

Role of the Postpartum Doula



The word “doula” comes from the Greek word “doulos” which means bond-servant or slave. While doulas do serve families they are far from bond-servants. In 1973 an American medical anthropologist Dana Raphael first used the term in the context of breastfeeding support for new mothers. Today the word is now associated with a professional, trained to support women and their families through pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period.

Throughout history women were traditionally surrounded by other women as they began their journey into parenthood. Large families and close community meant that most women had seen or supported other laboring women and new mothers before it was their turn to enter motherhood. This meant they had adequate support as well as knowledge and experience to labor and parent confidently. While we still see this in many traditional cultures and a few modern cultures that are understanding of the importance of birth and the postpartum period, most western women do not witness a birth or early parenting until it is time for their own experience. Due to this shift, the support of doulas during childbirth and the postpartum period has become an important part of western maternity care.

Short and sweet, the role of the postpartum doula is to “mother” the new mother. The postpartum doula looks for ways to help the new mother be more relaxed and to get the sleep she needs. Postpartum doulas are non-medical and help to make life easier for the new parents in any way they can making sure she is eating healthfully and fully enjoying her time with her new baby. As a trained postpartum doula you will be equipped to provide families with evidenced based information, non-judgmental support, and help facilitate bonding.

As a professional doula, it is important to provide support compatible with our Professional Standards of Practice and adherence to HIPPA confidentiality to ensure high-quality support. The only exception is if abuse or neglect is suspected. It is then the doula's responsibility to report to the state any suspicions of abuse or neglect, physical or emotional to their state child protection services. Check for the hotline numbers in your state. These standards define the role of a postpartum doula and what she does and doesn't do.

What a doula does

A new mother often finds herself being given advice from other family members and friends, all believing they know the right way to do things. In addition, the mother may be reading conflicting opinions in books, magazines, or on TV shows. In the end, she may resort to what she knows best – the way she was raised herself. The postpartum doula can encourage the mother to trust her own instincts, following the leads from her heart. Encourage the mother to stay in the present moment and not worry about the past or future. The doula's job is to help increase the mother's confidence in her own abilities to parent her baby with constant reassurance and praise. She also praises the mother and father for the work they did to bring a baby into the world.

New parents may have doubts about their ability to care for their babies. Some who have other children may wonder if they will love their new baby as much as their other children. Reassure them that love is so full and effulgent that it can never be depleted. Love keeps growing and growing. Just as her body knew how to grow and birth her baby, so she can trust that she can take care of her baby. A postpartum doula offers encouraging words to instill confidence. In this way women can feel respected, nurtured, and cared for themselves after giving birth to a child.

A professional doula is expected to have evidenced-based knowledge regarding pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period and to provide physical and emotional support. She provides education in infant care, including bathing the baby, umbilical cord care, and diapering, and lactation, including breast care and positioning. She may run errands and shop as requested, or help out with household chores such as putting a load into the washing machine, cleaning up toys, and making beds. She may also be asked to take some photos. She may even help out accompanying the mother with her other children to a doctor's visit, or watch the other children at home while the mother goes to the appointment.

The postpartum doula may help prepare light nutritious meals, organize the nursery, and care for older children so the new mother can be with her baby or take a shower. The new mother may have a two year old who is very attached to her and has his own needs, especially if she has been away a couple days at the hospital. It is helpful for the postpartum doula to include other older children in small chores for their family, always reminding all the children that they are loved by their parents.

The postpartum doula may also teach infant massage. The power of touch cannot be underestimated. The mother and baby have a deep connection. For a breastfeeding mother, the baby's hands on her breast increase the production of oxytocin in her brain that helps bring in the

mothering hormone, prolactin, which brings in the milk let-down reflex. This increase in oxytocin helps the mother to feel calm and relaxed which helps more milk to be produced. In turn, the mother may massage her baby's skin, especially in his quiet alert state when he can look into her eyes and feel her hand gliding over his body stimulating more oxytocin in him as well. It is important to only massage him when he is in a receptive state. The mother can follow her instincts with basic long gliding strokes, circling strokes both wide and smaller, feathering strokes using just the fingertips, and deeper strokes such as kneading and wringing on the arms and legs. The doula should remember that the mother may also wish to be massaged especially on the shoulders, hands, and feet. Deep pressure into the soles of the feet works well especially for women who have experienced abuse.

