
A quiet place: what is natural family living?

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A few months ago I got a call from a reporter who wanted me to define natural family living for an article she was writing for the Seattle Times. Just yesterday a friend told me that the article had turned up in the Baltimore Sun. Until now I have resisted defining natural family living, for several reasons.

First, at its best, natural family living defies general definition because it is about discovering what is natural for each individual. Second, I don't want parents to think they must follow rules in order to be good at parenting. And third, natural family living is not a movement, a fad, or a custom. It is about getting back to our roots as humans and rediscovering the parenting skills that have sustained humans throughout history and prehistory.

I got started with natural family living in the 1970s, when my first babies were born. At that time, there was a burgeoning natural-living movement that had been catalyzed by young people who had gone "back to the land" during the Vietnam War and rediscovered sustainable ways of living.

In the 1970s, for example, many of us grew our own organic food, made our own herbal remedies, and searched in second-hand stores for cotton clothing for our children. These things were not yet popular enough to be widely available.

When I became pregnant with my first child, I read all the books I could get my hands on. I was a vegetarian who didn't take over-the-counter drugs, and I wanted to continue living with these values as I raised my babies. I needed living examples who would give me confidence in the natural way.

I read the anthropological writings of Margaret Mead, in which she talked about common characteristics shared by tribal peoples. Babies in tribes are integrated easily into their societies. They are born at home, breastfed without restrictions, and held in

arms. Children are not routinely separated from adults, and adults work with children in their arms or at their side.

I was inspired by tribal societies and by the idea of a life that would integrate my experiences as a woman with my experiences as a mother. I lived on a farm at the time, and that, too, gave me confidence in natural living. As a new mother, I understood that it was not having a baby that made motherhood oppressive, but my social isolation. I wanted a bigger, more positive picture of motherhood than was popular at the time.

Of course, at that time, there was no such thing as natural family living. Many of us were just trying to figure out what it meant to do things in as natural a way as possible. And, then as now, there were the purists, the extremists, and the "occasional natural livers?"

My new knowledge of the natural world ran parallel with what I was learning about attachment parenting from my baby and from the La Leche League meetings I attended each month. Attachment parenting is very much a part of natural family living. It appreciates that the first three to five years of life are a critical period for developing trust, empathy, dependency, and optimism.

Natural family living views pregnancy and birth as normal bodily processes, not disease states. Therefore, interventions are avoided during pregnancy in favor of human interaction. A person interested in natural living, for example, might choose to have her midwife palpate her abdomen to determine the baby's size and age rather than opt for an intervention such as ultrasound.

Similarly, birth is seen as a normal event that does not require drugs or intervention. Birth is not perceived this way because women who embrace the natural way are more heroic or tolerant of pain. It is perceived this way simply because a drug-flee mother and baby have distinct advantages. A mother avails herself of an ecstatic birth chemistry that unlocks a dormant, instinctual maternal intelligence; a baby begins life without having imprinted on drugs and awake enough to successfully breastfeed.

It is not surprising, then, that the ideas of natural family living meet at the intersection of instinct and science. Personal intuition is often supported by scientific evidence. Homebirth is a good example of this. Homebirth fosters the intimacy and privacy necessary for an optimum birth. Its safety is also supported by scientific evidence, evidence that consistently demonstrates that birth is safe in any setting.

The ideas of drug-free birth and homebirth are not dogmas, but are good news. They become serious options only if one begins to trust in the natural order of things. Above all, natural family living is about this trust. It is not about making homebirth a dogma; it is about believing that it is safe. If we can believe that homebirth is safe, we will believe that birth in general is safe.

Breastfeeding is an obvious expression of natural family living. One can trust that human milk is the best food for a baby. One can trust, too, that a baby will wean in his or her own time. This is easier said than done in a culture where the vast majority of babies don't nurse past six months, but it gets easier with subsequent babies to rely on this trust. And again--like birth, natural family living is not about rules but about a way to see the world. It is about learning to trust in our own inherent wisdom and the wisdom of our babies.

This new--and very old--way of looking at the world is very much a process. As a new mom, I knew intellectually that touching my babies, for example, was a good thing, but I had to get used to it, and my babies taught me well. This does not mean I was a failure because I was in the process of trusting the natural way. Entering the world of natural family living means accepting that there is a time lag between our intellectual appreciation of an idea and our emotional assimilation of it.

