

NCT **antenatal** services -

policy, practice and evidence

NCT wants birth to be an experience that enriches the lives of women and their partners, and gives them confidence as they embark on parenthood.

Antenatal education is often cut when budgets are tight, but realistic, positive and practical preparation for labour and birth matters to women and their partners. It can make a significant difference to how they experience labour and how well equipped they feel to cope.

Positive experiences depend on good preparation, consistent emotional support during labour, and respectful, competent care. Aspects of the environment - privacy, quietness, subdued lighting - and access to facilities, such as a birthing pool to help ease the pain, can make a huge difference.

The *Normal birth consensus statement*, developed by a range of maternity professional bodies and parents' organisations, encourages commissioners and NHS trusts to develop maternity services so that more women receive all these important aspects of care. A copy of the statement is available at www.nct.org.uk/normalbirth

Authors: Miranda Dodwell and Mary Newburn

NCT

Alexandra House
Oldham Terrace
London W3 6NH
0844 243 6000
www.nct.org.uk

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Introduction

This report provides an overview of Department of Health policy on antenatal education in England and the provision of antenatal classes by NHS trusts. It introduces NCT antenatal services and summarises key points of evidence on what works and what parents value.

NCT teachers are specialists in adult learning and they deliver interactive, antenatal courses in a range of formats to:

- provide women, their partners (and other labour companions) with knowledge for birth,
- help parents in preparing for life with a new baby,
- provide opportunities for parents-to-be to get to know one another and begin to form supportive networks.

The NCT has been providing courses to women and men making the transition into parenthood for over 50 years, and has developed considerable expertise in adult learning in the perinatal period. In 2009, the NCT helped over 70,000 individual parents through antenatal courses and drop-ins and 2600 through Early Days postnatal courses and drop-ins. Of these parents, 45% were men.

NCT antenatal courses are participative and are designed to respond to a range of different needs and preferences.

Feedback from parents attending NCT classes

"I wasn't keen at first 'cause I thought it would be all heavy breathing and not for me, like you see on TV. But it was good. It helped me and my husband talk more about things. It helped us really think about what it was going to be like. And it made us know that other people were having doubts and worries too."

(Asian mum – Birmingham Women's Hospital)

"The teachers were the greatest. They made me feel comfortable and involved me - not just my wife. I thought it would be a real snore, but I looked forward to going each week and my one regret is that it didn't go on for longer."

(White dad – Birmingham Women's Hospital)

Our teacher was fantastic and created a comfortable environment (where) you never felt silly asking questions, which is probably the most important thing. I never felt preached to or had opinions imposed on me and I feel there was a good balance between the different areas of information."

(Mum-NCT 2009 survey)

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Background

The National Service Framework for Maternity states that “Good antenatal care for all women and their partners will include access to parenting education and preparation for birth as classes or through other means to enable them to make informed choices about the type of birth they would prefer”.¹ The Maternity Care Working Party recommends access to antenatal preparation courses with a positive focus on practical skills for coping with labour pain including use of active positions, access to birth pools, relaxation, massage and aromatherapy.²

The NHS Institute Toolkit³ details maternity service practices and behaviours which support normal birth and lower caesarean rates. These include running ‘well attended antenatal education classes led by a birth educator or midwife which are accessible to all women in a variety of settings’. These should be used to inform and prepare women for birth and explore a full range of coping strategies.

According to a recent Healthcare Commission survey,⁴ 36% of women were not offered classes by their NHS trust, but this varied between trusts (from 11% to 67% of women were not offered classes). The Healthcare Commission concluded that, “Clearly, many Trusts need to improve the availability of classes”.⁵

In a recent survey about antenatal classes conducted via the Babycentre website, nearly 3,700 women responded with their views.^{6,7,8} In general, women viewed the classes as being helpful and informative, indicating that despite other forms of information being available (for example, internet, television, health education leaflets), women still value the opportunity to interact directly with a group facilitator with specialist knowledge. Where NHS antenatal classes had been cut back because of staff shortages or lack of financial resources, women were frustrated or even angry about the lack of provision. Women were unhappy with classes that were overcrowded, poorly taught or patronising.



