

The Value & Purpose of Labor Support

The purpose of labor support is to promote the mental and physical health of mother, baby and family by providing continuous emotional and physical support. In times of uncertainty and doubt, the doula also assists in gathering the information necessary for the woman and her partner to make informed decisions during labor and delivery. The value of labor support is manifested in the improvement of some obstetric outcomes, enhanced early mother-infant relations and breastfeeding, improved satisfaction with birth experiences and improved self-esteem for mother and partner.

Physical Support-

The doula works closely with both the laboring woman and her birth partner to make sure her physical needs are met. The doula offers help and advice on comfort measures including breathing techniques, relaxation, visualization, movement and position changes. As the woman progresses through labor, the doula and birth partner will begin using an increased amount of hands on support to help her get through each contraction and to help her fully relax between the contractions. Examples of physical support during a contraction would be the employment of pressure on the Merkel's discs or the double hip squeeze. Between contractions the doula may lightly touch the woman's brow and jaw to remind her to relax and take a deep cleansing breath. The doula also makes sure that the laboring woman and her birth partner both stay hydrated and nourished to maintain the efforts required for the physically and emotionally demanding work of labor and delivery.

Emotional Support-

Childbirth is a highly emotional event with long lasting effects on the mental health of the woman and secondarily on her partner and the relationship she has with her partner. The emotional support and the presentation of that support to the laboring couple may be the single most important aspect of the care provided by a doula. The doula must provide continuous consistent support in the form of reassurance and encouragement presented with a positive and respectful attitude. Providing emotional support is an intuitive task that may vary widely from birth to birth, the doula needs to be able to identify when the support the laboring woman is receiving is working and when it is ineffective. The doula then gently encourages the good support and redirects the ineffective support coming from the members of the laboring woman's support team (even if it is the doula herself). The doula should strive to role-model a positive atmosphere and behavior for the laboring woman to carry forward into motherhood.

Information Gathering-

The third aspect of doula care is to aid the couple in gathering information about childbirth, interventions, complications, and procedures. The doula begins this task during the pre-natal interview by addressing any concerns the mother or her partner may have about the labor and delivery process. The doula then continues to educate the couple or help them get the factual information they need for the duration of her contact with them. Getting the couple the information they need to make decisions based more on fact and less on emotion and opinion empowers them during their journey into parenthood and beyond.

Obstetric Outcomes-

Meta-analysis of continuous labor support trials conducted in North America, Europe, and Africa, compared to women receiving usual care, shows that women cared for by a birth doula are*:

- 26% less likely to give birth by cesarean section
- 41% less likely to give birth with a vacuum extractor or forceps
- 28% less likely to use any analgesia or anesthesia
- 33% less likely to be dissatisfied or negatively rate their birth experience

The benefits of doula care in improved obstetric outcomes and reduced intervention rates is most notable when the woman has no loved ones present, intervention rates were routinely high, and the doulas are not health care professionals.

Enhanced Early Infant-Mother Relations and Breastfeeding-

Both early infant-mother relations and breastfeeding are enhanced when the mother receives continuous care during labor and delivery. It is thought that the mother role models the care she received during labor and delivery onto her child.

Improved Self-Esteem & Satisfaction with the Birth Experience-

The new mother and her partner also experience improved self-esteem and greater satisfaction in the birth experience when a doula provides continuous support to the laboring couple. The doula does not replace the partner, but instead meshes seamlessly to enhance the support the partner provides and add her support to the laboring woman. The doula creates and/or maintains a positive atmosphere and positive birth experience for the couple.

Doulas Do Not-

Having discussed the role and benefits of a doula it is important to establish what the doula does not do. Doulas do not perform clinical tasks, diagnose medical conditions, give medical advice, or offer second medical opinions. The doula does

not project her own values, ideals, or goals on the laboring woman and never makes a decision for the woman and her partner.

In Conclusion-

Providing continuous, consistent physical and emotional support in conjunction with assisting the couple in gathering information is the role of the birth doula. The value of this support is manifested in improved obstetric outcomes and reduced intervention rates. The value of the doula is also seen post-partum in the enhanced breastfeeding and early infant-mother relations. Improved self-esteem and satisfaction with the birth experience for the couple occurs when labor and delivery is attended by a doula. The conclusion can be drawn that a positive and empowering birth experience can create a stronger family unit which could lead to a stronger and healthier society.

References-

- The Birth Doula's Contribution to Modern Maternity Care
A DONA International Position Paper
- Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Newborn; Simkin, Whalley, Keppler;2001