

# The Motherly Guide to Becoming Mama

Redefining the Pregnancy, Birth,  
and Postpartum Journey

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# Dear Mama

Pregnancy is about more than simply growing a baby. It's about becoming a mama.

These 9 months are also the season of your own metamorphosis because when a child is born, a mother is born, too. And that has been the most powerful revelation of our lives as women.

Motherhood changes you long before your baby is born. The changes begin with the decision to focus on your health, to start saving up for your first home, to accept a work promotion, or to connect more deeply with your partner—all with the goal of someday, somehow welcoming a little one into your life.

In each small moment on that journey—meeting with your medical provider, starting your prenatal vitamins, taking your first pregnancy test—you begin to transform into this new being: a mother.

Perhaps motherhood for you started with an unplanned pregnancy. Or perhaps motherhood has been a long-fought journey, full of incredible waiting, pain, or loss. Maybe your pregnancy experience is just like you anticipated. Or maybe it's nothing like you'd ever envisioned.

In many ways, pregnancy epitomizes the highs and lows of motherhood: the dreams and the despair, the magic and the ambiguity, the strength and the sacrifice, even the absurdity and the beauty. The discomfort of pregnancy, which can make it hard to sleep, is a bellwether of sleepless nights to come. The joy of a positive pregnancy test becomes a peek into the ecstasy of seeing your baby's face for the first time. The marks that pregnancy leaves on your body are a reminder of the permanent shift in your identity.

Motherhood will also mold you in unexpected, amazing ways, but becoming a mama doesn't mean leaving the woman you are behind. It means you have an opportunity to nurture, not lose, your true sense of self. You'll discover superpowers you never knew you had. You'll endure greater challenges than you've ever known. And you'll experience an indescribable love that will change your life.

We created *The Motherly Guide to Becoming Mama* to coach and inspire you through this season of transformation. It is the pregnancy book we wish we'd had when we first became mothers. It is the one pregnancy book focused on you—the pregnancy book women deserve.

This book won't bog you down with demands or give you more to be worried about or tell you what to do. (We promise!) Because the truth is, we don't know quite how your story will unfold. It's impossible to know exactly what to expect during *your* pregnancy; after all, you are your own amazing woman with unique dreams, experiences, and needs. Instead, we asked Diana Spalding, a certified nurse-midwife, pediatric nurse, Motherly's

Digital Education Editor, and mother of three (we *know*, we're impressed, too!) to write this book, drawing on her deep experience walking alongside women like you to help you feel confident during this time of massive change, to remind you of your strength, to give you the courage to face difficult choices, and to help you define—and redefine along the way—what becoming a mama means to you.

At Motherly, we want to be with you along this journey. We're so proud of the supportive, nonjudgmental community of women we've built together and are thrilled to bring their wisdom to your pregnancy. Every woman, every baby, every pregnancy is different, but mama, we know this is true: *You were made for this moment.*

You are powerful. You are capable. You are becoming a mama.

*You've got this.*

Jill + Ling<sup>xo,</sup>

Founders of Motherly

# Welcome, and How to Use This Book

My heart is bursting for you.

Maybe you are already pregnant. Maybe this is your first baby, or maybe it's your fourth. Or perhaps you are not pregnant yet but have decided that it is time to start preparing for what comes next.

Whatever the reasons that inspired you to pick up this guide, you are on the verge of something tremendous. This is the start.

You are on your journey to *becoming mama*. And *becoming mama* is everything.

It is thrilling, blissful, scary, exhausting, empowering, confusing, and awe-inspiring—all in a single moment.

And it is a whole-self journey. This is not just something that happens in your uterus.

*Becoming mama* involves your whole body and mind, emotions, lifestyle, career, relationships, home, bank account, schedule, spirituality, worldview, and your heart. Oh, your heart.

You will always be you, but you will never be the same.

And I am so deeply honored to begin this adventure with you.

