



Labor Support

What do Support People Do During Labor and Birth?

Throughout labor and birth:

- Provide a continuous presence: reassuring, supporting, encouraging, normalizing, and loving. Sometimes this is very active, giving ideas, and taking actions. Sometimes all a mother needs is the Presence of someone who cares about her, who is calm, helps her feel safe, and is confident of her ability to give birth in the way she wants to.
- Give reminders to take care of basic self-care needs: eat, drink, rest, go to the bathroom at least once an hour. (Partners, remember to do these things for yourself too!!)
- Be sensitive to mom's emotional needs, and try to match activities and behavior to mom's mood.

Early labor:

- Keep mom calm, relaxed, distracted. Encourage mom to alternate rest and relaxation with activities to promote labor progress. Reassure her that everything is fine.

Active Labor and Birth

- At the hospital: serve as mom and baby's advocate, or help mom advocate for herself. Ask questions to make sure you have all the information you need to make decisions, and also ask questions of you to clarify that you understand the risks and benefits involved, and clarify any places where your choices may differ from the birth plan you developed in advance.
- Remind mom about breathing techniques, remind her to change positions often, suggest different positions, massage, distractions such as reading and music. Reassure and encourage. It's important to offer specific suggestions, and options from which she can choose.
- Birth: Help with positions, help the caregiver guide pushing efforts, remind mom to breathe.

What should Support People NOT do during Labor and Birth?

- Don't criticize and complain. The mother needs support in laboring her own way, and suggestions for things to try. She doesn't need to be told that she is doing things wrong. During labor, women are very receptive to the things that are said to them. If you say to a laboring mom "You look exhausted," then she will feel even more exhausted! Instead, the support person should notice for himself what mom's state is, and try to adapt suggestions to that: maybe it's time to try a resting position, or maybe it's time for a little extra emotional support.
- Supporters should try not to ask open questions like: What would you like to try next? Especially late in labor, you may not be able to think up any ideas, and will only find the questions stressful. It's better if they can say: "Here's three suggestions: which one of these things sounds best to you?"
- Supporters should not try to encourage mom to do things that don't fit in with her hopes for the birth. The most common example of this is mothers-to-be who were hoping for a non-medicated birth, but then have a support person who finds it difficult to see them in pain, so makes comments like "This is too

- much, honey, why don't we find out about pain medication?" Or "How much longer until you can have pain medication?"
- Support people should try to keep their own issues out of the way, and focus on the birthing mother. During labor is not a good time for a husband to vent at his mother-in-law about how he "hates it when she does that!"

At the most basic level, laboring moms need to feel respected, loved, nurtured, and reassured. Breathing techniques, massage, and all sorts of other comfort techniques for labor help with pain, but this is the "big picture" of what mom needs to have a positive birth experience.

Who provides support during labor and birth?

Doctor/Midwife: Physicians are typically only in attendance at the delivery itself, and for about one hour after the baby is born. Prior to that, they are available for phone consultation. They may come in briefly a few times during labor to check on you, answer questions, or provide recommendations about your care.

In one study, 70% of moms reported their baby was delivered by the same caregiver who had provided most of their prenatal care. However, 10% said it was someone she had only met briefly prior to the delivery, and 19% said they had not met their primary birth attendant before the delivery.

Midwives may remain with you through a much larger portion of your labor, and are more likely to offer the kinds of supportive care described in this article.

Nurses: Hospital staff can meet your concrete needs and attend to the safety and well-being of your baby. Many nurses are excellent at providing hands-on labor support and offering emotional support and encouragement. However, they have other duties and responsibilities, which may prevent them from attending you continuously through labor. Also, usually your nurse is a stranger to you, and you may have multiple nurses attending you, depending on the length of your labor.

Husband / Partner: If you and your partner are both comfortable with the idea of him attending your labor and birth, s/he can be the most valuable source of emotional support and comfort. Loving partners are one of the strongest tranquilizers and most effective pain relievers available. Their nurturing presence may also encourage the flow of oxytocin, a hormone which helps labor to progress more quickly. For many fathers, the involvement in birth gives them a chance to nurture and care for their partner like never before, which is great practice for nurturing their new baby.

- If a partner is worried about his ability to be helpful during birth (e.g. worrying about fainting): Education about what to expect can be very helpful, especially attending childbirth ed classes and watching videos of births. Talking with friends who've attended a loved one's birth can also be helpful. Some couples may also want to have an additional support person (see below) to take some of the burden of responsibility off his shoulders, reduce anxiety, and make him more available to support mom.
 - After the birth, partners may worry that they were not useful. Nurturing and supporting you can feel passive, and they may feel like they didn't do enough. Learning about birth ahead of time may help them realize how vital relaxation and reassurance can be to labor progress and pain relief.
 - Some fathers feel overwhelmed by their laboring partner's discomfort and the feelings of helplessness it causes. Again, knowing ahead of time what to expect, and how to help is useful. Also, birth education

may help to normalize that the pain of labor is productive, and isn't something to be fought against, just something to be soothed with loving attention.

