

Delivering help to Istanbul's mothers

California native Julia Steils has made Turkey her home for the last five years. With a pragmatic and encouraging touch, she hopes to help make birthing experiences for Turkish and foreign women in Istanbul as natural as they were meant to be

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Expatriate women of Istanbul who are expecting mothers or planning to be mothers can sigh with relief. One California native and birthing assistant has made it her life's mission to help parents prepare for birth and coach them through it, in this city she calls home.

Steils shares her time between her home in Anadolu Hisari and those of the families she helps through every stage of the birthing process. The birthing assistant is acutely aware, however, that "You can't control everything," she says. Her own landing in Turkey was "all very chance." Her journey to Istanbul started 10 years ago, she says, at a one-month language course in Italy. There she became friends with a Turkish woman. The two visited each other and, in 2003, Steils met her husband-to-be at a wedding in Izmir. Turkey, she says, has made her a little less dogmatic about natural childbirth. In the dozen births she has assisted here she has learned to encourage parents with the knowledge that they are making the best decisions given the information and resources they have at any given moment. Her hope, though, remains to create a birthing environment that is as natural as possible.

Steils' schooling and life took her from massage therapy to birthing in a very hands-on sort of way. The first birth she attended was that of her nephew. Of course it was a miraculous experience, she says, but during the labor she recalls thinking, "It shouldn't be this way." Every 30 minutes a nurse would come in to press her sister, while she was in labor, to have an epidural.

"Honey, you don't have to be in pain," Steils quoted the nurse as saying. By saying this, the nurse was undermining her sister's ability and confidence to give birth naturally, a pattern Steils says she has seen in many hospitals. "She wasn't validating her saying 'Yes, you are in pain, but you're doing a good job and you're going to be ok.' It was like, 'You're in pain, let's fix it.' This manner of thinking, while seemingly a kindness on the part of the healthcare provider, often makes women feel like failures," says Steils. This was the experience that her interested in births.

"It made me curious about what possibilities there were," she says. After completing certification in massage therapy for pregnancy, she went on to earn her certification as a doula, or birthing assistant, from the Doulas of North America. After 40-something births that she has assisted, she says what makes a birthing experience good or bad, in a nutshell, "is the caregiver's and parents' communication and their beliefs and attitudes about birth—and the grace of the heavens." The difference is most stark when she compares

home and hospital births. During home births, she said midwives create an environment of trust empowering the woman without interfering with what her body is doing. *But in the hospital she often finds an atmosphere of fear.*

"In many hospitals there is so much fear from both the nurses and the doctors who seem not to understand the natural process and this instills fear in the parents," she says. When the environment is fearful and parents find themselves in an unknown situation, like a birth, it is no wonder so many of them make decisions they otherwise wouldn't, she says. "It's difficult to give birth normally in that environment," says Steils. "I understand why they get epidurals, etc."

She explains that women's bodies are made to give birth and under normal circumstances will act "normally." It is the responsibility of the caregiver to affirm that in the parents and create an environment that requires the least necessary medical intervention. "That's what I try to help parents with now, but it's really challenging because of the environment," she says. "Birthing is not seen as something normal. It's seen as a situation in which the mom and baby could die ... but you could die crossing the street!"

When it comes to the difference between birthing experiences in the United States and Turkey, she says that the mentality is the same, but, "The difference is how far it's taken." She says that while in Istanbul hospitals she sees more caesarean sections for example, this is also becoming a trend in the United States.

Communicating with hospital staff

The key to having a natural childbirth in Turkey, Steils says, is above all communicating and creating a good relationship with the doctor before the birth. If parents have doubts about their doctor, she suggests changing to a different one, even at the last moment. Practicing how parents speak to hospital staff so as not to put them on the defensive is just as big a part of birthing classes as the breathing techniques or delivery positions. A question like, "In your experience, what else has worked? What could we try first?" can take you a long way when unwanted interventions are suggested, she explains. Steils encourages parents to research and understand what they want and not to be afraid to ask for it. "Nothing will change if you don't ask," she says.



BABY MASSAGE:

Steils recommends baby massage as an excellent way for parents to bond with their babies. It also helps stimulate and develop the baby's nervous system, while it soothes.



Photo: Cori Pacheco/Alamy