

## HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT HAVING A DOULA AT YOUR BIRTH?

by Penny Simkin, PT, CD(DONA)

As expectant parents, you are probably preparing extensively for childbirth and early parenting—attending classes, watching videos, reading books and articles, touring your hospital, practicing relaxation and comfort techniques, preparing a birth plan and discussing your hopes and 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 and know about your options for care, ways to cope with pain and the clinical measures commonly used to maintain safety and labor progress. In short, childbirth preparation takes many of the surprises out of labor and helps you to meaningfully participate in your care.

Yet the journey through birth is unpredictable and stressful. Even well-prepared women or couples often find it difficult to apply their knowledge in the midst of intense labor. It helps to have guidance and reassurance from experts so you can 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. And 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 to discuss 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



Becky with Jon and doula © Sarah Tew

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 and 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.”

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.

## HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... (CONT'D)

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 alleviating 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 studies have also reported shorter labors, less need for oxytocin to speed labor and fewer deliveries by forceps, vacuum extractor and cesarean when doulas are present.



Rebecca with Lila © Nicole Heidbreder

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 all improved when a doula is present during childbirth. Research also shows that when doulas are in attendance, 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.

Whether you plan to birth at a hospital or at home, with medication or without, a doula can make a positive difference at your birth. If you are interested in learning more about doula care see page 37 for listings of organizations that train and support doulas.

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.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK A DOULA

The following questions will help you decide if a particular doula is right for you.

- What training have you had?
- Are you certified? By what organization? What were the requirements for your certification?
- Tell us about your experience with birth, personally and as a doula.
- What is your philosophy about childbirth and labor support?
- May we meet to discuss our birth plans and the role you will play in supporting us through childbirth?
- 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 hospital?
- Do you meet with us after the birth to review the labor and answer questions?
- Do you work with one or more backup doulas to cover (for times when you are not available)? May we meet them?
- What is your fee?

When you meet the doula (and it is a good idea for both you and your partner to meet her), pay particular attention to your personal perceptions of the doula. Is she warm, kind, and enthusiastic? Is she knowledgeable? Does she communicate well? Is she a good listener? Is she comfortable with your choices? Do you feel comfortable with her? You may want to interview more than one doula or, if you like the first doula and backup you meet, you may not need to look any further.

(Source: Doulas of North America, [www.dona.org](http://www.dona.org))