



Episode 2: Pure Choice  
with Frances Laing (Epworth Maternity)

## Pure Choice

### Preparing for a hospital birth.

**Tiffany:** Hi everyone, we have Frances Laing from Epworth Maternity joining us today. She's a registered midwife and a childbirth education coordinator at Epworth Freemason Hospital. Frances has 10 years of experience as a midwife and childbirth educator and is also a mother of a 9-year-old son and a 5-year-old daughter. I've been lucky enough to have worked with Frances over the past few years for our Nesting Workshops and other partnerships with Epworth. So, today will be discussing what to consider before having a hospital birth, birth plans, and will also answer some of the frequently asked questions from first-time parents or new parents in hospital. Hi Frances, thanks for joining me today.

**Frances:** Hi Tiffany, thanks for having me along.

**Tiffany:** It's an absolute pleasure. Let's start with a big question today. How important is it for parents to gain information about what will be offered to them in hospital when they first go in to give birth?

**Frances:** Look it's so important. I often try to explain the hospital information gathering in this way - I'd say to parents if you're planning an amazing holiday you wouldn't just go and book a hotel without checking first if they've got the essentials, like a private bathroom and internet connection, a pool room service or even a TV. You know, you just really wouldn't do that.

And so, it's the same when you're choosing a hospital. You need to keep in mind that hospitals all vary. Some will provide things like disposable nappies and wipes, and then others will ask you to bring your own. Some will have a-la-carte partner meals available from the hospital kitchen, others will just suggest visiting the local cafe or fast food outlet. And also, not all hospitals will have things in their birth suite that are the same. Some may have a birth pool or a bath, others may only have a shower that's available for use during labour.

And keep in mind that during labour, some birth suites might offer wireless monitors, or they may only have wired monitors available. Then if you're considering having an epidural, is it a patient controlled epidural available?

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**Frances:** (cont...) Or, is it one that you're connected to a machine? You know particularly in the private setting, it's important to consider what level of special care might be available if your baby does require extra care. Does the hospital have an outreach programme, where they offer a stay at a hotel if you and your baby are OK and well enough and you require minimal care?

There are also other important considerations about accommodation for your partner and/or support person. Can they stay with you on the post-natal ward? If so, is there extra charges? Are there any shared rooms or they all private? Do they have ensembles or do you need to share a bathroom? Are the beds single or double beds? And how many support people are you allowed with you into the birth suite? The list could keep going on and on but really there's some important things to start thinking about and to really find the answers to work out what's going to be really important to you and matter the most during your journey.

**Tiffany:** Yeah there's so much to know it seems and I guess you know "what you don't know you don't know". I say that to people all the time and I believe that knowledge is power, I totally do. So, this information is so great I definitely wish I'd had researched more about my options when having a hospital birth because I had all three of my children in hospital. So, what are some of the other general recommendations do you think that people should know about or research before coming in to have their first baby?

**Frances:** I agree with you, knowledge is power and being informed is just so important. I mean if you going to have your first baby, it's such an unknown path you want to make sure that you're arming yourself with the right information. It's actually really quite vital. As a midwife, I'm often asked about the top things that mums should be thinking about. So I've put together a bit of a list of the must haves.

**Tiffany:** Great!

**Frances:** I think the very first point should be always remembering that this is your journey. Make your own list of what's important to you and your partner during your labour and birth and also throughout the rest of your hospital stay. If you do have questions don't be shy or embarrassed to ask them.



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**Frances:** (cont...) You know, use trusted resources when you are seeking information and make sure that you're fully informed about your preferences. And with your healthcare provider, start the conversations early with them about what you wish to have take place during your labour and birth, and if you find that your priorities don't match then you have time to find a new care provider who meets your personal needs. Along with this, you might like to give a copy of your preferences or your birth plan to your doctor and midwife, and you might want to pack an extra copy into your hospital with bag. And that's just so that you can put one on your file the hospital, you can have one in the room with you or your partner support person will have one to refer to as well.

**Tiffany:** Thank you for highlighting some of the what might seem to be obvious things to do before you head into hospital to have your bub but could be missed if you're not told or has baby brain because that definitely happens when your pregnant. So, preparing a birth plan is another thing that is often something that couples do prior to birth. Do you have some suggestions on how it might look and tips on how to write a good birth plan, what to put in your birth plan and some things maybe to leave out? Because I think birth plans are something everyone looks into at some point or another, particularly for your first baby.