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Antenatal classes taught by NCT

NCT paid-for courses usually have 10-16 participants, with contact time of between 16-20 hours, though many teachers also offer weekend workshops, shorter intensive courses, refresher courses and drop-ins.⁹

3.1 Diversity and access

The NCT is working towards making its services accessible to all parents. Strategies include:

- contracting with the NHS and with children's centres to offer courses and drop-in classes free at the point of delivery
- charging a reduced rate to parents on a low income attending NCT's paid-for courses.

3.2 NCT-led NHS birth preparation

Courses run by the NCT for the NHS are usually larger with fewer hours of teaching time than paid-for courses. They often include parents from a wide mix of ethnic and socio-economic groups. NCT antenatal teachers are trained to meet diverse needs and to use a variety of teaching methods to enable all members of larger groups to participate and achieve the learning outcomes of the course. NCT antenatal teachers are reflective practitioners: they respond to feedback and evaluate their own experiences to continually improve the learning experience of course participants.

The effectiveness of NCT-led courses taught for the NHS

The NCT commissioned an evaluation of 148 courses of antenatal classes taught by NCT teachers at Birmingham Women's Hospital (BWH) between 2005 and 2006.¹⁰ Altogether, 655 parents completed questionnaires after attending a course, over a quarter of whom (27%) were from minority ethnic groups. Results were compared with responses to the pre-course survey.

The findings of this evaluation were highly positive, with 100% of those responding agreeing that the teacher did a good job and that they would recommend the courses to someone else.



3.3 NCT paid-for courses

Parents' views of the NCT's paid-for courses also show high levels of satisfaction and opportunities to get to know other parents.¹¹ After the course, at least nine out of 10 women and men attending in May 2009 said they knew all they needed to know about:

- Natural ways to help cope with contractions
- Using movement and different positions
- Using a birth pool
- Epidural
- Caesarean section.

Other topics that parents felt were well covered included baby feeding, crying and sleeping, relationship changes, tiredness, sex after childbirth and where to get help.¹¹

"The opportunity to ...work on tasks with people going through the same thing, with someone who can answer ... your questions, no matter how trivial, has been of great benefit to us both."

(Dad – NCT 2009 survey)

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Aims of antenatal classes

From the surveys which have been conducted and from NCT's long experience of teaching, it is clear that women and their partners attend classes to gain knowledge about labour and birth, to prepare for parenthood and to interact with others in a similar situation, sharing experiences and making friends. As a result of this, participative antenatal classes tend to increase the confidence of parents and create social networks of support which are available as an ongoing resource after the baby is born.

4.1 Knowledge and skills for labour and birth

Providing information about labour and birth is a core part of antenatal preparation. In the evaluation of antenatal courses at Birmingham Women's Hospital, parents expected to be given information about different types of birth and to learn how to cope during labour. Nolan found that parents wanted antenatal classes to provide information about self-help strategies for coping with labour, and opportunities to practise physical skills such as breathing, upright positions and massage.⁷ According to the MIDIRS Informed Choice leaflet on positions in labour and delivery¹² women "are less likely to try out positions which are unfamiliar to them ... Antenatal preparation may help in changing behaviour as it may offer women the opportunity to try out a variety of positions". Classes also inform parents about medical procedures and pain relief, as well as helping with decision-making and communicating effectively with health professionals.

NCT-led classes enable expectant parents to gain knowledge and feel more in control and more confident about the birth to come.

Parents attending NCT courses at Birmingham Women's Hospital were more knowledgeable about childbirth following the course:

- 99% said that the course had given them new information about birth and skills for labour,
- 98% thought the course would help them cope better during labour,
- 63% felt 'confident' about the birth after the course, compared to 30% beforehand.¹⁰

4.2 Preparation for parenthood

Most first-time parents have had no experience at all of caring for a newborn baby and therefore antenatal classes which include some preparation for the transition to parenthood are generally seen as beneficial.