- If you're worried about your partner's ability to be helpful during birth: Especially if there are problems in your relationship, you might be nervous about your partner's presence at your birth: You can involve additional support people, if that would be helpful. You may want to seriously consider seeking out counseling to resolve some of your issues before the baby's birth, as the stresses of parenting can strain even the healthiest relationship.

Friends and Family Members

- Benefits: Familiar faces can be comforting, helping you to stay calm and relaxed. They can provide support for you *and* your partner. The more educated and/or experienced they are with labor and birth, the more effectively they can support you with concrete ideas for comfort and for helping labor to progress.
- Disadvantages: Sometimes friends and family members have a difficult time seeing a loved one in pain, and rather than being able to reassure you that you're doing well, they may convey their anxiety to you in messages like "wouldn't it be better to use pain meds?" The more you can talk to them in advance about your desires for your labor and birth, the more aware they will be of what would be helpful for them to do, and what would not be helpful.

Doula: A Doula (a.k.a. monitrice, a.k.a. labor support professional) is a professionally trained labor support companion. They have completed education about the normal labor and birth process, medical interventions, techniques to minimize pain and aid labor progress, and emotional needs during labor. They provide information, advocacy, emotional support, physical comfort, and suggestions to the laboring woman and her partner.

Doulas do not replace the partner; instead, they help the partner to be as supportive as possible by reducing his anxiety, giving ideas for how he could be more supportive, and giving positive feedback to him for the support he is giving. A Doula provides a continuous presence throughout labor. Typically, the mother informs the doula when labor begins, and then they stay in contact, and the doula will join the laboring mom at whatever point in labor the mother and her partner decide that extra support is needed, and then the doula stays throughout the labor until one or two hours after the baby is born.

The fee for a doula's services varies depending on her skills and experience, and the degree to which she relies on her Doula work to support herself versus the degree to which it simply supplements other income. A typical fee would be \$300-550, which includes a prenatal visit, labor support, and postpartum follow-up. Sliding scale fees are often available for low-income mothers. For more info: www.dona.org , [Pacific Association for Labor Support \(PALS\)](http://Pacific Association for Labor Support (PALS) and www.doulaworld.com) and www.doulaworld.com

Concerns you may have: Some pregnant women are nervous about having people at their birth for various reasons. Here's some responses, based on my conversations with women who have given birth, and friends and family who were in attendance.

- Concern: Modesty – "I'm not comfortable with my friends seeing me naked." During labor, most mothers forget about this concern: they are so focused on the labor and birth that modesty seems less important to them. Support

- people who are truly being supportive will also be focused on the birth process, and generally don't put much thought into your clothing, or lack thereof, or exactly what your body looks like.
- Concern: Body Image – “Will my friend like me less if she realizes I’m fat?”
Self Image – “What if I’m out of control, or a wimp... will he think less of me?” Birth is an intense and intimate experience. Your friends and family will see more of you (in many senses) than they see in normal interaction. They will see some of your weaknesses, but they also see your strengths. Sharing a life-changing experience will change your relationship... but typically, it’s a change for the better: a deeper, stronger, richer relationship.
 - Concern: Privacy – “I want this to be an intimate experience, with just my partner and me.” If you are giving birth in a hospital, the experience will not be private, as staff may come in and out of the room on a regular basis. Having a trusted and supportive friend there with you can actually help serve as a buffer between the birthing couple and the support staff, sometimes in the abstract sense of being a familiar face in a room full of strangers. Sometimes, if the couple needs some time alone, the extra support person can stand outside the hospital room, and let others know that.
 - Concern: Politeness / Etiquette – “I’m afraid I’ll say something offensive.” Sometimes during labor, social inhibitions slip about what is “acceptable” to say out loud, and what is not. If you are concerned about this with a particular support person, just apologize in advance: “If I say something offensive during labor, I apologize.... But it’s an intense experience, and I’m not sure how it will be until we get there.”
 - Concern: Non-Helpful Helpers – “What if he flips out, and I end up feeling like I need to take care of him?”
 - Prior to the birth, if friends or family ask to attend the birth that you do not think would be helpful to you, it is O.K. to tell them they can’t come. Try to think of other things they *can* do to be helpful.
 - Prior to the birth, let support people know what you think will be helpful to you during labor. Also, let them know that you are not certain what your needs will be, and that there is a chance you will ask them to leave. Reassure them that this won’t be out of anger, but simply out of trying to figure out what your needs are during this unique experience.
 - During the birth, if someone is doing things that bother you, or if you feel like you can’t focus on the birth because you need to take care of this other person, then you can first ask them to change what they are doing, and if that doesn’t help, then you may ask them to leave. If you don’t feel comfortable asking your friend or family member to leave, quietly ask a nurse or caregiver for help: they will find a gentle way to send them away.

For more information on labor support, read [Mothering the Mother](#) by Klaus and Kennell, or [The Birth Partner](#) by Penny Simkin.

For more about women’s experiences with labor supporters, see www.maternitywise.org/listeningtomothers/index.html

For more information on pregnancy and baby care:
See our books: *Pregnancy, Childbirth & the Newborn* or *The Simple Guide to Having a Baby*.
Take a childbirth preparation class at Great Starts, or in your local community.

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For parenting tips, information for families, or to talk to someone about parenting:

In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

Outside of WA: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at www.circleofparents.org