**Frances:** Yeah, well there's really no right or wrong to writing a birth plan, but I would probably just like to highlight to parents-to-be that a birth plan really should be your birth preferences. Not all plans follow the exact path that you set out, but if you can highlight some key preferences that you would like to take place during your labour and birth, it will be a really positive experience and you won't be disappointed.

But, when you are jotting down these points, remember to keep it simple, keep it to the point, and be sure that the really important information that you want to relay to your care provider doesn't get lost in a whole heap of words. So, a few key points with that would be, be informed about your choices and your options. You know, read up to date and reliable information beforehand. Research the hospital that you've chosen and what they offer. Have the discussion with your doctor about what's on your birth plan and also discuss this with your support person or your partner. Keep in mind that you may need to be flexible as some of your preferences might change if your labour and birth changes.



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**Frances:** (cont...) Take the time to really sit back and reflect on the information that you've learned in research and focus on, that no matter what happens that you can feel positive about your experience as you have made informed choices and you took the time to do the research.

**Tiffany:** That's great advice.

**Frances:** Yeah, so there's also some other things to think about and also discuss with your partner or support person, but these are things that you want to include on your birth plan. It might be simple things like you have a favourite pillow at home and you know that you really don't sleep without it or sleep well without it, so consider bringing along to the hospital with you. And the same if you've got a nice comforting blanket that makes you feel warm and secure, pack that in your bag as well.

When you are packing, select comfortable clothes to labour in. You know, the best things are usually loose, they're easily removable and high waisted and think about breastfeeding clothes, if you plan to breastfeed. So that's anything that's got buttons or clips at the front for easy access because you will be doing this quite a bit. And you know, have along with your partner support person perhaps consider creating a comforting and soothing playlist on your device that can help you relax. So, to further help in creating that relaxing birth environment some people like to bring along their essential oils. They might choose to use these for massage or even in an electric diffuser.

To help create this beautiful space for labour and birth, consider also dimming the lights in the bathroom or dropping the blinds. A darkened room can really help you to relax, it can help to increase the birth hormones and to get in the zone for coping with labour, and really creates that beautiful environment when you are bonding with your newborn in those first moments after birth.

Don't forget about hydration and keeping nourished for both yourself and your partner. You might be in labour for quite some time so make sure you bring along some snacks for both of you. And really important, don't forget your camera or your phone along with its charger or spare batteries as you will want to capture and cherish some of those first moments with your baby.



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**Frances:** (cont...) You know, all these little things that you do they really create this beautiful labour and birth environment as a safe, supportive and loving space in which you're welcoming your baby to the world.

**Tiffany:** Yeah, for sure.

**Frances:** If you're planning a caesarean birth, there's a few different things that you might want to consider and ask your care provider about in advance. Some things like a maternally assisted caesarean section or even just having the drapes in front of you lowered so that you can watch the birth of your baby might be something that you really like to do. You'd need to discuss this with your doctor and check that both your doctor and the hospital support and assist these, and then there's also that unknown element to what happens if you have an emergency caesarean section you do require general anaesthetic. What's the process for that? Is delayed cord clamping still an option even though you're in theatre? And when will that first skin to skin and that first breastfeed with your baby take place? Is it going to be in theatre or will that be in the recovery room?

And even checking the other little details such as can I take photos or videos in theatre? Or can the theatre staff help taking the photos or the videos? Knowing that in advance you can prepare a little bit and you know; some mothers do like to wear nail polish, or they may like to wear makeup during the procedure. It's worth asking if that's a possibility for your caesarean section.

**Tiffany:** Yeah understanding more about the options that you might have and knowing that these things could be implemented in hospital is so reassuring I think so thanks so much for that. Is there a birth plan template around that you know of? Because a lot of people I think often search this, so thought we'd just discuss that a bit today too because I think having something to work from and take away from today's episode might be really helpful.

**Frances:** Yeah, if you do a quick search on the Internet, you'll find that there's many that you can download for no charge or you can even have a look at. But I think the thing is when you're selecting one, remember you want to look for something that simple, it's not complicated, it's not long and wordy, and remember that you need to consider your partner or support person in this and make them part of your birth plan or your birth preferences.



