

Arriving Home: Family and Partner Support



Scenario

Amy and Josh have two children, their six day old newborn and a three year old son. Amy's parents are visiting from out of town for a week to assist. Josh is taking care of their three year old and Amy is trying to rest.

Amy says she misses time with her older son and is worried about him acting out. Josh is fielding parenting advice from the in-laws. When you arrive Amy and Josh both say they are very tired; their son is full of energy. The in-laws are away for the day to give the parents some time alone to bond. Amy appreciates their willingness to help but doesn't know how they can help her get more rest.

How would you support this family? (In Application and Understanding section)

Postpartum doula care is unique in that we support families as a whole; we do not focus on just infant care. Our goal is to support mothers, but part of supporting mothers is family support and care. While we are not babysitters, we have the skills to assist with older siblings with the understanding that a new infant impacts every family member. We are not housekeepers, but we can help in household organization to facilitate rest and stress relief for the mother. We are not relationship counselors, but we can support, educate, and help partners in a way that helps couples focus on and nurture their relationship during a time of many changes.

Healing from a birth can take from six weeks to six months and sex may feel uncomfortable during that time, especially if there has been an episiotomy or a cesarean. A new mother may not be as interested

in sex, feeling overstimulated with the skin-to-skin contact with her baby. The diminished sex drive may be part of the hormonal shifting in her body as she transitions to the non-pregnant state. She may also have leaking breasts. It may take time for some partners to reconcile the changing role of their wives from lover to mother. Most mothers are also demanding more equal sharing of the work in the home, especially if there are other children.

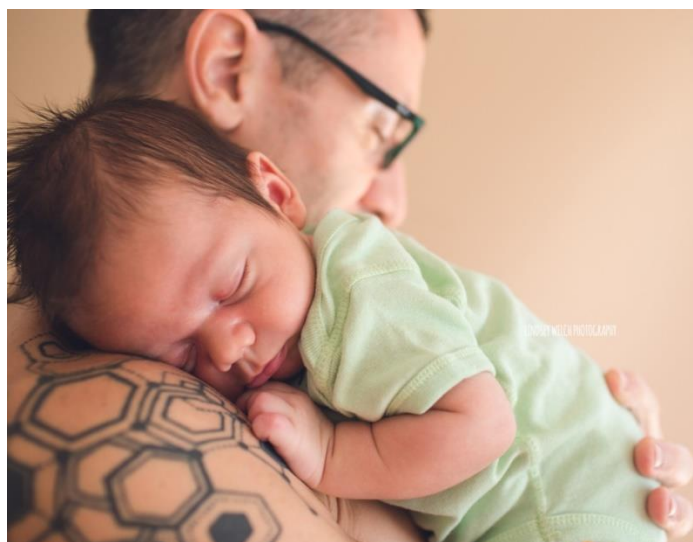
As a postpartum doula, you can use active listening with the partner as you would with the mother. Doulas are not a replacement for partners; they come alongside them to provide mothers with support. As a doula you want to build the partner's confidence in parenting and in supporting the mother. Here are a few ways to support the partner:

- Encouraging words build confidence. “Aww, I can tell the baby recognizes your voice! She turned as soon as you began talking!” and “The baby looks so comfortable in your arms.”
- Ask them how they are doing. Respond with understanding. “Yeah, it can definitely be difficult adjusting to less sleep. It is so wonderful that you are able to support your wife/partner though!”
- Encourage self-care. Some partners are busy taking care of their wives/partners, the baby and even older siblings. They might find it difficult to find time for rest and showering.
- Provide tips and model ways he can support his wife/partner with nursing, getting extra rest and providing infant care.
- Teach them how to bathe their baby, care for the umbilical cord and circumcision if appropriate, and how to change the diaper. Demonstrate how to comfort a crying baby. Encourage skin-to-skin time and find the attachment and bonding increase dramatically.
- Suggest that they set aside time to be alone together to create a balance between their life with the new baby and the bonds of their own marriage.
- Remind them that the transition in assuming their new roles as parents takes time, even up to a year. Encourage them to enjoy every part of it.

Emotional Support

Relationship Strain with Partners

Birth and adding a new baby to the family, is a significant event for the mother, but it is also life changing for her partner. In today's world, most partners are witnessing the miracle of birth. Even 40 years ago, this wasn't the case. Now they realize the hard work of labor and have new admiration for their wives. At home births some partners are even catching their babies. As a result of this experience and immediate contact, they are more likely to bond



with their new baby and take on a nurturing role such as changing diapers and giving baths.

