

The TMI of childbirth

From tweeting intimate details of labor to posting full-frontal footage of baby's birth—is nothing too sacred for social networking?

During a recent dinner party, Serin, a mom in Livermore, CA, overheard a new dad casually announce that his wife pushed so hard that she pooped.

Welcome to the brave new world of full disclosure. And according to Sue Fox, author of *Etiquette for Dummies*, it's here to stay. "Birth just isn't considered private anymore." Fox admits that she's on the fence about sharing certain details of a baby's birth, but etiquette changes just like everything else. "Technology is evolving so quickly, we simply haven't had time to put new rules in place," she says.

We now have the ability to spontaneously (and frequently) share whatever we desire about our lives—including the details of the labor and delivery of our children. But is this a good thing? And when does sharing the arrival of that new bundle of joy veer into the territory of **TMI (too much information)?**→

 BY AMELIA GLYNN



What is etiquette, anyway? P.M. Forni, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University professor and author of *Choosing Civility* says that ultimately, “Etiquette isn’t about which fork we choose for our salad, but how we treat each other.” He believes that because birth is such an intimate part of the human experience, it should be governed by restraint. “Privacy is owed as a form of respect for the mother, baby, and the birth itself,” he says.

Forni also believes that our urge to document birth is an automatic response to the growing desire to publicly announce the changes in our lives. Sometimes this includes broadcasting things that could be awkward or embarrassing.



“Facebook friends:
My doctor is sewing up my episiotomy now. Thank God I can't feel a thing!”



“It’s a party!”

Kaiser’s Calhoun says there’s no limit to the number of family and friends allowed in their delivery rooms, as long as everyone is respectful of the patient and staff.

Although she didn’t plan for a crowd, nearly 20 witnessed the birth of Asia’s son. Says the mother of one from Mill Valley, CA, “I had a long and difficult labor. People just kept showing up.” She still remembers the party-like atmosphere when her son arrived on the scene. “Everyone cheered and someone popped open a bottle of champagne,” she says.

Twittering through transition

For some moms, blogging is just so 2001; they need the drama to unfold in real-time. So when Sara Morishige Williams, known on Twitter as @sara, went into labor, she sent out a tweet: “Dear Twitter, My water broke. It wasn’t like Charlotte in *Sex and the City*.” Five hours later, after she was admitted to the hospital, she sent another: “Epidural, yes please.” Sara also happens to be the wife of Twitter CEO Evan Williams. Publicity stunt or not, Tweeting is taking the sharing of intimate pregnancy details to a whole new extreme.

Some moms claim that using their cell phones during labor comes as a welcome distraction from the pain and help them feel less alone. “We’ve had a lot of moms who have tweeted and texted through their entire labors and deliveries,” says Amanda Calhoun, M.D., assistant director for women’s health at Kaiser Permanente Northern California.

But why are we sending so many messages through the Internet in the first place? Because we can, Forni says. “It’s a technology-driven behavior, and to a large extent, it’s a trivial exchange.”

When her contractions began, Pamela, a mother of one in Philadelphia, was on her BlackBerry with three friends, but she chose not to share anything publicly. “I find it kind of a turn-off,” she says. “I would think you’d be too involved in your child’s birth to inform anyone but those who truly need to know.”



Lights, camera, contraction!

Tara and Travers from Santa Rosa, CA, describe the video of their son's dawn arrival as more "art film" than documentary. "I think an argument can be made for aesthetics," Travers says. "The way a birth is filmed can make it a lot less 'in your face' and more about the actual experience."

Unbeknownst to Pamela until several days after the fact, her husband videotaped her C-section. "I was both surprised and horrified," she says. But once she watched it, she felt grateful to have it: "It has all these things that I replay in my mind—including the image of my son in his first moment of life." As for sharing this footage, Pamela says it's not something she would post for public consumption.

But a lot of moms-to-be do consider birth videos an important resource. Ann from San Francisco, who is pregnant with her first child, says she intends to watch one on BabyCenter.com as part of her own preparation.



"Dear Twitter: I think I just lost my mucus plug. Wonder when my water will break!"

Birth by YouTube

An increasing number of moms and couples are choosing to share their deliveries—from hypno-births to Caesarean sections—on YouTube and other video-hosting websites. Search for "childbirth" on YouTube and more than 6,300 results appear. Some of these astonishing videos have been viewed as many as 2.5 million times.

Although YouTube established what it calls "community guidelines" to regulate what's posted, some of the childbirth videos are surprisingly graphic, showcasing screaming moms and full-frontal crownings. According to Victoria Grand, YouTube's head of policy, the site relies on a community policing mechanism that allows viewers to flag videos they find offensive, which are then reviewed by staff. The majority of birth footage lives in an age-restricted area of the site.

Last November, Lynsee and her husband, Anders, from Minneapolis, upped the ante by setting up a webcam in their hospital room (with special permission) so visitors to the social networking site MomsLikeMe.com could follow every push—*live*—during their baby's delivery. Why did they subject themselves to such scrutiny? According to the site, they wanted to help take some of the mystery out of the process.

SFGate.com and BabyCenter.com mom blogger Amy Graff thinks that some women push the envelope too far by sharing inappropriate information online just to get attention, but says that most moms feel compelled to help prepare other women for their own births or hope to demystify childbirth by presenting a candid experience—one that is a far cry from the heavily edited and often outdated videos shown in birthing classes. "I just worry that a lot of these women aren't prepared for the feedback they receive. There are a lot of mean and creepy people out there," she says.

Setting boundaries

To avoid awkward discussions during the throws of labor, Kaiser's Calhoun encourages parents-to-be to decide on a birth plan and write it down. "This helps open up the conversation and ensure that everyone involved knows the rules ahead of time," she says. "It also helps the mother feel more comfortable and relaxed."

Farra, a new mom in Oakland, CA, told her husband: "No crotch shots," while Anne, a mother of four girls in Denver, CO, made sure that she had final say on all photos that went out to family and friends. Anne recommends taking a break from technology and embracing the downtime that giving birth affords us. "It's one of the only times when the outside world becomes non-existent," she says. "It's like a little baby honeymoon and new parents should take the time to enjoy it."

However you decide to document your birth should be OK with you, your partner, and your immediate family, Fox advises. And know in advance that not everyone will approve. "It wasn't so long ago that we had to wait for baby announcements to arrive in the mail," she says. "For some, sharing the very intimate details of a baby being born can be offensive."



Someone else to consider

We can't rightly ask her permission, but we can still take into consideration the child being born, Forni says. And because we have no way of knowing the impact that such far-reaching disclosure might have, he strongly advocates erring on the side of privacy.

“OMG!

I can't handle
another
contraction!
Where's my
epidural?!
Somebody
get me some
DRUGS!”

—sent via iPhone

“It’s not me, it’s you.”

Pamela, who describes herself as being “less squeamish than most,” has occasionally been put off by what some people have chosen to share. “A friend posted what I considered to be highly offensive pictures of his semi-nude wife and still-bloody child on Facebook,” she says, adding that this same couple also set up a Facebook page for their child when he was only a week old.

So what should we do when we encounter folks who are, in our opinion, guilty of over-sharing? “If your friends, say, hold an unexpected birth screening during a party that you aren’t comfortable watching, simply excuse yourself,” P.M. Forni, Ph.D., says, “offer to take the dog for a walk or head out to the terrace to watch the sunset.” Basically don’t make a big deal out of it. 🍋

✿ San Francisco-based writer **Amelia Glynn** grew up reading Emily Post. She secretly dreams of going back to charm school.