To the Editor: My congratulations to Elizabeth Feldman on her sensitive and moving "Birth and Death: Through a Child's Eyes" (J Am Board Fam Pract 1999;12:344–5). Dr. Feldman's wonderfully insightful and reflective piece captures many of the life cycle issues that are so often not discussed in our society today. These values are those that we try to instill in our medical education programs for our medical students and residents as we attempt to teach them a normalizing perspective on important life cycle events. I have circulated this very moving piece to our faculty who are involved in early medical student education, and we are planning to use it for discussion and reflection in our life cycle discussions, particularly with issues of death and dying.

Dr. Feldman has provided us, in an articulate and sensitive manner, a framework with which to discuss these important issues. I will look forward to similar reflective pieces in your future journal articles.

William B. Shore, MD
Department of Family and Community Medicine
University of California, San Francisco

To the Editor: I found Elizabeth Feldman's article "Birth and Death: Through a Child's Eyes" (J Am Board Fam Pract 1999;12:344–5) extremely disturbing. Not only does this article not describe birth and death through a child's eyes - rather it details one adult's beliefs - but the author-mother herself is revealingly honest when she says: "I can draw no definite conclusions about the impact of these experiences on Hannah's psyche or her own future life choices."

Why then would a physician or a parent expose a child to experiences the impact of which is uncertain? The evidence from psychotherapy patients is that such experiences are often traumatic because the activities of adults are regularly misinterpreted by young children according to their own limited understanding. For example, observation of parental intercourse is usually experienced by the child as an assault on the mother. Children are routinely distressed by a parent's pain, physician or psychological - not to mention the sight of a parent bleeding - because they feel their own security threatened by such an event, often imagining that the parent will die. I have not seen evidence to suggest that the survival of the mother after childbirth makes the child any the less anxious about physical harm to the mother.

We know clinically that children of all ages are extremely sensitive to the condition of a parent who has, for example, a chronic painful illness. The younger the child, the more difficult the experience for the child to understand and tolerate. A mother groaning in pain during labor suggests that she is suffering, helpless, vulnerable, weak, and possibly not able to protect the child when she is frightened, because the mother is naturally preoccupied with coping with her own pain or other needs. Young children do not realize that this is not the case or at least that it is time-limited and not life-threatening.

It is furthermore disturbing that Dr. Feldman's admission of ignorance of the impact of these experiences does not dissuade her from a professional recommendation that "other children and families can benefit from these experiences."

Many are concerned about violence and sexuality in the media for precisely this reason. We should err on the side of caution when it comes to both raising children and making professional recommendations to our patients on the matter of child rearing. It is too easy to think that because we believe some approach worked with our own children, it will work for all children. We might be wrong, and we might have a blind spot precisely because we are dealing with our own families and our own narcissistic investment in our parenting abilities.

It is also a mistake to assume that because a child has no overt reaction to an event, the child has tolerated the event without trauma. There is a great deal of clinical evidence, for example from abuse victims, both adults and children, that denial and affect isolation can make a person look as though he or she is not reacting to an event. The impact, in fact, can be so troubling and overwhelming that it can cause a freezing of reactions, which superficially looks like an absence of difficulty. Later events then demonstrate the delayed impact. The tentative observations of her daughter's reactions ("birth *seems* to have been perceived as an emotionally intense, special event, . . . *not frightening or insurmountable*" [emphasis supplied]) are indication enough that as adults we should not subject children to our theories or experiments but only to the fruits of our carefully considered experience. We should have great concern and empathy for the fact that we are no longer children and must take a child's perspective, not our own.

Merton A. Shill, PhD
Wayne State University Medical School
Detroit

The above letter was referred to the author of the article in question, who offers the following reply.

To the Editor: I appreciate Dr. Shill's concern about traumatic experiences for children, but I would like to respond to several of his comments.

First, it concerns me that Dr. Shill would draw an analogy to violence or sexuality in the context of birth and death. Children who are present at births and deaths in nonthreatening, familiar surroundings do need advance preparation and the attention of loving, caring adults during these times. With proper preparation and explanations, children who have been present at births and deaths do not view the experiences as violent or sexualized. If caregivers are not frightened during these moments, they can enable even relatively young children to share the full moment without fear.

Perhaps we would be wise to address the emotions of adults during births or deaths in American culture. Many adults, perhaps including physicians, still experience these events as so traumatic that they might pass this attitude on to their children. Psychosocial research, however, indicates that if parents are not traumatized, children will not be traumatized. Certainly as family physicians, we are perfectly poised to change this emotional

experience for our patients, both adults and children, to prepare them adequately and interpret for them - to provide care for them through these profound growth experiences. We can do so, however, if we ourselves appreciate the power of the moment as positive rather than as traumatic. Maybe we would be well served to begin with ourselves. I recommend contacting a local hospice association, and local childbirth educator's group or nurse-midwifery practice, to further this process.

Second, published data do not support any short- or long-term negative consequences for siblings present at births. Some parents have reported that children present at a sibling's birth and not separated from their parents during this time appear particularly protective or care-taking of the new baby, and some have suggested a sensitive "sibling bonding" time shortly after birth. I would encourage readers to peruse the following books and articles that address this issue in more detail:

1. Anderson S, Simkin P. Birth - through children's eyes. Seattle: Pennypress, 1981.
2. Hathaway M, Hathaway J, Bradley-Robert A. Children at birth. Sherman Oaks: Academy Publications, 1978.
3. Butler D. They saw it all. Mothering Magazine 1997; 85.
4. DelGiudice G. The relationship between sibling jealousy and the presence at a sibling's birth. Birth 1986;13:250–4.
5. MacLaughlin SM, Johnston KB. The preparation of young children for the birth of a sibling. J Nurse Midwifery 1984;29:371–6.
6. Daniels MB. The birth experience for the sibling: description and evaluation of a program. J Nurse Midwifery 1983;28:15–22.
7. Lumley J. Preschool siblings at birth: short-term effects. Birth 1983;10:11–6.
8. Mehl LE, Brendsel C, Peterson GH. Children at birth: effects and implications. J Sex Marital Ther 1977;3:274–9.

Finally I do not believe that I am recommending a more open, inclusive attitude toward birth and death merely because this "worked with my own children," or because I am subjecting them to an experiment. My use of self was designed to illustrate conclusions I have drawn from years of speaking with parents, children, nurse-midwives, childbirth educators, hospice nurses and physicians, social workers, and clinical psychologists who work with children and families. I do not believe the impact of these experiences is uncertain, nor am I tentative in my observations of hundreds of patients, friends, and colleagues during the last 15 years.

Elizabeth Feldman, MD
UI/Ravenswood Family Practice Residency Program
Chicago, Ill