Pregnancy and the following year are considered a time of potential crisis for relationships. There are many changes, stress, and responsibilities. The added physical stress of pregnancy, hormones, and sleep deprivation also makes it a difficult period. As postpartum doulas, we are not relationship counselors, but we should be familiar with and understand the amount of strain a relationship might encounter during this time

Conflicting emotions are often present with a partner feeling close yet distant at the same time as his wife works to meet the demands of their new baby. The romantic image of happiness and joy with a new baby may not be realistic as she experiences disrupted sleep, hormonal, and mood changes resulting in jealousy and hurt feelings. High oxytocin levels in the mother may decrease her sexual desire. Open and honest communication is crucial at this time to work through these early days of transition.

Here are some ways we can support families and their relationships:

- Remind couples that it is normal to feel relationship strain during this time. Encourage them to speak with counselors familiar with the reproductive years if they are struggling.
- Encourage couples to spend quality time together. It can be easy to focus just on the new baby and other children but it is important to take time to nurture their relationship with each other.
- Some postpartum doulas offer date-night support. It is up to you if that is a service you would like to offer. While it might not seem like traditional postpartum support, caring for the family as a whole might look like facilitating time for parents to be with each other. While a sitter might be able to offer this service, as a postpartum doula you have a unique skill set that might make parents feel more comfortable leaving their infant for an hour or two.
- Encourage parents to spend quality time after their baby is settled in the evenings or even to take their baby out for date-night. Many infants stay well settled for evening walks, walking the mall or other activities, especially while being worn in a carrier.
- Encourage parents to find peer support with other couples raising young children. Knowing some things are normal, can lower stress levels.
- Model active listening.

Mother/Partner Relationship and Adjustment

A new baby demands much time from his mother and that means the marital relationship will need to make adjustments. Especially if this is the first baby, the transition to parenthood can be either a time of deepened love or stress and turbulence. There may be financial pressures especially if the mother was working and now staying home. The balance of power in the relationship shifts. Division of labor in the home changes. The high levels of oxytocin in the mother may decrease her sexual desire. This is a very important time to discuss expectations they have of each other.

We are not counselors but we can offer a listening ear and give general information, such as relationship stress is common after having a baby. Part of S.U.P.P.O.R.T. is listening, understanding but also knowing when to refer. As you begin to network in your local birth communities, be sure to have some referrals for counselors familiar with the reproductive years.

Siblings

Adding a new baby to a family can be exciting but it can also be a time of uncertainty, concern, and even jealousy. Acknowledge siblings when you enter the home. Be excited to see them and ask how they are doing. No matter what the age of the siblings, help them feel that the new baby is theirs too. Help them to feel proud about having a new baby brother or sister. Pay attention to all children to minimize feelings of jealousy. Talk about the times when they were babies and show pictures. They will be fascinated. With compassion, patience, and understanding on your part, an older sibling soon realizes that she is not being replaced by the new baby, but has been given someone wonderful to love and to be loved by.



It is also a good idea to let them feel proud of themselves by including them in age-appropriate baby care activities (getting diapers, singing to a fussy baby, etc.). Be aware that they may regress in previous achievements, such as potty training. These regressions are usually temporary and may signify a desire to be a baby again to receive the same constant, loving attention that the baby gets. Avoid chastising them, for they will return to their “big-girl or big-boy” self soon enough on their own.

If a potential client is interested primarily in sibling care, you may use your discretion in deciding if the job falls under postpartum doula care or if you prefer to recommend she seek out regular childcare. Doulas have different areas of expertise with some being gifted in helping siblings adjust to a new baby in the family.

Some women find it hard to imagine how they can love another baby as much as they love the one(s) they already have. This is a common concern, shared by all expectant parents. Love is boundless, and there is always room in the heart for another soul to cherish.



By providing a little sibling care, a postpartum doula helps to relieve the mother’s stress, facilitating time for her to bond with her baby, and she gives children extra needed attention.

Mother/Daughter Relationships

A woman who has given birth wants her baby to love her. But what if she, herself, does not have a good relationship with her own mother? It is good for new mothers to remember that they once shared cells with their mothers while in the womb. Without our mothers, none of us would be here. Being grateful for that, helps to bring positive feelings into mother/daughter relationships that are struggling.

Children also have a way of bringing mothers and daughters closer together even if their relationships have been difficult.

Women with new babies often realize they are more like their mothers than they thought. As they begin to transition into motherhood, they may find themselves making decisions similar to those of their own mothers. Mothers are templates from which their daughters create themselves as mothers. Babies and young children mimic their mother's facial expressions, tone of voice, and mannerisms. Many decisions a new mother makes have a foundation in how they, themselves, were raised. They may say, "I can't believe I sound like my mother!"

