

Dads, Partners and Doulas

A DONA International Birth Doula Topic Sheet

Dads, Partners and Doulas: Key Players on Mother's Labor Support Team

There was a time when expectant fathers 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 fathers, loved ones and families are different.

When it comes to pregnancy, birth and parenting, today's birth partner, be it the father or other loved one, may want to share everything with the expectant mother. The partner may want 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 doula can help the partner experience this special time with confidence.

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 rather than pull away in times of stress.

Today, a partner's participation in birth preparation classes or presence at prenatal visits and in the birthing room is a familiar occurrence. Yet, we sometimes forget that the expectations of the partner's 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 to advocate for the birthing mother in an unfamiliar environment and culture. A doula can provide the information to help parents make appropriate decisions and facilitate communication between the birthing woman, her partner and medical care providers.

At times, the partner may not understand a woman's instinctive behavior during birth and may react anxiously to what a doula knows to be the normal process of birth. The partner may witness the birthing mother 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 be

asked to accompany the mother during surgery should a cesarean become necessary. Not all partners can realistically be expected to fully support the mother at this intense level.

Many partners are eager to be involved during labor and birth. Others, no less loving or committed to the mother's well-being, find it difficult to navigate in uncharted waters. With a doula, the partner can share in the birth at a level that feels most comfortable. The doula's skills and knowledge can help the partner to feel more relaxed. If the partner wants to offer physical comfort, such as a back massage or change of positions, and help the mother 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 if they arise; but birth 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 birth, the doula supports the parents in having a positive and memorable birth experience.

The benefits of doula care have been recognized worldwide. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 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 birth is comforting and reassuring. The love shared with the mother and their child and the desire to nurture and protect their family are priceless gifts that only the partner 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 birth.