Barlow et al, concluded that health-led parenting interventions in pregnancy and early years “have the potential to improve a range of outcomes such as dyadic adjustment, maternal psychological well-being, parental confidence, and satisfaction with the couple and parent-infant relationship in the postnatal period”, though they noted that rigorous evidence is currently limited.¹³ Their report suggests that addressing parenting issues is a form of social support which should take into account the priorities of the participants and should include sessions on relationship issues and preparation for new roles and responsibilities; the parent-infant relationship; problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.¹³

This evidence is reflected in the needs of the parents participating in surveys. Expectant parents attending the Birmingham NHS classes were very keen to know what life would be like with a new baby. They wanted to learn practical skills such as changing nappies and coping with a crying or tired baby. This need for baby care skills was echoed in the Babycentre survey.⁷ Parents also wanted information about feeding their baby, particularly the practicalities of establishing breastfeeding, but without undue pressure being put on them to breastfeed. Parents wanted a chance to think about life with a new baby, and to find out more about the impact it would have on their lives, particularly about changes in relationships, both between the expectant parents and with other family members and friends.⁷

Parents can gain increased knowledge and confidence about parenting from attending NCT-led antenatal classes. Evaluation of NCT’s paid-for courses shows that women who had attended longer courses were more knowledgeable and confident about birth and parenthood than those who had attended shorter courses.¹¹

Feedback from parents attending NCT courses at Birmingham Women’s Hospital, immediately after the course showed that:

- 96% felt that the course gave them new information about life with a new baby,
- 94% thought the course had helped them learn about caring for a baby,
- 80% said they knew ‘a lot’ or ‘all they needed’ to know about changing nappies and feeding their baby,
- Confidence about being a parent increased from 62% before the course to 78% afterwards.¹⁰

4.3 Meeting other expectant parents

Antenatal classes can provide a safe environment in which to discuss hopes and fears, and a positive sense of group identity can help to validate feelings and experiences. Teachers will build on the prior experiences that parents-to-be bring to classes in order to prepare for them for the new experiences of birth and parenting. The Babycentre survey showed that parents-to-be value opportunities for group interaction, and learn by talking with other people in a similar situation. Women found that smaller groups were better for developing social networks.⁶

NHS courses typically involve fewer sessions and larger groups than is usual for NCT courses, which can be a barrier to parents creating an on-going support network. In Birmingham, about three-quarters of those attending hoped to meet other local parents and to make friends, and two-thirds of those responding to the hospital's questionnaire said that the course had helped them achieve this. Parents commented that a reunion following the birth of their babies would have been useful in consolidating support networks.¹⁰

The social support developed during antenatal courses may improve women's well-being¹⁴ and has been shown to have a protective effect against postnatal depression.¹⁵ This would contribute to a positive start for parenthood for those attending antenatal classes.



5

Effect of classes on birth experience

A study of about 1,200 women carried out in eight maternity units in England found that most pregnant women wanted to give birth either drug-free (14%) or with 'a minimum quantity of drugs to keep labour pain manageable' (65%, total 79%).¹⁶ Similarly, the NCT's Birmingham Womens Hospital study showed that most women wanted to avoid medical procedures, such as induction (75%), caesarean (88%) and instrumental delivery (91%), and wanted to know how to help themselves during labour and birth.¹⁰

5.1 Does attending classes make a difference?

Antenatal classes help to support those women who want to reduce their likelihood of needing medical procedures by:

- suggesting alternative ways of coping with pain,
- helping them practice physical skills
- offering ways to enhance their birth environment.

However, antenatal preparation is only one factor which determines women's experience of birth. No matter how well a woman and her partner are prepared for birth, their experience will be strongly influenced by the environment, the facilities and the practices at their maternity unit.

5.2 The importance of an integrated approach

Antenatal preparation needs to be one part of an integrated approach to implementing *Maternity Matters*¹⁷ and the *NICE Intrapartum Care Guideline*¹⁸, including one-to-one emotional support and encouragement during labour,¹⁹ an environment which allows mobility, privacy and comfort,²⁰ access to a birth pool for immersion in water,²¹ and other comfort aids such as mats, pillows and a birth ball. Evidence shows that these factors can lower the use of pain medication,¹⁹⁻²¹ forceps¹⁹ and caesarean section.¹⁹

Where antenatal preparation is participative or client-led, women feel more satisfied with their birth experience.^{22,23}

85% of parents who attended NCT-led courses at Birmingham Women's Hospital said that they had felt confident during labour and birth.¹⁰

In general, there is limited evidence from research reviews that antenatal education reduces the perception of labour pain, is associated with a higher incidence of vaginal birth or a reduction in use of epidurals. NCT classes increase the knowledge and confidence of women and men,^{10,11} and some, such as NCT yoga-based classes, seem to enable women to 'work with pain' during labour, as well as offering other health advantages.²⁴

The latest independent review for the Department of Health concludes that 'group-based social support including antenatal preparation for parenthood classes can be effective in supporting women with sub-threshold symptoms of depression and anxiety' as well as there being some evidence for:

- improving maternal psychological well-being,
- parental confidence, and
- satisfaction with the couple and parent-infant relationship in the postnatal period.²³

Benefits of NCT yoga for pregnancy classes

"Yoga makes women feel calmer and more relaxed, it improves their flexibility, helps them sleep, reduces some of the physical discomforts of pregnancy and increases the likelihood that they will have a normal birth."

