




# STORIES AND TEACHINGS ABOUT BIRTH



“Every new life is potential. It’s potential to do things differently. It’s potential to do things better. When you start respecting the birth process, everything else follows from there.”<sup>1</sup>

*Aimée Carbonneau,  
Indigenous Registered Midwife*



Aboriginal midwives are committed primary health care providers who have the skills to provide care during pregnancy, labour and birth, and postpartum. Aboriginal midwives share information and teachings to promote family and community health and wellness.

Aboriginal midwifery is about “the recognition of culture and ceremony into the pregnancy and birthing process.”<sup>2</sup>  
– Diane Simon, Mi’kmaq Registered Midwife

This booklet shares teachings and stories related to birth. Other booklets can be found at [www.aboriginalmidwives.ca](http://www.aboriginalmidwives.ca)

“Storytelling is the way in which knowledge is shared in traditional Aboriginal relations.”<sup>3</sup> – Patricia Monture-Angus

Be aware that sharing traumatic stories can deeply affect the pregnant person in a detrimental way so sharing should be done with care.


### **Looking for an Aboriginal midwife in your community?**

#### **Contact NACM for information:**

[nacm@aboriginalmidwives.ca](mailto:nacm@aboriginalmidwives.ca) or 1-514-807-3668, ext. 220  
[aboriginalmidwives.ca](http://aboriginalmidwives.ca)

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# STORYTELLING

Sharing stories of labour and birth are important ways of learning and passing along important health and cultural information.

“I was born at home. My grandmother delivered me. I know the power of a birth story.”<sup>4</sup> – *Katsi Cook, Mohawk Midwife*

“Stories are forms of remembering natural laws, such as the interrelatedness of all life. While Native communities recognized the potentially life-threatening aspects of birth in earlier times, they related cosmovisions and told birth stories, such as corn-as-a-mother, to comfort women and children and to teach all members of the community about how women sacrifice in birth.”<sup>5</sup> – *Patrisia Gonzales*

“Pregnancy and birth and starting a family is a really important time in a family’s life, and two people’s lives, or however many people are starting a family together and it has important connections with family and ancestry and your culture.”<sup>6</sup>  
– *Claire Dion Fletcher, Lenape Potawatomi Registered Midwife*

# CONNECTING *and* RE-CONNECTING

There are teachings and stories in all Aboriginal communities about the importance of families, communities, and acceptance.

These teachings include Two-Spirit, gender fluid, LGBTQ+, Queer, transgender peoples. It is widely believed that a child will reveal who they are to the parents. The parents do not need to impose a specific identity onto their child.

Inuit Elders reference similar teachings:

**“While the child was in the womb its sex was not always decided. Even at birth the child might still decide to change its gender. These children who changed their gender were called sipiniit.”<sup>7</sup> – Inuk Elder**

We are all learning more about Aboriginal communities ways of being before contact with European settlers. NACM honours all Aboriginal peoples in our families and communities through our first core value, which is healing:

*Aboriginal midwives enhance the capacity of a community to heal from historical and ongoing traumas, addictions, and violences. Aboriginal midwives draw from a rich tradition of language, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural practice as they work with women to restore health to Aboriginal families and communities.*



# SELF-CARE IN LABOUR

Labour and birth is a time of huge emotions and feelings. This is because they are sacred and have transformative energies. Ceremonies can play an important role during this time, which can be calming and centering.

Aboriginal peoples from all over incorporate some type of rituals and ceremonies into labour and birth. Smudging, drumming, singing, and bathing are some things that can be part of labour and birth.

Having a support person present, like a partner, family member, or doula can help to make sure you are as comfortable as possible during labour and birth. Sometimes it can be challenging to focus on drinking enough water and moving around when the strong feelings – and even pain – get stronger.

# BIRTH

Each person experiences labour and birth differently. This uniqueness is why so many people share a child's birth story and even write it down.

“I believe in telling a child their birth story, that's what I do, because that sets them into the family... And at nighttime is usually when they really enjoy the story, and you don't change it, it's THEIR story. They'll correct you if you miss something. They know their story, that's how you know they are listening.”<sup>8</sup> – *Freda MacDonald, Ojibwe Elder*



## SKIN TO SKIN

Having baby skin to skin with you immediately after birth is important.

Not only does it help with keeping baby warm, it promotes bonding between the parent and the baby. Skin to skin also helps to establish breastfeeding.

# BREASTFEEDING

Breast milk is the first medicine.

Breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed your baby. It also helps to bond with baby as well as providing immunity to some illnesses.

In times past, every baby was breastfed. Not everyone breastfeeds their babies today, however, there is growing awareness of the importance of breastfeeding and more support.

There are many benefits of breastfeeding<sup>9</sup>, like:

- Convenient
- Nutritious
- Portable
- Chronic disease prevention
- Reduced risk of SIDS (Sudden infant death syndrome)
- Inexpensive
- Protection against breast and ovarian cancer

For information and support on skin to skin contact and breastfeeding, talk to your midwife. Contact La Leche League: [www.LLCC.ca](http://www.LLCC.ca), 1-800-665-4324. Consult Canadian Breastfeeding Foundation: [canadianbreastfeedingfoundation.org](http://canadianbreastfeedingfoundation.org)

**PARENTS WHO CHOOSE TO NOT BREASTFEED ARE STILL LOVING, NURTURING, AND RESPONSIBLE.**



# UNEXPECTED CHANGES

Sometimes, labour and birth are different than what was planned.

