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## The Value of Doula Support

If there is one thing pertaining to birth that I hear very often, it is the need to hire a Doula for support. I have heard Midwives tell their clients to hire a Doula. I have heard parents tell expectant parents to hire a Doula. I have even heard Doulas mentioned on the local news. However, if there is one thing I hear more than the need for a Doula, it is this question which follows the advice to hire one, “What is a Doula?”

The word ‘doula’ derives from an ancient Greek word meaning “a woman who serves.”<sup>1</sup> This definition continued its accuracy through the years as women would birth at home with their female friend by their side. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black Doulas supported Moms, White and Black, typically in the southern states while they birthed at home due to segregation and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Today, there are Doulas who are Male as well as those who are Female. Therefore, the original definition does not fit as well as it used to although the service is the same. This is why the typical definition of “birth coach,” is not good enough as it does not tell the whole story. Doulas are non-clinicians that provide support for laboring mothers whether in a hospital, birth center or at home. Whatever definition is chosen, we must remember that Doulas provide support in five main areas: Emotional Support, Physical Support, Informational Support, Partner Reinforcement, and Self Advocacy.<sup>3</sup>

What is it about a Doula that leaves so many people recommending them? Simply put, they are incredible helpers. One mom writes, “I realized, when in a ton of pain and totally

overwhelmed with the act of giving birth, I could use a helper.”<sup>4</sup> Doulas can help with everything from guiding conversations between moms and their care providers to educating moms on early labor coping techniques. They also can help moms avoid unnecessary interventions, feel more comfortable during labor, and breastfeed with greater confidence.<sup>5</sup> Doulas do their best work when they support the birthing person in their right to make decisions about their own body and their own baby.<sup>6</sup>

Scientific evidence is not plentiful on the topic of Doulas, but it does exist, and it does support the idea of hiring one. In 2017, an updated Cochrane review<sup>7</sup> was published on the use of continuous support for women during birth. “Overall, people who received continuous support were more likely to have spontaneous vaginal births and less likely to have any pain medication, epidurals, negative feelings about childbirth, vacuum or forceps-assisted births, and Cesareans. In addition, their labors were shorter by about 40 minutes and their babies were less likely to have low Apgar scores at birth.”<sup>8</sup> The Cochrane review looked at a wide variety of support people and not just Doulas. However, when researching the effects of Doula support alone, researchers found a thirty-nine percent decrease in the risk of a Cesarean and a fifteen percent increase in the likelihood of a spontaneous vaginal birth.<sup>9</sup> Another study from 1991 implies that Doulas are a form of pain relief.<sup>10</sup> This idea was further confirmed in a 2017 study that showed a significance decrease in anxiety and pain scored when a mom had a doula with them.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note the impact of doulas for women of color. A 2017 study showed that women of color experience high rates of poor birth outcomes and doula care improves many perinatal outcomes.<sup>12</sup> According to an article from Evidence Based Birth, “Although continuous support can also be offered by birth partners, midwives, nurses, or even some physicians, research has shown that with some outcomes, doulas have a stronger effect than other types of support

persons. As such, doulas should be viewed by both parents and providers as a valuable, evidence-based member of the birth care team.”<sup>13</sup>

My love of being a doula is rooted in my experience at the birth of my first child. My wife and I were not expecting our little one at thirty-eight weeks because we had been told that first-time moms tend to go to forty-weeks. We had participated in several weeks of childbirth classes and felt really prepared until her water broke without any prior pain or discomfort. I was thrown into supporting her with gentleness while feeling a lot of anxiety on the inside. I held her hands, I kept her hair out of her face, I squeezed her hips and cried with her as our little girl was born. Months later, my wife announced to me that I made a big difference in her experience and I have never forgotten that. In fact, I intentionally think on that day to enhance my experience as a doula. Being a doula is the most rewarding thing I have ever done.

Doulas are irreplaceable. I said it. You cannot replace a doula because their role is so significant and unique. Not only that, but they are needed. A quick internet search will prove how many moms wish they had hired a doula after having chosen, for many reasons, to do without one. Doulas are for moms who need support, and every mom needs that. The value of doula support is dependable on the value of birthing moms. If we value moms, we will do so by providing support for them; not just any support but evidence-based support that covers their emotions, their bodies, their partners, and their self-advocacy.

## **Citations**

- 1 <https://www.npr.org/sections/babyproject/2011/07/14/137827923>
- 2 <https://doulasofcolorboston.wordpress.com/page/>
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- 4 <https://intentionalbygrace.com/why-we-chose-a-doula/>
- 5 Hailes, N., Spivak, A., & Reimer, L. (2020). *Why Did No One Tell Me This?: The Doulas' (Honest) Guide for Expectant Parents* (Illustrated ed.). Running Press Adult.
- 6 <https://evidencebasedbirth.com/the-evidence-for-doulas/>
- 7 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28681500/>
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