(Virginia Campbell, NCT yoga for pregnancy (YfP) coordinating tutor)

"The gentle yoga really helped with my pelvic pain (SPD). Most weeks I would go into the class in moderate to severe pain (on crutches on some occasions) and walk out pain-free, which would then last for the rest of the evening. The chance to learn and practise breathing techniques really helped me through a long labour with my baby."

(Mum who attended an NCT YfP class)



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NCT services for parents

Antenatal services

The NCT can offer a range of bespoke services to support and inform parents during pregnancy, labour and after birth, according to your local needs:

- **Antenatal courses** - our antenatal teachers can be commissioned to run antenatal drop-ins, birth and parenthood preparation courses and specialist sessions, such as VBAC (vaginal birth after a caesarean), or expecting twins.
- **Yoga for pregnancy** - some NCT teachers are qualified to lead yoga-based antenatal sessions with a focus on relaxation, breathing awareness and developing physical flexibility.
- **'Early Days' and integrated courses** - NCT Early Days sessions provide new mums, dads or mixed groups with an opportunity to talk about their baby's crying and sleeping, and the practical realities of motherhood and fatherhood. We also offer courses that start during pregnancy and continue into the postnatal period to provide parents with much-needed support antenatally and after their baby has arrived. These are led by NCT-trained antenatal teachers, postnatal leaders and breastfeeding counsellors working together to cover different sessions.
- **Birth companions** - NCT is developing a new birth companions training and service for parents. The NCT can provide one-to-one support during pregnancy and labour for vulnerable or disadvantaged women and families.
- **Training for health professionals** – the NCT offers a range of conferences and workshops for health professionals involved in maternity, neonatal and postnatal services. NCT workshops are designed with clearly defined aims and learning outcomes and can be tailor-made to suit specific training needs. The training can enhance partnership work and service improvement for NHS trusts, PCTs, Sure Start projects, service teams, universities and other educational bodies.

NCT antenatal teachers each have a Diploma of Higher Education in antenatal education, validated by the University of Bedfordshire. The programme prepares them for:

- planning antenatal classes
- facilitating groups and promoting learning for adults
- teaching the physiological processes of pregnancy, labour and birth and the management of labour
- introducing informed decision-making for parents,
- helping parents explore the transition to parenthood
- meeting diverse needs in antenatal classes, and
- reflective practice.

Qualified NCT antenatal teachers are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure high levels of competence are maintained. Continuing professional development requirements ensure knowledge and skills are kept up-to-date so that parents attending antenatal classes can be confident of receiving an excellent service.

Postnatal services

In addition to our antenatal services, the NCT can offer postnatal drop-ins and courses of varying lengths, and integrated courses involving sessions both before and after birth. Postnatal leaders and breastfeeding counsellors are all qualified to diploma level. They are equally experienced at running groups and providing one-to-one support.

Postnatal leaders

Postnatal leaders train via the Diploma of Higher Education, Postnatal Group Facilitation (NCT) - a course validated by the University of Bedfordshire.

The programme prepares them for:

- reflective practice including linking interactions and feelings to past and current personal experiences and the implications for its use in their future practice.
- facilitating groups of new parents - understanding group dynamics; working with diverse groups of parents from different cultural backgrounds; and addressing the challenges and issues of early parenthood
- planning and evaluate Early Days courses and drop-ins
- working with parents experiencing loss or disappointment connected with birth and in early parenthood
- communicating the psychological impact of motherhood on women and the impact of a new baby on relationships
- understanding the influences of the wider culture on life as a new parent.



For further information on how NCT can help you deliver services for parents in your area, please contact:

Parents Services Department

020 8752 2416

partnership@nct.org.uk