The Circumcision Conversation
by Diana Paul

After giving birth three times (twice without professional attendants), practicing midwifery for ten years and then filming natural births for many more years, this is what I can honestly say from my experience: everything about birth is intuitive.

There's a lot more that could be said, of course, but I want to tell a little story about the birth of my first child, a sweet baby boy. It was 1977 and there were no licensed midwives in the San Francisco Bay area at that time, so I interviewed the only two doctors who would attend homebirths; one was senile and the other was foul-mouthed. I told my husband that I didn't want to break the law, but I didn't want to employ these doctors or give birth in a hospital either. My husband is a lawyer so he looked into the birth laws and told me that if we had the baby at home, we wouldn't be prosecuted. "Prospective"? I could hardly imagine that he was thinking in those terms. I mentally stamped my foot and said, "Then that's what we'll do." And that's how we gave birth—alone.

A neighbor and former classmate of my husband's was a medical intern in San Francisco. He said that he and his nurse wife would come over for the birth, but in the end, the baby came later than expected and our friends had to go out of town. Before they left, Paul called and said, "If you have any problems, just go to the emergency room."

Well, our son arrived, cleared his throat, looked around and began nursing for an hour. I didn't have to tell my baby what to do and he didn't have to tell me; we just played our parts instinctively. He never cried except when my husband tried to give him a Leboyer bath that had turned cold during his extravagant time at my breast.

This was bliss—just my husband, me and our baby. Without opening any doors or windows, we were a family of three. My oxytocin high lasted for years, but I really couldn't talk about my experience because it was definitely outside culturally accepted norms.

Relatives came and went. Friends brought music, casseroles, curiosity and love. While I was still in a state of nirvana, my husband said he got a call from his mother who thought we should have the baby circumcised right away. It would be so much better for his future wife ("less bulk to deal with").

What a jolt! Future wife? He just got here and now I have to think about severing our baby's foreskin for some little girl in the future? I was holding perfection like I had never seen before and the thought of circumcision made me sick. But what did I know? Nothing, so I consulted my older sister.

To my surprise, circumcision had been a topic of conversation in her two marriages. Her first husband had been circumcised, the second hadn't. "Sex," she said, "was far better without circumcision." So much for the future wife theory—I didn't need any more information and I didn't circumcise my sons.

Later, my father-in-law told me that when my husband was circumcised, whoever did it botched the job and my husband nearly bled to death. The panic Grampa Joe felt 32 years earlier still resonated as he told me he was running around like crazy trying to find someone to help them.

Fast forward another 30 years and I am screening a birth video to a circle of women and doulas. Several women are pregnant and the topic of circumcision comes up. One pregnant woman says she is definitely planning on circumcision if she has a boy. The dad is circumcised and her stepson who is about 10 but uncircumcised really has problems. Another woman asks, "What kind of problems?"

"Well, his foreskin is too tight to retract."

A third woman says, "It sounds to me like he didn't play with himself enough. That would have taken care of it."

I just listen, delighted that the subject is not taboo in this group. A healthy, intriguing discussion follows. It occurs to me that I am witnessing a cultural shift.

Not too long before Gramma died, I got up the courage to ask my grown sons at a family dinner if they had ever experienced any problems at school or in sports because they were not circumcised. They hadn't. I started to ask Gramma why she didn't leave her sons intact, but our talk around the table had shifted to another topic.

For me the exciting news is this: Circumcision conversations are finally taking place in our culture.

Diana Paul has produced several films about natural homebirth and most recently published her first book, Wild Naked Ladies: Mother Nature's Design for Birth. She is the executive director of Love Delivers, Inc., and founder of the Motherbaby International Film Festival. Diana lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband of 43 years.