EVIDENCE-BASED CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION:
A KEY STRATEGY TO IMPROVE U.S. MATERNAL & CHILDBIRTH OUTCOMES

BACKGROUND
Evidence-based childbirth education plays a critical role in improving birth outcomes and reducing maternal health disparities. Childbirth education empowers women and their partners to make informed birth choices and initiate birth-preference conversations with their care teams — two actions that help decrease rates of unnecessary birth procedures. By providing individualized guidance to parents through each stage of pregnancy, childbirth education increases their confidence, helps them address pregnancy and childbirth fears, and prepares them for the labor process with individualized and informed birth plans.

Unfortunately, childbirth education is an underutilized strategy for family engagement, patient safety, and health literacy—all of which are critical to improving maternal health outcomes. Increasing access to evidence-based childbirth education is a key step payers and providers can make to improve patient care, and ultimately maternal and childbirth outcomes. Childbirth education is especially crucial for underserved populations who experience greater maternal mortality and morbidity rates.

Approximately four million births occur in the United States each year, accumulating $98 billion in hospital costs.1 Overused obstetric procedures such as cesarean delivery, labor-inducement, and epidurals increase these costs and put mothers and children at greater health risks.1-3 Epidurals, though helpful when necessary, increase the need to use medication to stimulate contractions, and the risk of cesarean delivery.27, 29 Both epidurals and labor induction increase the likelihood a woman will need to have an operative vaginal delivery, which usually involves forceps or a vacuum extractor.28

As the payer model shifts from volume to value, healthcare becomes more of a process than a series of procedures. As such, value-based models embrace supplementary services that foster healthy lifestyle choices, proactive recovery, and informed patient-practitioner communication. Evidence-based childbirth education plays a critical role in value-based healthcare, as it helps improve maternal and childbirth outcomes by reducing requests for elective cesarean by 35 percent and unplanned cesarean birth rates by 28 percent. It also increases breastfeeding initiation and improves postpartum maternal and paternal health.2, 4, 15 Childbirth education also improves women’s abilities to adapt to the physical changes during pregnancy and improves their satisfaction with their care.5, 6

COMPREHENSIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION
The Lamaze International Six Healthy Birth Practices, integral components of childbirth education, help parents prepare for birth by informing them about evidence-based birthing practices. These practices encourage parents to actively participate in shared decision-making (SDM) with their healthcare team. SDM in childbirth leads to increased trust in the

In our childbirth class we learned exactly what to expect, to the point where I was completely calm when I went into labor and knew exactly what to do. Because I had all the great information from class, I was only at the hospital for two hours before our son was born.

Kelsey B.
healthcare team, greater knowledge about childbirth and parenting, and better patient experiences.\textsuperscript{8}

In addition, a comprehensive childbirth education program will encourage women and their partners to consider their birth-place and practitioner options, as well as recognize the connection between early-labor interventions and cesarean births.

**COMPREHENSIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION INFLUENCES VAGINAL AND CESAREAN BIRTHS RATES**

While cesarean births are sometimes medically necessary, their overuse increases short- and long-term health risks. These risks include increased maternal mortality and morbidity rates, as well as increased rates of uterine rupture, abnormal placentation, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth, and preterm birth.\textsuperscript{9-11} Cesarean births require longer recovery times, which significantly increases birth-related costs, and reduces breastfeeding rates, and can contribute to poorer child development up to age nine.\textsuperscript{3, 11, 12, 30}

Evidence-based, comprehensive childbirth education decreases cesarean birth rates by between 10 and 15 percent.\textsuperscript{13, 14} Comprehensive childbirth education that effectively informs and prepares women for childbirth reduces the maternal-request rate for elective cesarean delivery.\textsuperscript{2, 4}

Women who know the least about giving birth—first-time mothers who do not receive comprehensive childbirth education—are twice as likely to have cesarean births. On the other hand, female physicians, who are more educated about birth than most women, have a lower cesarean birth rate than the national average.\textsuperscript{16, 17} The more a patient knows, the more her preference-based options increase—and the greater likelihood they decline an elective cesarean delivery. Evidence-based childbirth education makes this information available to all women and their partners.

**COMPREHENSIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION INCREASES BREASTFEEDING RATES**

Childbirth education begins as early as the second trimester of pregnancy, when women typically make breastfeeding decisions. Attending comprehensive,
Of evidence-based childbirth classes that explain breastfeeding benefits increases breastfeeding initiation and duration up to six months postpartum.\textsuperscript{6, 18} Prenatal breastfeeding education increases women’s knowledge about these benefits and provides anticipatory guidance for potential breastfeeding challenges.\textsuperscript{18, 19} This education provides women skills to overcome these challenges and connects them with local breastfeeding resources.\textsuperscript{20}

**COMPREHENSIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH**

As early as 1933, obstetricians began to associate improved childbirth experiences with childbirth education.\textsuperscript{21} Comprehensive childbirth education improves maternal mental health during and after pregnancy by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.\textsuperscript{31, 32} In addition, pregnant women who attend childbirth education courses are less likely to use synthetic oxytocin (Pitocin) during labor, which is linked to increased rates of postpartum depressive and anxiety disorders.\textsuperscript{25} Research now shows that both parents benefit from comprehensive, evidence-based childbirth education throughout the postpartum period, which reduces their childbirth fears, as well as their postpartum depression rates.\textsuperscript{22-24} Women who attend childbirth education also report improved bonding with their newborn and greater connectedness to their partners.\textsuperscript{31}

**CONCLUSION**

Evidence-based childbirth education helps improve outcomes for women and their families, practitioners, hospitals, and communities by reducing unnecessary birth procedures, reducing cesarean birth rates and associated complications, and increasing shared decision-making and breastfeeding success rates. It also reduces maternity care costs by decreasing cesarean birth and postpartum depression rates. Childbirth education achieves these results while also increasing women’s satisfaction with the birth experience, which strengthens family bonding and expedites postpartum recovery. These outcomes make comprehensive, evidence-based childbirth education a critical tool for practitioners, hospitals, and communities – all of whom work to provide safe, high-quality, and low-cost maternity care.

**REFERENCES**


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