In the early months of parenting, it is helpful for new mothers to find the strengths in their own mothers. Motherhood may be the first common experience they have shared but the new generation will also have its own unique aspects. If a woman's mother has passed away, the postpartum doula can be that mothering presence so needed by the new mother. The postpartum doula can be the one to offer love and support and even a shoulder to cry on. Her love is unconditional, helping the new mother to feel safe to let go of feelings, fears, and concerns. The doula's role is to help the new mother make the transition to motherhood a less stressful and more positive one. Just as women are born with the knowledge about how to give birth, so they can also trust their instincts to parent in a way right for them.



Grandparents and Other Relatives

A new baby in the family is exciting and it often draws many visitors. Keep an open dialogue with your client about visitors and how you can help the mother balance guests and rest. Polite and helpful interactions with relatives can help keep a low stress situation for a new mother.

Here are some tips for interacting with grandparents and other relatives:

- If you enter the home and the mother is busy or they enter while she is busy, be sure to politely introduce yourself. Congratulate them on their new grandchild.
- Say encouraging things like, "Aww baby must know you are grandma! She looks so comfortable."
- If a relative gives advice that is outdated or unhelpful, be careful with your wording when replying and be sure not to hurt her feelings. For example, if the grandma says the baby seems very hungry and might need a bottle, you might reply, "Yes, the baby might be hungry. Maybe her mother wants to offer the breast again? Or we might try changing and burping the baby and see if she calms down." Then later try and educate her in casual conversation by mentioning how small the baby's stomach is, how it fills and empties quickly, and how frequent feeds are good for building milk supply..

- Thank relatives for their help. Depending on the family relationship and dynamics, some might feel hurt that the mother needed to hire help instead of just relying on family. Let them know their help is still needed, and is valuable and appreciated.
- Model and share ways they can assist the mother in between doula visits

Household Support

Postpartum doulas are not housekeepers or cleaners but household organization can be a way to support a new mother. It is a personal decision what services you choose to offer, but it is important that you are comfortable setting boundaries. For example, some doulas are comfortable taking care of pets while others are not. If a client asks for deep spring cleaning, remind her that that is not a service that you offer. Below are common services doulas do and do not offer.

Typical Postpartum Doula Household Organization

- Assistance organizing the nursery
- Emptying or loading a dishwasher
- Folding a basket of laundry or doing a load
- Cleaning or sterilizing bottles, pacifiers and pump parts
- Helping siblings tidy up toys used while you were playing with them
- Meal preparation and tidying afterward
- Emptying a wastebasket

Diversity Awareness

As postpartum doulas, it is important that we treat all of our clients equally. It is also important to be aware of cultural differences that might be important for positive interactions. Being aware of varying cultural norms is important to ensure we are kind, caring, and respectful. In this line of work, you will find many families of varying socio-economic backgrounds, varying religions and different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Below are a few tips for positive interactions when working with families:

- **Be non-judgmental.** Show openness in your words, tone of voice, and body language. Do not point out things that might seem different to you unless you have questions related to caring for the baby, the home, or the mother. Be attentive and show interest if they share any of their cultural or religious norms.
- **Do not make assumptions.** Every individual is unique. Even if they say they identify with certain groups, do not make assumptions. If you are uncertain of something that could impact how you need to interact and be respectful of their home and family, ask them in a kind, non-judgmental manner.
- **Be sensitive to cultural differences** in infant care and child rearing. Do not jump to point out something that seems wrong; remember that it might just be different. Model evidence-based infant care, and talk about what you are doing in a positive way, but be sure to follow any

instructions they have.

- **Role of a Postpartum Doula:** Regardless of how a family is functioning in their home, remember that your care is essentially the same – that of supporting the mother, providing education, offering resources, and supporting the family as a whole

Application and Understanding

1. Respond to the scenario at the beginning of this section and describe how you would support Amy and Josh. How would you respond to a relative recommending that a mother try rice cereal to help her three week old sleep better?
2. What are the seven Baby B's for Attachment Parenting?
3. Name two ways you can support a schedule minded parent.
4. How would you respond to a client asking you to clean the playroom including vacuuming and dusting?
5. How would you support the partner who feels overwhelmed in his role as a father? How could you help him understand his wife/partner's changing role from lover to mother?
6. The new mother's mother arrives to visit her daughter and new grandchild. You note tension in their relationship. How would you support the mother and daughter?
7. Your client is concerned that her nine-week old baby is not rolling over because she heard some babies learn to roll over at eight weeks. How would you address her concerns?