

# Birthlight

ELAINE WESTWICK  
looks at Cambridge's  
very own baby charity...

Françoise Barbira Freedman, the founder of Birthlight, is currently an affiliated lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University. As a medical anthropologist, her mothering experiences were not typical of Cambridge women:

"After having a baby in the middle of my anthropological fieldwork with Amazonian forest people in Peru," she says, "I modelled my mothering on that of my Amerindian sisters: caring but care free, with more vigorous handling, swimming with her, massaging her. Friends asked me to show them how I did all this and I had to think about the differences between conventional European handling of babies and what I had learnt in Peru."

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"Three babies later, there was enough interest to motivate me to set up small classes in the Friends Meeting House, but it was still very much a friends-of-friends affair. The original aims were to restore a day-to-day,

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joyful experience in pregnancy, in approaching birth and afterwards while caring for newborns and older babies. It was clear that certain physical activities were conducive to achieving this: adaptations of yoga were a suitable urban substitute for Amazonian women's active yet relaxed lives. Birthlight is rooted in these early practices, which we have streamlined and expanded over the years with the same aims in mind."

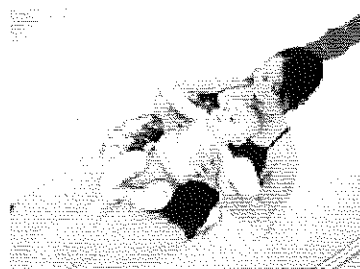
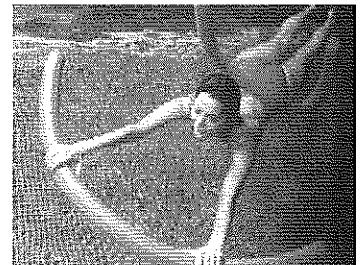
The organisation is still very much Cambridge-based, but has since grown in the UK and worldwide. "There was never a plan to grow in the way we have," says Françoise. "We have grown

organically, mainly from word of mouth, in response to demand from parents and health professionals who resonated with our approach and found it effective. At the time we were the only resource that catered for the transition to parenthood from conception to the second year, and this continuity of care with a holistic approach has remained at the core of Birthlight."

Sally Lomas is a co-director of Birthlight. Following Montessori training in California and Hawaii, she joined one of the early Cambridge antenatal groups during her second pregnancy in 1993. She found her values were very close to Françoise's, with a focus on the fulfilment and well-being of mothers and babies.

Inspired to teach, Sally went on to train with Janet Balaskas, joining her Active Birth teaching course in London. Each of Sally's further two pregnancies increased her involvement with Birthlight and expanded her skills in all the areas of teaching, particularly in aquanatal yoga and infant aquatics. Sally had another big influence: "My mother, Diana Lomas, who has been a trustee of Birthlight from the early years and contributes not only her skills, but also her experience and wisdom, to the development of the Trust."

Birthlight's tagline "for the greater enjoyment of pregnancy, birth and babies" is realised in a range of prenatal and postnatal activities. The name of the charity itself summarises its main aim – to birth lightly and without violence. For pregnancy, there are yoga classes both on land and in the swimming pool. These are supplemented by informal workshops preparing for active births and for birthing in water. There is an easy transition to the postnatal activities – yoga for new mums and for babies, postnatal aqua yoga,



and baby swimming classes. The focus on the breath and relaxation is a guiding principle of the charity. It is believed that breathing techniques mastered in pregnancy can lead to a more relaxing antenatal period, a more natural birth and more enjoyable breastfeeding.

A more recent spin-off is the formation of the Birthlight Trust, an educational charity. The trust held their launch conference, called 'Visions of Infant Joy', last July in Cambridge. Their methods have solid foundations – developed by parents, midwives and carers, and constantly reviewed and updated. Indeed, the aims of the conference included "discussion of trends in the emergence of a birth wisdom that can match recent scientific research findings towards new understandings of birth and babyhood".

The list of speakers reads like a who's who of natural birth experts, including gurus such as Frederick Leboyer, Ina May Gaskin, Janet Balaskas, Michel Odent, Gowrie Motha and Naomi Stadlen. Sally was very pleased with the turnout. "The conference was well attended at full capacity with an international audience of 185. The evaluations were very pleasing; a number

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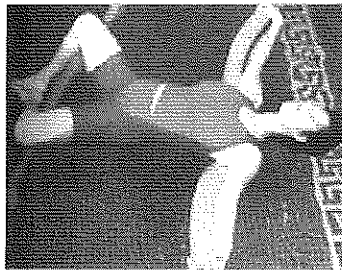
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of delegates reported that this was the best conference they had attended and overall ratings were high."

A necessary focus of such an expanding charity is teacher training. Birthlight courses began in 2001 and there are now over a thousand teachers in the UK alone. Graduates receive a Birthlight Diploma and can be found teaching prenatal yoga, baby yoga, baby massage, baby nurture and infant aquatics, in the community, hospitals and health centres. More recently, the training of



over 400 Sure Start staff members has taken Birthlight practices to mothers who might not be able to afford private classes. "A phrase that is quoted again and again about Birthlight is 'life changing'," says Sally, "whether in the homes of celebrities or in Sure Start centres in Bradford or Gravesend."

Personally, I found that baby yoga classes with Sally helped me to make the transition from my previously ordered life to my new, more joyous but infinitely more out of control one. With so many new babies in the class

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there were always people late, and plenty of exploding nappies and leaking boobs. The kindness and humour with which these incidents were dealt with helped me to be gentler on myself. I learnt to slow down and enjoy my baby, submitting to the new pace of life rather than battling against it.

Birthlight baby yoga teaches you the easiest and most natural way to entertain your baby – using your body. Dangle a toy over a two-month-old and they are more interested in your face and expression. Of course it's not possible to be your baby's full-time entertainer, but learning the skills is an invaluable lesson, especially when you are stuck with no other props. Babies love to be tickled, bounced, kissed and sung to. In the past such interactions were picked up by osmosis from being around the babies of

extended family members. In our mobile society, Birthlight groups act as surrogate families. Learning with so many other new mums makes cooing over your baby less embarrassing, and it becomes easy to forget yourself and join in the laughter.

In the era of medicalised birth, it is refreshing to encounter an organisation that focuses on having fun. So often the process of having a baby is shrouded by safety and health concerns and we forget to enjoy the journey.

For more information, see the Birthlight website: [www.birthlight.com](http://www.birthlight.com)



*Pictures taken from the Birthlight website with kind permission*