incorporating yoga into classes is the *The Prenatal Yoga Deck* by Olivia Miller, published by Chronicle Books in 2003. The poses listed above were selected from this deck. The deck contains 50 cards, so the educator can easily build a series for use in classes. Each pose card is accompanied by a lovely affirmation. The deck also includes six cards with simple meditations (the meditation above is adapted from one in the deck). The deck format, tidy box for holding the cards and sturdy card for each pose is an ideal format for transport to class as well as serving to provide subtle reminder cards as you lead couples through poses. Each card has a line drawing on the back illustrating the pose, so assessing whether you are doing the pose correctly is easy (sometimes just reading a description of the pose is more complicated than seeing it completed).

Occasionally the childbirth educator may get some eye-rolling or “weird, hippie exercise!” responses from pregnant couples. Regardless of how much or how little they appreciate the practice of yoga in classes, the poses used lay a physical foundation for a positive attitude toward birth and a sense of confidence as a birth-giving woman or supportive partner. Through the simple incorporation of yoga into birth classes, the expectant couple receives an irreparable, experiential grounding in the rhythm, focus, release, and conscious awareness so essential to the intensely embodied experience of birthing.

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**Suggested Resources for Birth Educators**

- *YogaFit: PreNatal DVD*, YogaFit (2009)

All available via Amazon.com

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All photos of the author, January 2011, 37 weeks. (c) Karen Orozco, Portraits & Paws Photography

**References**


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6 Comments
An excellent article, I totally agree with the comments about people living so much in their heads, and disengaged from their bodies. I think this is becoming more true generally and not just in pregnancy. Great!

Thanks for your comment! I agree.
Earthprayer, Birthprayer, Lifeprayer, Womanprayer

Molly Remer
Womanrunes
A guide to their use and interpretation

Molly Remer
and Shekhinah Mountainwater
Childbirth education, doulas, barre classes, massage, wellness, counseling, and workshops make the center a hub of prenatal and postpartum support. Even the yoga classes themselves are community-based and socially interactive. "We are literally teaching childbirth education on your yoga mat," explains Longacre. That education is the resource Longacre wishes more people knew about. "Our childbirth education is hands-down the best in the Twin Cities," she declares, crediting their doulas who are "on the ground", experiencing the changing birth landscape. "You’re not sitting at a desk with 50 other couples, you know? They’re really talking about 'What are real expectations? As childbirth educators we spend a significant amount of time talking and sharing information, but birth does not only happen in the mind. Birth happens most profoundly in the body. Not only does birth happen in the woman’s body, but supporting and being with a woman in labor is also an intensely physical process, so it is important for partners to try the yoga series. A favorite resource for easily and smoothly incorporating yoga into classes is The Prenatal Yoga Deck by Olivia Miller,"