In this regard, one basic and important idea is that of simply holding our babies. For humans, touch is a nutrient that is necessary for full human development. Babies' brains are stimulated by the kind of rhythmic movement and physical stimulation they were accustomed to in the womb. Some call this in-arms parenting; it's the way of the tribes that Margaret Mead and others have studied. It's important to hold and carry our babies

in arms, or in a sling, carrier, or backpack. We can trust in and respond to a baby's need to be held.

In addition to touch, children need to eat food that is in as natural a state as possible. It seems obvious to say that people interested in natural family living want to use foods with few additives and preservatives. Parents sometimes err on the side of caution where food and children are concerned. For example, when my children were young I had to back off my high standards on sweets; I began buying candy from vending machines and hiding it under their beds. We cannot isolate ourselves from society, and are always mediating our values with those of others. That doesn't mean, however, that we abandon our values.

In natural family living, we want to trust in the body's innate capacity to heal itself and see illness as a necessary immune stimulant, not a bothersome nuisance. Accordingly, natural family living is cautious about medical interventions. Medical circumcision, for example, is questioned because the procedure's claimed benefits remain unsupported by scientific evidence. Vaccinations are also questioned so that parents can exercise informed consent. Both medical circumcision and vaccination are complex, personal matters for which there is no single, easy answer. Here in particular we fall back on trust in the individual, which is the foundation of natural family living. We trust both in the inherent integrity of the child's body and in the inherent authority of the parent to make decisions for the family.

The values of natural family living are the values that have sustained the human species for millennia. They are inspired by evidence of the historically successful practices of our species. Our ancestors, for example, lived in community; birth was a ritualized cultural act with customs that ensured safe outcomes. Women attended other women during birth. Today, science has confirmed that a woman is much less likely to have birth interventions if she births in the company of another woman.

Natural family living is about optimum survival, but it is not about making rules for proper behavior. That is the last thing we need. Parents don't need any more guilt or

more inflated standards of perfection. This is the beauty of natural family living, which is about falling back into ourselves and trusting our own natures again. It is not about conforming to anything. Natural family living is about trust in the natural order of things, trust in the innate goodness and perfectibility of people, trust that each child is following his or her individual timetable for development. What this means practically is: Trust your body. Trust your baby. Trust yourself.

I know that it can be hard to trust ourselves as parents. We want to ascribe a dogma to others and invest our authority in them. It's easy for Mothering, or for me personally, to be seen as such authorities. We publish articles with strong points of view and encourage parents to trust the legitimate needs of their babies. However, what we really hope for are authentic and original individuals, people who are thoughtful about their parenting choices and who look at all sides of an issue before making a decision. What is most natural, it seems to me, is the need to choose for ourselves. I have no disagreement with someone who has examined things carefully and made a decision different from my own. I just want to make sure she has all the information.

The ideas of natural family living have heart and meaning and are a sustainable way of caring for children. They are not a dogma. I want to know not that you have followed my way, but that you know what your own way is. And I hope that you will realize that the current cultural values regarding birth and parenting are social constructions of our times. Only by reconsidering them will you have the whole picture, and only the whole picture is good enough for your child.

Here are some of the basic ideas of natural family living, as I understand it:

- * Pregnancy and birth are normal processes that do not require drugs or interventions.
- * Breastmilk is the optimum food for humans.
- * Cosleeping helps to facilitate successful breastfeeding and bonding.

* Mothers and babies need to be together, especially during the first three to five years of life.

* Human babies have a need to be touched and to be held in arms.

* It is important to cultivate a community of like-minded families for friendship, information, and support.

* Eat food that is in as natural a state as possible.

* The human body has the capacity to fight off illness without the use of drugs and interventions.

* Unstructured play is essential to the full development of the human imagination.

* Hitting and punishment are unnecessary when children's natural desire to cooperate is engaged to resolve conflicts.

This is not a complete list. Please let me know what natural family living means to you. Do you find these ideas helpful in your family life? Do they seem impossible to attain? What would you add to the list? Let me hear from you. Let's foster a broad sense of natural family even as we appreciate its long history and deep roots.

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