

When It's Time to Opt-Out of Institutions

It was the stopwatch on the wall that did it. The colorful paint and framed pastel prints nearby tried to hide its conspicuousness, but it was there: red neon digits glowing like the timer at an NBA basketball game. I asked the hospital tour guide what the clock was for, knowing full well its purpose but curious if it's intent could somehow be justified. "Oh, never mind that," she replied cheerfully. "It's just a way for us to keep track of how long your labor is."

I had been here before. Not in this smaller, supposedly more personalized hospital but giving birth in a hospital, on two previous occasions. Both times medical error caused complications for me, ranging from an allergic reaction to prophylactic penicillin to massive hemorrhaging.

But this new hospital would be better, I told myself, in the third trimester of my third pregnancy. Here I could have a natural, non-induced birth, attended by midwives. The baby wouldn't be rushed, she could pick her own birth date, and no one would pull too quickly on the cord.

But then I saw the timer.

It reminded me that institutions have policies and procedures, often designed to protect (or at least protect from liability). They have their own timeframe, their own expectations for when and how certain things should happen. You are simply a widget. When you agree to the services of an institution, you agree to their policies and procedures. Sure, you may try some creative bargaining, arming yourself with a birth plan and clearly stated wishes. But in labor, at the hospital, you relinquish control.

Sometimes things go smoothly and you make it through a hospital birth just fine. More frequently, at least in America, things don't go quite like you anticipated, but everyone reassures you that you have a healthy baby and that's all that matters—even though, deep down, you wonder if that should be so mollifying.

Sometimes you need to opt-out. On the ride home from that hospital tour, I called the homebirth midwife and committed to an out-of-hospital birth—something that, according to *Scientific American*, many more women are now choosing in the U.S., perhaps in light of the fact that America is now the most dangerous developed country to give birth.

At home, there were no timers. My last two babies were born on their own time, in their own way, with no complications. (You can read more about my experience opting-out of hospital birth in my article at *Midwifery Today*.)

As September rolls along, you may be having your own stopwatch moment. Maybe all is not quite right at your child's school. Maybe you keep being reassured that it will get better, that this is just the way it is, that everything is fine. But maybe you keep sensing that timer. Maybe you wonder if your child is simply a widget, growing along someone else's timeframe according to someone else's policies and procedures. Maybe you don't like the proposed interventions. Maybe school is not in your child's best interest.

Maybe it's time to opt-out.

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