



Partners and Doulas: Key Players on Mother's Labor Support Team
(This is adapted from the Article, "Dads and Doulas" by DONA International)

There was a time when expectant partners were portrayed as anxious, floor-pacing, cigar smoking men who were tolerated in hospital corridors until the long-awaited moment when a nurse or doctor would announce they were the proud father of a daughter or a son. Today's expectant parents are different.

When it comes to pregnancy, birth, and parenting, today's expecting parents want to share the experience as fully as possible. The partner wants to be actively involved; ease the mother's labor pain, welcome their baby at the moment of birth and help care for their newborn at home. A labor doula can help a partner experience this special time with confidence.

The word "doula" which comes from ancient Greek today refers to a woman trained and experienced in childbirth. A doula provides continuous physical, emotional, and informational support to the expectant mother and her partner during labor, delivery and in the immediate postpartum period. The wisdom and emotional support of experienced women at birth is an ancient tradition.

Studies show that when doulas are present at birth, women have shorter labors, fewer medical interventions, fewer cesareans and healthier babies. Recent evidence also suggests that when a doula provides labor support, women are more satisfied with their experience and the mother-infant interaction is enhanced as long as two months after the birth. With doula support, partners tend to stay more involved with mothers rather than pull away in times of stress.

Today, a partner's participation in birth preparation classes or their presence at prenatal visits and in the delivery suite is a familiar occurrence. Yet, we sometimes forget that the expectations of their role as a "labor coach" may be difficult to fulfill. Sometimes it is also culturally inappropriate for an expectant father to be so intimately involved in the process of labor and birth.

The partner is expected among other things to become familiar with the process and language of birth, to understand medical procedures and hospital protocols and advocate for their partner in an environment and culture they are usually unfamiliar with. A doula can provide the information to help parents make appropriate decisions and facilitate communication between the laboring woman, her partner and medical care providers.



At times a partner may not understand a woman's instinctive behavior during childbirth and may react anxiously to what a doula knows to be the normal process of birth. They may witness their partner in pain and understandably become distressed. The doula can be reassuring and skillfully help the mother to cope with labor pain in her unique way. The partner may need to accompany the laboring mother during surgery should a cesarean become necessary. Not all partners can realistically be expected to "coach" at this intense level.

Many partners are eager to be involved during labor and birth. Others, no less loving or committed to their loved one's well being find it difficult to navigate in uncharted waters. With a doula, a partner can share in the birth at a level they feel most comfortable with. The doula's skills and knowledge can help them to feel more relaxed. If the partner wants to provide physical comfort such as back massage, change of positions, and help the mother-to-be to stay focused during contractions, the doula can provide that guidance and make suggestions for what may work best.

Physicians, midwives and nurses are responsible for monitoring labor, assessing the medical condition of the mother and baby, and treating complications when they arise. But childbirth is also an emotional and spiritual experience with long-term impact on a woman's personal well being. A doula is constantly aware that the mother and her partner will remember this experience throughout their lives. By "mothering the mother" during childbirth the doula supports the parents in having a positive and memorable birth experience.

The benefits of doula care have been recognized worldwide. The Medical Leadership Council of Washington, D.C, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada and the World Health Organization are among the many healthcare organizations that value the benefits that doulas provide to women in labor.

The partner's presence and loving support in childbirth is comforting and reassuring. The love they share with the mother and child, the need to nurture and protect their family are priceless gifts that only they can provide. With her partner and a doula at birth a mother can have the best of both worlds: her partner's loving care and attention and the doula's expertise and guidance in childbirth.