



Have You Thought About Having a Doula at Your Birth?

By Penny Simkin

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As expectant parents you are probably preparing extensively for childbirth and early parenting—attending classes, watching educational videotapes, reading books and articles, learning your options, touring your hospital, practicing relaxation and comfort techniques, preparing a birth plan, and discussing your concerns with your doctor or midwife and other parents.

Such preparation improves the quality of your birth experience in many ways. You understand the birth process, your options for care, ways to cope with pain, and the clinical measures used to maintain safety and labor progress. In short, childbirth preparation takes many of the surprises out of labor and helps you to participate meaningfully in your care.

Yet, the journey through birth is unpredictable and stressful, and even well prepared women or couples, when in the midst of intense labor, often find it difficult to apply their knowledge. It helps to have guidance and reassurance from experts, to help you relate the intense physical sensations and emotions of labor to what you already know intellectually. Your nurse, midwife, or doctor will offer some guidance, but may be limited by their clinical duties and the needs of other laboring women in their care. Some are better than others in giving such support.

To be sure you will get the kind of help you need in labor, consider having a birth doula. A doula is with you continuously through labor. She is trained and experienced in providing emotional support, physical comfort, and non-clinical advice. She usually meets with you before labor and discusses your preferences and concerns. She learns the role you both want the father or partner to play. For example, some partners prefer to be the primary support person—with the doula there as a guide, errand-runner (for beverages, ice chips, hot packs, warm blankets, partner's food), helper (often a woman needs two people helping during contractions), and stand-in (if the partner needs a break). Other partners want to be with the woman they love to share in the joy of the birth of their child, but feel more comfortable leaving the primary support role to the doula.

The doula is a constant—no breaks (unless you are asleep), no shift changes, no clinical responsibilities or other women to care for. And she understands what you are going through. Her knowledge and experience reassure and comfort you, and guide you in breathing techniques, positioning, massage, use of the bath, shower, birth ball, hot and cold packs, and other comfort items.

As one grateful father said, "I heaved a big sigh of relief when she walked in. I hadn't realized how much pressure I had been feeling." A new mother said, "I don't know what we would have done without her."

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Your doula's goals are to learn your preferences regarding the use of pain medication and any fears or concerns you have. In labor she helps you accomplish your wishes and allays your fears, but also helps you make adjustments if unexpected demands or complications arise.

The continuous assistance of a doula throughout labor has been proven in numerous scientific trials to improve both physical and psychological outcomes of the birth. By reducing the mother's emotional stress (which can have a negative impact on labor progress and the baby's well-being), doulas reduce the mother's need for pain relief medications. Most of the studies have reported shorter labors, less need for oxytocin to speed labor, and fewer forceps, vacuum extractor, and cesarean deliveries when doulas are present.

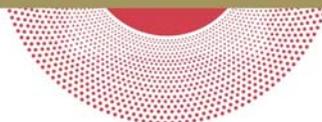
In addition, the research has shown that women's satisfaction with their birth experiences, their postpartum psychological state, success in breastfeeding, and interactions with their newborns are improved when a doula was present during childbirth.

Research on fathers' participation in labor shows that when doulas are present, fathers take fewer breaks away from the mother, remain closer to her and touch her more. The doula seems to relieve the stress and some of the burden on the father, allowing him to comfortably give more support to his loved one.

Doulas are trained by many local, national and international organizations, which you can find by searching the Internet. The organizations can help you find a doula. To help you find a good match for you, ask the questions in the box below (taken from the website of DONA International).

Questions to Ask a Birth Doula

- What training have you had? (If a doula is certified, you might consider checking with the organization.)
- Do you have one or more backup doulas for times when you are not available? May we meet her/them?
- What is your fee, what does it include and what are your refund policies?
- Tell me about your experience as a birth doula.
- What is your philosophy about birth and supporting women and their partners through labor?
- May we meet to discuss our birth plans and the role you will play in supporting me through birth?
- May we call you with questions or concerns before and after the birth?
- When do you try to join women in labor? Do you come to our home or meet us at the place of birth?
- Do you meet with us after the birth to review the labor and answer questions



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Doulas usually share call with another doula, or have a backup doula to cover for those inevitable times when they are unavailable. You should become acquainted with the backup doula as well as your primary doula.

More information and referrals for doulas can be obtained from:

ALACE (Association of Labor Assistants and Childbirth Educators– ALACE.org)

Birthworks – Birthworks.org

DONA International – www.dona.org

ICEA (International Childbirth Education Association) –ICEA.org

Lamaze International – Lamaze.org

Penny Simkin is a physical therapist, childbirth educator, doula, birth counselor, doula trainer, and author of books and articles for parents and professionals. She is a frequent presenter at conferences and workshops for maternity care professionals.