

The history and purpose behind providing labor support

Before the early 1900s, babies in the U.S. were born mainly at home. Laboring women were surrounded by family and knowledgeable women such as mothers, grandmothers, neighbors, friends, and midwives. Later, when birth moved mainly to hospitals, most women lost a highly valuable support system and became isolated during childbirth. Although nurses and doctors were present to monitor a woman's physical health, the emotional level of support that women so desperately needed during childbirth was not something a hospital could be expected to provide.

In the 1960s, hospitals began allowing fathers into the delivery room. While this was an obvious step in the right direction, these new fathers were not equipped to provide all the support necessary to a laboring woman. While they could provide more emotional support than hospital staff, and while they could be excellent coaches, advisors, and decision-makers, they were generally not familiar with the birth experience or the medical procedures surrounding it. Some fathers even felt so distressed about the pain of their partner that they could not provide the constant, careful support a woman needs.

The benefits of labor support to the mother and family

Women in labor need to be encouraged, comforted, reassured, supported and respected during childbirth more so than at any other time. Experienced, continuous support from a knowledgeable woman can make a laboring woman feel safe and secure in the process of birth, which allows a woman's body to labor more effectively. When continuous labor support by women experienced with birth was introduced in the hospital setting, noticeable changes occurred. Over the course of the last two decades, many studies have shown a drastic difference between women who have usual hospital care and women who give birth with continuous labor support.

In a 2007 review¹ of 16 recent studies involving more than 13,000 women from 11 countries, researchers found that women who received continuous labor support were more likely to give birth without cesarean, vacuum, or forceps; were less likely to use pain medications; were more likely to be satisfied with the birth experience; and had slightly shorter labors. Other studies show that mothers have enhanced bonding with their infants, have more successful breastfeeding, have decreased postpartum depression, and have a higher overall satisfaction with their birth, infant, and partner after the baby is born.

The doula's responsibilities

Doulas are professionally trained birth companions who provide continuous support to laboring women. They are the modern manifestation of the women prior to the 1900s who surrounded birthing mothers with emotional support and encouragement. The goal of a doula is, to the best of her ability, to help a woman have a safe and satisfying childbirth as the woman defines it. A doula's responsibility begins with *servicing* women during pregnancy, labor and birth. They work to understand a woman's needs and desires, they remain on call for potential weeks surrounding a mother's due date, they remain with a woman for the duration of labor and delivery, they help mothers and their families transition to a new life, and they check in with families postpartum to offer additional assistance that might be needed.

Doulas today are trained to provide emotional, physical, informational, and partner support. They reassure and encourage with their continuous presence; they suggest comfort measures and positions; they use massage; and they coach women through breathing techniques

and relaxation exercises. Doulas have knowledge of labor progression, information about medical interventions and procedures, and can offer non-medical advice. Doulas also support a woman's partner by giving reassurance and encouragement, by modeling effective techniques, and by guiding the partner in comforting the woman in labor. Doulas do not provide medical care, give medical advice, or perform medical tasks. They do not make decisions for women, but they do provide parents with the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions about their care. A doula's responsibility is to serve and support women and their families in a way that creates positive memories around the birth experience.

¹Hodnett, et al (2007). "Continuous support for women during childbirth (Review)" *The Cochrane Library* 2007, Issue 3.