My path to midwifery started when I was a little girl. I am the daughter of a midwife and have been surrounded by birth my entire life. I didn't play "normal" games as a child. Instead of tea parties with my dolls, I pretended to deliver their babies. The very first word I learned in Spanish was *empuja*—push. I read baby name books and made notes in the margins.

I've been obsessed with pregnancy and birth for a very long time.

In college, I studied anthropology. My fascination for the ways culture, health, and medicine influence each other led me to Central America, where I conducted public health research focusing on parasitic diseases. (I know, I know, but it was wildly interesting, I promise.)

Inspired to become a nurse, I moved to New York City for nursing school, and as it turned out, to fall in love with the guy who would become my husband and father of my kids. I spent 5 years working as a registered nurse on a pediatric hematology-oncology unit in the Bronx, learning just how strong children and their parents can truly be.

I then started midwifery school, which for me was a master's degree in nursing (more on the different paths to midwifery on page 81), and was amazing. I was trained and guided by wonderful midwives and was then hired to work with them.

Midwifery is not my job; it is my life. Being with women as they grow and give birth to their children is more of an honor than I can describe. I get invested in women's stories. I still cry at every birth. Bearing witness as a woman crosses the threshold into motherhood fills me with joy, reverence, and hope that everything really will be okay.

Through it all, my most profound teachers have always been the women I have had the honor of working with. I learned very quickly that it was never going to be my job to tell women what they *needed*. My role is to provide information, evidence, and compassion and then to hold space for a woman as she finds her way to motherhood.

My way to motherhood started on a warm spring day—after 32 hours of labor—when we welcomed our daughter into our lives. Three years later, our middle guy joined us, and then in an unexpected plot twist, our youngest, another boy, came into the world a short 15 months later. And since we are all about birth stories here, I will share that they were all born vaginally in hospitals with midwives and with epidurals.

I am the founder of a motherhood wellness center called Gathered Birth in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

And now, in what still seems like a surreal dream, I get to work with Motherly and give birth to this book.

*The Motherly Guide to Becoming Mama* was inspired by what we saw as an overwhelming need to provide evidence-based, nonjudgmental nurturing to women when they need it most.

As I said, my job is not to tell you what matters: It is to listen to you and then walk alongside you accordingly. Therefore, to create this book, we started with you. We spoke to thousands of women in the Motherly community in order to understand what you needed this guide to be.

Here is what you told us: You are fiercely dedicated to your baby (who already exists or who will one day exist). You want to know everything about them, from the ways they develop through pregnancy and beyond, to how to create the best possible start in life for them.

You are also committed to staying true to yourself, to self-nurturing, and to thriving in the way that fills your soul.

And you do not believe that these two things are mutually exclusive.

You are part of a generation of women who believe that the love we have for our children and our own well-being can be woven together into a tapestry that radiates balance and love.

Yet weaving that tapestry is hard.

Our lives often do not leave room for optimal self-care. Careers and relationships take work, sometimes sapping us of the energy we need to focus back on ourselves. We are often lacking the foundation of a strong and nearby village when we need support. Systemic racism, misogyny, and heteronormative expectations can leave us without a voice to stand up and say, "This is what I need," and to be heard. And the constant swirling

of judgment, conflicting messages, and “shoulds” is exhausting and depleting on a profound level.

But you have decided, despite the difficulties and the obstacles, that this is not the experience you want. You have decided that you will bring your baby into this world differently, and in doing so, become part of the radical movement of strong women making this world better for each other and for each other’s babies.

You are redefining the pregnancy, birth, and postpartum journey. And Motherly is with you.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

In part I of this guide, “Getting Pregnant,” you will find chapters on preparing for pregnancy, conception through the many ways people grow their families, infertility struggles, and miscarriage—because loss can be a part of our stories, and you should not have to go through it alone. Lastly, I’ve guided you through how to decide where to give birth and who you’d like your care provider to be during your pregnancy and birth. I know it feels early, but these decisions can impact your prenatal care from the beginning, so it’s important to start thinking about it now. That said, it is often possible to make changes during the course of your pregnancy, so return to these pages if you find that you’d like to switch birthing places or providers.