Whether it is an unexpected cesarean section or the baby is admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit, it can be a difficult – and emotional – time for everyone.

Care providers want parents and families involved as much as possible, even if it does seem limited. Sometimes, there are rules or procedures that are difficult to understand.

A SUPPORT PERSON, SUCH AS A PARTNER OR FAMILY MEMBER, CAN HELP GET THE INFORMATION YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND. WRITTEN INFORMATION MIGHT ALSO BE HELPFUL. DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS.





# THE IMPORTANCE OF CEDAR

Cedar is often used in bathing as a way to cleanse and heal.

“Some Elders say to give your baby its first bath in cedar water. You prepare this by boiling fresh cedar leaves in water for about 10 or 15 minutes, and then allowing the tea to cool. You can do this before baby comes and save it in a glass jar. A parent simply needs to add a bit of tea to bath water to get the good effects of the medicine.

Or the tea can be put onto a wash cloth for the first time you’re washing your baby.”<sup>10</sup> – *Best Start Resource Centre*





"HONOURING MY SPIRIT HELPERS," BY CHRISTI BELCOURT. USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST.

# PLACENTA CEREMONIES *and* RITUALS

Ceremonies for the placenta are very common because many Aboriginal peoples view the placenta and umbilical cord as sacred. Sometimes, the umbilical cord is kept and once dried, it is put inside a special bag. This bag, which is decorated with beads, can be hung from the cradleboard or attached to the child's moss bag.<sup>11</sup>

## *Burying the Placenta – Métis Teaching*

"We wanted them to have a sense of where they come from, which is the land, and [have a sense] of a place that they'll always belong to because a piece of them is there. So we buried all three of [our children's placentas] together and we planted trees on top of them and they're able to witness the growth of those trees which in a way is to represent their life and their growth as a human being."<sup>12</sup> – Métis Centre of NAHO

# References and Resources

<sup>1</sup>Aboriginal midwives (n.d.). National Aboriginal Council of Midwives. Available at <http://www.isuma.tv/en/national-aboriginal-council-of-midwives/aboriginal-midwives>

<sup>2</sup>Diane Simon Aboriginal midwifery.mp3 Available at <http://aboriginalmidwives.ca/resources>

<sup>3</sup>Monture-Angus, P. (1995). *Thunder in my soul: A Mohawk woman speaks*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

<sup>4</sup>Aboriginal midwives (n.d.). National Aboriginal Council of Midwives. Available at <http://www.isuma.tv/en/national-aboriginal-council-of-midwives/aboriginal-midwives>

<sup>5</sup>Gonzales, P. (2012). *Red medicine: Traditional indigenous rites of birthing and healing*. University of Arizona Press.

<sup>6</sup>Claire Dion Fletcher What is Aboriginal midwifery.mp3 Available at <http://aboriginalmidwives.ca/resources>

<sup>7</sup>Ekha, N., & Ottokie, U. (2000). *Interviewing Inuit Elders: Childrearing practices*. Iqaluit, NT: Nunavut Arctic College Library. Available at <http://tradition-orale.ca/english/pdf/Childrearing-Practices-E.pdf>

<sup>8</sup>Best Start Resource Centre (2012). *Supporting the sacred journey: From preconception to parenting for First Nations families in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Author. Available at [http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep\\_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf](http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Romano, I. (2016). *Breastfeeding, Aboriginal practices (Fact Sheet No. 8)*. Available at <http://www.healthyweightsconnection.ca/ModuleFile/resource?id=3405>

<sup>10</sup>Best Start Resource Centre (2012). *Supporting the sacred journey: From preconception to parenting for First Nations families in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Author. Available at [http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep\\_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf](http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf)

<sup>11</sup>Anderson, K. (2011). *Life stages and native women: Memory, teachings, and story medicine*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.

<sup>12</sup>Métis Centre of NAHO (2010). *Métis maternal and child health: A discussion paper*. Ottawa, ON: NAHO. Available at [http://www.naho.ca.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/documents/metiscentre/english/2011\\_maternal\\_health\\_report.pdf](http://www.naho.ca.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/documents/metiscentre/english/2011_maternal_health_report.pdf)

# Core Values of Aboriginal Midwifery

HEALING  
RESPECT  
AUTONOMY  
COMPASSION  
BONDING  
BREASTFEEDING  
CULTURAL SAFETY  
CLINICAL EXCELLENCE  
EDUCATION  
RESPONSIBILITY

“Aboriginal midwifery can create that safe space for people to be able to create the ceremony they want and recognize birth as a ceremony rather than something that is just happening.”<sup>2</sup>

*Diane Simon, Mi'kmaq  
Registered Midwife*



The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives exists to promote excellence in reproductive health care for Inuit, First Nations, and Metis women. We advocate for the restoration of midwifery education, the provision of midwifery services, and choice of birthplace for all Aboriginal communities, consistent with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

**Our Vision: Aboriginal midwives working in every Aboriginal community.**



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