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**Frances:** (cont...) Because they can be your spokesperson and they can support and encourage your choices as well. I've actually put together a bit of a list for a simple vaginal birth plan so you can get a bit of an idea of what you might want to start including on a plan.

**Tiffany:** Yeah great

**Frances:** So you might want to start with a simple statement like “what I do want” and then follow with “I respectfully request the following during my planned vaginal birth, assuming that my baby and I are healthy at the time of the birth and not experiencing any unforeseen complications. All of the below requests are in an ideal planned vaginal birth situation, and if an emergency caesarean section takes place then I understand that some of these requests might not be possible that will be discussed with me”.

And after that statement, you might want to list a few things like having a labour and birth with as little intervention as possible, having a few people present in the birth room as possible, having minimal interruptions, been given time and privacy to labour with how you feel comfortable, eat and drink when you want to, being supported to keep moving and stay upright and in active positions, to use a shower or a bath for comfort during labour, being able to wear your own clothes or you may wish to wear hospital supplied gown, to have intermittent or wireless monitoring where possible, uninterrupted skin to skin with your baby (at least for the first hour after birth), delayed cord clamping until the placenta has been birthed.

You may even wish to include something along the lines of having a physiological third stage, which is waiting for the placenta to separate and be birthed naturally, as opposed to active management, where you given an injection to increase your own contractions and then quicken up the process as well as controlling bleeding. To initiate the breastfeeding when your baby is showing signs that it's ready to feed.

**Tiffany:** Great. They are all fabulous things to consider for sure.



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**Frances:** Yeah. So, like you've listed things that you would like to happen during your labour, you also might like to make a note of things that you don't want to have happen during your labour and birth. You might not want to have drugs offered or even suggested to you. You might not want continuous monitoring, you might not want to be restricted with your movement, you may wish to avoid being induced with synthetic hormones such as Syntocinon. You may not want active management of the third stage of labour, you might want to try and avoid vaginal examinations, except where necessary, and you may want your bag of waters to actually break on their own rather than being artificially ruptured.

**Tiffaney:** They're so great. Having some ideas of what a birth plan could include is really going to support first-time parents out there so much. I think as it can be hard to allow yourself to really open up and look at all these things and think about them because you don't know where to start. So, I'm sure everyone listening will appreciate this inside info, so thank you so much for that, Frances. What about in the case of having a C-section or an elective C-section?

**Frances:** Yeah, so there are some variations if you're having a C-section birth. It is a completely different scenario, but still there's a few key things that you might want to think about that can help to positively shape the experience. You might include things like in a similar way state what you would like.

So, say what I do want and then you might follow that with "I respectfully request the following procedures during my planned caesarean birth, or should a caesarean section become necessary, assuming that my baby and I are not experiencing any unforeseen complications. All of the below request is in an ideal plan caesarean birth situation and if an emergency caesarean does take place then I understand that some of these requests might not be possible".

So then you would list some dot points saying that you would like your partner or support person to be present in the operating room during the birth, to have minimal discussion or to have everyone silent during the birth of your baby, that you might like to have some music playing during the operation, you might like your partner or support person to announce the gender of the baby.





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**Frances:** (cont...) Even having the drape lowered so that you can see your baby being born, or you may like to be asked “Are you ready to have your baby now?” before the operation begins and you may like to have the whole surgery procedure explained to you as it happens, or you may not want any of the details to be mentioned. As you can see some of these things are quite personal preferences.

Along with this, can your partner or support person cut the cord? You may wish to be shown the cord or the placenta or you may wish to request to keep it. I would like to have delayed cord clamping to take place, also I would prefer to have skin to skin contact with my baby in theatre or as soon as possible. I'd like to be separated only for a minimal period of time from my baby, and if you do need to be separated for medical reasons that you may like your partner or support person to accompany your baby. You may like to initiate breastfeeding as soon as possible and after the procedure you may like to be up and walking as soon as you're physically able to, and along with that you may like to eat and drink as soon as you want to.

I think considering all of these things, you have to be aware that not all providers and hospitals will have these options available during caesarean births. That's why it's really important to start planning early and have these discussions with your doctor or your midwife well and truly before your baby is born. And then in the same way with the vaginal birth, you can then have a title saying that “what you don't want to have take place”. You know, some people might not want to see their baby until it's cleaned up, after the procedure. And some partners actually get quite queasy about blood and things like that and they may not wish to cut the cord and they might not even want to be asked to do this. Because everyone's pain levels are different, this means that some people might choose to be totally pain free as possible, and others might opt to have little pain relief and be quite comfortable with being aware of how they are feeling. Some mothers also may choose to formula feed and they might want their partner or support person to give this first feed to their baby and they don't want to be asked about breastfeeding.