Although a doula is a nonmedical provider, she may recognize potential problems such as jaundice, postpartum depression and breastfeeding problems and suggest appropriate referrals. In general, she helps to minimize stress in the family as they all accommodate to a new baby in their lives.

New mothers need to remember to drink plenty of fluids especially if they are breastfeeding. The postpartum doula provides nutritious snacks and drinks for the mother to help prevent exhaustion. She asks if the mother has any special dietary needs such as vegetarian or vegan preferences, lactose intolerance or allergies such as to peanuts. Breastfeeding mothers must never diet even if they are overweight from the pregnancy. The postpartum doula always cleans up after herself.

Each day, the postpartum doula can ask, "What can I do for you today? What do you need?" She reminds the mother she is there to help her. The mother may breathe a sigh of relief that helps her feel happy and supported, greatly impacting her experience in the postpartum days.

Things Not Typically Done by Doulas

- A doula should not transport her client in the doula's car. Rather, use the client's car for that purpose.
- A doula does not give any medical care or give medical advice. Instead she refers the mother to her pediatrician or family doctor.
- The doula does not relate any of her client's personal family information with her doula friends or other acquaintances
- The doula does not recommend high doses of medicines or provide aroma therapy with essential oils unless she is certified in these areas and the mother has requested her services.
- A doula may do very light cleaning such as picking up toys, but does not typically do housecleaning such as vacuuming, dusting, mopping, etc.
- She does not do several days worth of the entire family's laundry
- Cleaning siblings rooms, toy room, etc
- Deep cleaning a kitchen
- Gathering all of the wastebaskets and trashcans in the home

You can use your own personal judgment and comfort regarding household organization but it is important to emphasize your role of caring for the mother. There are no hard rules regarding what services you can provide, but use discernment. For example, while we do not typically mop, if you or a sibling spill something, choosing to mop is a way of providing mother care. While we do not typically vacuum if the mother is feeling stressed about the living room rug, taking a moment to vacuum it is a way to care for her.

Standards of Practice

Scope

Doulas are non-medical support professionals. Our scope of practice means we do not treat, diagnose or prescribe anything. We do not perform any clinical tasks.

Understanding

We are understanding and respectful of each family's unique circumstances and therefore we do not pass judgment on their decisions. We practice patience, good listening, and understand the magnitude of adjustment necessary when a new baby joins a family.

Professional

We will use professional behavior in all of our interactions with clients. We will be reliable, we will provide evidenced based information and we will be respectful of our clients' homes.

Praise

Having a new baby comes with many challenges. As postpartum doula our role is to build a family's confidence in their ability to care for their newest addition. We will be kind, encouraging and optimistic with parents, siblings and other family members.

Others

While caring for mom is our primary role, providing support to their partner and other family members is important for facilitating a healthy adjustment with a new addition.

Refer

As postpartum professionals we have knowledge regarding physical and emotional postpartum healing, and newborn development but this knowledge is for educating and supporting, not diagnosing or treating. We are to refer parents to the proper professionals when they have questions and concerns regarding medical or psychological concerns. We have knowledge regarding establishing breastfeeding but we are to refer to lactation professionals when there are concerns outside of typical latching. This includes but is not limited to weight concerns and persistent painful latch.

Trust

It is important that our clients feel safe to open up, express concerns, and simply be comfortable in their interactions with us. It is imperative that we practice confidentiality regarding our clients. While doulas are not bound by HIPPA, it is an excellent guideline for practicing confidentiality.

Application and Understanding

1. During the interview your client expressed interest in breastfeeding. You arrive for your first visit when the mom is six days postpartum. You learn the mother had unexpected delivery complications that resulted in an extended hospital stay and long hours of separation from her newborn. As a result mom is supplementing and is now considering fully weaning. Keeping in mind our standards of practice, S.U.P.P.O.R.T., how would you support this family?
2. You are changing a three week old baby's diaper and notice a pretty severe diaper rash. Keeping in mind S.U.P.P.O.R.T. how would you handle this?
3. John and Sally have hired you to help them with breastfeeding questions and newborn care following the birth of their new baby. You arrive on the morning of the third day after birth and find Sally and the baby crying and John pacing nervously across the room. They were up all night with a crying baby despite the fact that Sally had nursed her every three hours for fifteen minutes on both sides as the nurses had instructed. Keeping in mind our Standards of Practice, S.U.P.P.O.R.T, how would you support this family?