Part II, “Pregnancy Month by Month,” guides you through each month of pregnancy. In these chapters, you’ll find prompts to “pause and reflect” (because *oh, my goodness*, you are having a baby, and this is huge) and ways to bond with your growing baby.

You’ll also see a list of symptoms that you may be feeling each month—but maybe not! Each woman experiences pregnancy differently. I’ve created a “Symptom Checker,” which you’ll find on page 389, that you can turn to at any time to learn more about what you’re feeling and what you can do about it (remembering, of course, that your provider is always your point person for all things medical and symptom-related).

You’ll read about what might happen at each month’s prenatal appointment(s). Because pregnancy is a holistic adventure, each of the month-by-month chapters will give you information from a renowned team of experts. (Seriously, they are amazing. Check them out on page 487.) They’ll share how to nourish and move your body for the specific time of pregnancy you are in, how to build strong relationships with your partner (if applicable) and village, and how to deal with potential changes at work as well as providing you with unique ways to consider finances, life plans, baby gear, and so much more.

And, I know you will be excited to start thinking ahead to birth and beyond, so starting in a few months you’ll find cues to read ahead so you can envision and plan!

Part III, “Giving Birth,” breaks the labor process into four distinct stages. Then, once you know what to anticipate during your labor, you’ll find a chapter on coping techniques to help you rock your experience like the amazingly strong woman you are. I’ve also included full chapters on potential interventions and Cesarean birth. Giving birth



is a story that will unfold as it moves forward; if your story involves interventions, you deserve to feel prepared and confident so that you can experience your birth with empowerment. Finally, with all this information to support you, you'll be guided through how to make your birth plan.

You also told us that you needed much more postpartum support: what to anticipate with your own healing after pregnancy and birth and how to care for this new little human being. So, it is my honor to guide you through this as well in part IV, "The Fourth Trimester."

Now this part is big: When we asked, you told us you felt very strongly that you did not want to spend every day worrying about all the possible complications, but you did want to have access to that info should it come up for you. We got you!

Possible complications, details on most of the testing, and the "scary stuff" are in a separate section called "Tests and Complications," on page 409 (a few live within the main text). This way, you can choose how and when to see this information. From reading it all, to reading none of it, to just focusing on the things that apply to you, you are in charge here.

Where applicable, I've included notes for your partner (whether this is a significant other, friend, or family member) to help them through this monumental time as well. And speaking of your village, the Motherly community had a lot to share with you about this journey, so you will find quotes from them throughout the book, too.

Of course, there is a ton of info on birth throughout this book—and all the beautiful ways that birth happens. I am so excited for you already, but I'll be patient. We'll get there soon enough, and I'll give you prompts throughout about what sections to read ahead to become a total birth boss.

While this book focuses on pregnancy, we want to take a moment to reflect on all the amazing ways that women become mothers—adoption, gestational carriers, and fostering. We are all in this together, the rich variety of our stories enhancing the beauty of the experience of motherhood.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the creation of this book, we worked hard to be sure that every mama could see herself within this guide—to have all women represented, and all concerns voiced. Yet despite our efforts, we acknowledge that we are far from perfect and will be on a lifelong quest to learn more and grow. We are so grateful for the opportunity to serve our diverse community, and to paraphrase Maya Angelou, we will always strive to do better as soon as we know better.

Mama, this is *your* journey. Whether you feel scared or confident (or a mix of both), know that you are not alone. Your journey to becoming mama starts now.

*You've got this.*

xo,  
*Diana*

# Deciding to Have a Baby and Preparing to Get Pregnant

I am crossing a  
threshold that will  
forever change  
the way I exist  
in this world.