And the other thing to consider is your cultural preferences, so if there's something that's really important to you, remember to speak to everyone that is caring for you and have this on your birth plan so that your preferences can be fully supported.





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**Frances:** (cont...) And then there's the flip side to this too, so in the case of the medical emergency, you might state that you would like your partner or support person to stay with the baby at all times and perhaps they can initiate some skin to skin contact with the baby, or you might want them to stay with you, if that's possible. And then also consider in this emergency situation who's going to be given the consent for formula for your baby.

**Tiffany:** Having a better understanding about you know what is often offered at these times and things that you can include in your C-section birth is wonderful. When I had my C-section, I had it with my son, my middle boy, I had no idea what the options were at all apart from you know what I was told on the day really, I didn't look into it. I think I was a bit worried and it was a very last-minute thing.

You know, so before we finish up today can you tell us a bit more about some of the most asked questions you get from first-time parents while they're in hospital, because I think that would be great to have a few answers to those prior, so you can prepare a bit as a first-time parent.

**Frances:** Yeah sure there's actually a number of common concerns that are raised during those first couple of days and we get asked these quite often. So, one of these common questions is: Why won't my baby settle? First of all, we always suggest going through a bit of a checklist of your baby's needs, you know, does your baby need a nappy change? Are they hungry? Do they have wind pain? Are they uncomfortable in their clothing, being too hot or too cold? Or is the clothing too restrictive? Is it time for a sleep? Or do they just need a cuddle with mum or dad?

**Tiffany:** yeah that's a good one I think it's hard to know sometimes how to settle your baby so that's a really good one to discuss.

**Frances:** It can be a tricky one. Another one is around sleep. So how long should my baby sleep for? When we are talking about newborns, we sort of say that all babies are different but generally speaking newborns will sleep for around 16 hours in a 24-hour period. They do need to wake quite frequently as they've got quite small stomachs and their sleep/wake cycle is not really established until around three to four months of age, and the sleep cycles actually generally last around 40 minutes and then they may need a little bit of help in resettling after this time.



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**Frances:** (cont...) Then when we're talking about sleep, another question that sort of that naturally follows is when should I introduce a sleep routine to my newborn? Well, some babies will actually fall into their own patterns of sleep, but there's some gentle ways and cues that you can actually use to help. You might like to start doing things in a bit of a similar order at each nap time, you might like to close the curtains, perhaps stroke your babies forehead or sing a little song, swaddle them up, place them down in the cot, and do this when they're drowsy but they're not asleep. You know, avoiding rigid routines is often suggested because they can leave mothers and babies feeling quite stressed out and upset because they're trying to meet a time target, and you know your baby has so much to adapt to outside of the womb, and a sleep routine that's flexible can accommodate this and it's really important to be adaptable because their needs will change as they grow. But you know, just having a really simple nap time routine often helps.

Dummies is another one so we're often asked if they bring them into the hospital or should I and can I use a dummy? They're a really personal choice but there are a few things that you need to think about if you considering a dummy or pacifier for your baby. It can potentially have an impact on breastfeeding, it can decrease your supply if your baby sucking on the dummy rather than stimulating the milk supply at the breast and there's also the potential for something called nipple confusion to occur. And then you have to consider the long-term consequences or aspects of this as well.

So, when will you give it to your baby? And you know, is it going to be all the time and just apart from feed times? Is it going to be every time that they're unsettled, and I need to calm them down? Is it going to be every time they go to sleep? And then if it's used for sleep when it falls out and they wake up are you happy to get up and pop the dummy back in? And then in the long term, how are you actually going to wean your baby off having a dummy?

**Tiffany:** I think that's a really good thing to consider before you do jump in and start using anything else to support your baby to sleep, that's for sure.



