

Baby's Birth Certificate

A Serious Document with a Fun Side

by Katherine Bontrager

When your little one finally makes his or her big arrival, among the responsibilities you'll have is supplying the information required for a birth certificate. Everyone knows it's an important legal document, but what information do you need to properly fill out the certificate? If you haven't decided on a name, can you leave that part blank? And what will your little one ever use a birth certificate for?

Birth Certificate Facts

According to the U.S. government's Web site, "government-issued, certified birth certificates are one of the valid proofs of U.S. citizenship required when applying for a passport in person." Among the information the site lists as needed on the certificate is the seal from the registrar's office (which should be raised, embossed, impressed or multicolored), the registrar's signature and the date the certificate was filed in the office, which must be within one year of the child's birth.

To obtain the birth certificate, new parents need to contact the vital records office in the state where their child was born. This office can answer any specific questions about the process. (And if your child will be born abroad or on a military base abroad, the birth will need to be registered with the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in that country and a Consular Report of a Birth Abroad will need to be issued.)

Admittedly, the government's Web site instructions aren't chock full of details. This may be because each state has its own birth certificate requirements, says Brette Sember, a former attorney and the author of *Your Practical Pregnancy Planner: Everything You Need to Know About the Financial and Legal Aspects of Preparing for Your New Baby* (McGraw-Hill, 2005). Because of this, it's important for parents-to-be to check to see if their state has any special requirements.

"Generally, you complete an application while at the hospital or birthing center, or if it's a home birth, your birth attendant will give you the application," Sember says. "Once it's completed and sent off, then the certificate is mailed to you. Among the information required is the mother's name, though the father's name is not. The mother can leave this blank. The baby's place and time of birth is also required. The baby's name can be left off ('Baby Jones' can be listed instead) until the parents choose a name in most states. You can also hold off on filing your application until you have a name. Birth certificates also list time of birth, weight and length of the baby. And one important detail – the document must be signed by a physician or birth attendant."

Some parents may balk at the necessity for a birth certificate, but it's incredibly important. After all, Sember says, a birth certificate is legal proof of your baby's existence and parentage. "Without it you cannot prove you are the parent (without a DNA test)," she says. "A birth certificate is the first piece of legal ID your baby will have. When you apply for a Social Security number for your child, you must present the birth certificate. He or she will also need it to obtain a driver's license, passport and other documents in the future. The birth certificate is really the basic ID that everything else depends on."

With all that weighing on the endurance of one thin piece of paper, it might pay off to have an extra copy or two. You'll receive one copy automatically in the mail, but additional copies are relatively easy to come by. "If you would like others, you can obtain it from the town or city hall of the municipality in

which your child was born – that's where the records are kept," Sember says. "If you are unsure, you can contact your state vital records department. Usually there's a small fee for certified copies."

Now the Fun Side

Keeping one copy of the birth certificate in a safe place, such as a safety deposit box, is a good idea. But what then, can be done, with any extras you may have ordered? Actually, there are a number of creative ideas that allow you to display your little one's ever-important legal proof of birth in some very fun, innovative ways.

Sember suggests displaying a copy with your little one's teeny, tiny handprint and footprint. Or copies of the certificate can be artfully displayed using pretty papers and other embellishments then framed or placed in scrapbook, says Kathy Peterson, a celebrity lifestyle, design and craft expert, and national TV host of both *Town & Country Crafts with Kathy Peterson* on The Family Net and special guest host of *The Balancing Act* on Lifetime.

"Images of the child and birth certificate can even be photo copied onto special fabrics that can then be sewn into quilts, wall hangings, T-shirts and more," Peterson says. "Or more advanced crafters familiar with Photoshop or less complex digital graphic software can be used to create original artwork combining the certificate and pictures of the infant."

The birth certificate can also be incorporated into your infant's room decor. "You can use a copy and create a shadow box and fill it with the treasured objects that surround the newborn, such as pictures of the baby, picture of the new family, the hospital bracelet and birth announcement," says Sandra Magsamen, author of *Living Artfully: Create the Life You Imagine* (Free Press, 2006).

Magsamen even suggests integrating the birth certificate into one-of-a-kind birth announcements. "The birth certificate could be shrunk in size and photocopied to create a unique birth announcement," she says. "Add a picture of the baby inside, then simply fold, put in envelope and mail to family and friends."

Or another fun idea is to create a time capsule that your child can open when he or she is older, Magsamen says. "In a big glass jar or a beautiful box place bits of history – like the birth certificate copy, letters to the child as they are growing, mementos, photos and pieces of a life well-lived. Give this keepsake to the child when he or she turns 18 or at some significant time in his or her life."