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**Frances:** Yeah, and most parents of newborns are real excited, they are looking forward to seeing their babies first smile and most parents are quite excited about having their this new baby in their arms and they really want the baby to be able to see them because it's an exciting time at the newborn stage division is quite fuzzy but they can make out light, shapes and movement, and they can see around 20 to 30 centimetres, which is enough to really clearly make out the face of their carer. So, if mum or dad is cradling baby in their arms, the baby can make out the shape of their face. The really nice thing about this is that your baby actually already knows your voice so there is a connection there.

**Tiffany:** Beautiful

**Frances:** Now we sort of talked about feeding. A quite common question is when is my breast milk going to come in? You know, everyone is different. It's a really general guide to say it's the 3rd or 4th day after birth. Circumstances obviously vary from one woman to the other, and there can be other factors that result in the milk coming in much later. But the key here is if you are concerned about your milk supply and maybe your baby's having few wet nappies or you just don't feel like your supply is increasing, speak to your midwife and then also seek some support from a lactation consultant as well.

Now as their tummies are being stretched up after carrying a baby for nine months, one of the questions that comes up is: are support garments actually really helpful? The answer to that quite simply is yes. I just say they cannot be rated highly enough. They do support your muscles which have been stretched throughout pregnancy, and by supporting these muscles that helps also support your lower back, it holds your organs in place and then if you have had a vaginal birth they can help to support your perineum as well, particularly if you've had a tear or an episiotomy.

And an amazing organ is the placenta, and some people won't even think about it too much, but it is an organ that is grown specifically just to feed and nourish your baby in the womb. You may not be aware, but you can actually choose to keep it, amongst other things, or you may just choose to let the midwives take care of it.



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**Frances:** (cont...) Some women keep it, they take it home and plant it under a beautiful tree or bush in the garden, they might like to take photos of it, make art prints, have it encapsulated or fry it up and eat it. Some people donate it to research, have it made into jewellery, or even made into a face cream. The choice is really yours!

Now with your babies' hands and feet, they do feel cold initially and this is because your baby's circulation is maturing, and it does take it a little while for them to warm up after birth. It's normal for them to feel cold, but it doesn't actually mean that your baby's body temperature is actually cold.

**Tiffany:** I think that's a good one lot of people are unsure about that we get that question as well.

**Frances:** Yeah, so one of the next questions is, when can I start tummy time with my baby? And basically, this is really just from birth. It's just a few minutes a couple of times a day and you usually do it when your baby is quite calm and they need this tummy time to be able to help them strengthen their neck, shoulder and back muscles, and along with that is important for their brain and gross motor development, and it helps to prevent them getting flat spots on their heads from lying on their back all the time.

It's quite simple to do, you can lay your baby down on a matt on the floor and pop them on their tummy, or you can even lean back and lay your baby on your chest so that they are looking up at you. That's a really lovely one to meet their gaze and to watch them exploring the world.

And often parents are quite concerned that if they're having someone else look after their baby, they're concerned about their baby's safety and well-being and they want to know what is the really key information that they need to relay to them? And it's a really important discussion to have.



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**Frances:** (cont...) There are a few key things to keep in mind. You know, first of all check that they've had the whooping cough injection. It might have been awhile or they may not have had it, and if they haven't been around babies before, or it has been some time, you might want to gently remind them about not leaving a baby on a surface alone as babies can roll and move quite quickly, and always have your baby supervised around pets, and never ever leave them alone in water or in a car, even if it's just for a few moments and you might be really quick, babies do need constant supervision and care. You know, the temperature in a car can rise alarmingly quickly, and when it comes to water a baby can drown in just a matter of seconds. Also remind them that baby shouldn't sleep in a car capsule, but they should be placed in a safe sleep space on their back without any loose blankets and without any beanies or hats. And then, there's nothing else for them to do during that time that they are caring for your baby, except to care for your baby. Play with them and attend to their needs and enjoy all the cuddles.

**Tiffaney:** Yeah thanks so much for your time today, Frances. I think all of this information is so invaluable and you've shared with this so much and I think you know it's so empowering to get all this information and you know the educational aspects of this episode have been so wonderful and it's great to recommend all of these things from your standpoint being a midwife working in a hospital. I'm sure that everyone will agree who has listened today.

**Frances:** Thanks Tiffany, thanks for having me along.

**Tiffaney:** If any of our listeners are keen to learn more about birthing your baby at Epworth, please head to [www.epworth.org.au](http://www.epworth.org.au). You can also find them on Instagram @Epworthmaternity. Take care of you and each other. Thanks, have a great day everyone.