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# The Birth Companion Mini-Guide



By Patty Brennan

## The role of a birth companion

A birth companion is a nonprofessional who provides emotional support and physical assistance to the birthing mother in labor and immediately afterwards. Assuming you have an involved partner, a birth companion is simply another person on your support team who helps you. If there is no partner, then your birth companion can serve as your primary support person. The art of labor support involves providing unconditional and nonjudgmental assistance to the birthing mother. What type of support is needed? Reassurance, encouragement, physical assistance for movement and positioning, comforting touch and words, help with information gathering and decision making, and help with pain coping. A birth companion serves as a sustaining, loving presence during this peak life experience.

## What if I have a partner? Do I need anyone else?

It depends, as everyone is different. For some couples, privacy is a top concern. If they had anyone other than the partner present, they may prefer it to be a professional who is paid for her services—someone with proficiency in labor support skills and clear professional boundaries rather than a friend or family member. For others, the partner may feel daunted by the idea that it's all on him/her to support the birthing mother or may not be especially well suited to the role. This is normal and it's okay to supplement your support team and get the help you need. In still other cases, the partner may be highly motivated, capable, eager and willing to do whatever is necessary.

How does your partner feel? The two of you need to explore this together. It's a setup for disappointment when we have expectations of others that are not communicated. We make assumptions that our needs will be met and then feel angry or resentful when they are not. Why not set yourself up for success and side-step the drama? Here's how ...

1. Get informed about the labor process.
2. Try to anticipate your needs. Ignoring or denying our needs does *not* make them go away. And remember, what's best for mom is also best for baby. A stressed out, anxious laboring mother is flooding her system with stress hormones that are antagonistic to normal labor hormones. This is best avoided.
3. Have an open discussion with your partner and explore how they see their ideal role at the birth. Get the conversation started with our free online class, [\*Choices in Childbirth: A Consumer's Guide\*](#). You will find a partner quiz on choosing your support team in the PDF download that accompanies the program. Take the quiz and discuss your answers.
4. Now you should both have a good idea where the gaps are (if any) and can make a plan to fill them to everyone's satisfaction.

Note that even if your partner wants to be highly involved, it may not be realistic to expect one person to effectively meet all of your needs for support. An additional labor companion

(or two) can provide some depth to your support team, ensuring that you receive continuous support when your partner needs to take a break. If your labor is a long one or especially challenging, it's great to have a bit more support on hand to keep everyone's spirits (especially yours!) high.

### **Things to consider *before* inviting someone to your birth**

Anyone invited to your birth should be an unqualified asset and meet the following criteria:

- Are available to be present at my baby's birth
- Want to be present at my baby's birth
- Are capable of putting my needs first (while their own needs, issues and agenda are placed on the back burner)
- Share similar beliefs about birth
- Can provide unconditional, nonjudgmental support
- Have confidence in me and my capacities
- Are not afraid of birth
- Will be able to witness me in pain without becoming overly upset or protective
- Possess a personality and style capable of meeting my needs in labor, especially helping me to relax (likely to remain calm)
- Will respect my privacy

Consider whether the person(s) you are considering inviting is someone with whom you have a complicated relationship, full of ups and downs, power struggles or drama. This may very well play out at your birth as well and can actually rob you of energy and slow your labor down. Moms need to be in a safe and nurturing atmosphere of trust in order to give birth safely. If someone cannot be an unqualified asset (100% on board), then they should not be present.

### **Historical Perspective: How is a birth companion different from a birth doula?**

Throughout time and across all cultures, women have supported each other at birth and in the early weeks postpartum. It's a natural extension of our own mothering and nurturing tendencies. In many cultures today, the new mother is given a six-week "lying-in" period, during which time she is freed of all household responsibilities and other duties. Female relatives and neighbors see that any other children are tended to, meals provided, laundry washed and so on. During this time, the mother rests, recovers, breastfeeds and cares for her baby. In modern cultures, however, many new mothers find themselves isolated, without family nearby and lacking a supportive community.

In the United States, the widespread availability of labor epidurals and the growing obstetrical malpractice crisis have led to birth becoming immensely more high-tech than ever before. This claim is evidenced by rising national cesarean rates, from 5% in 1970 to 33% (and

higher in some areas) in 2015. In addition, U.S. maternity care has become increasingly fragmented as both OBs and midwives now operate in large group practices wherein “on-call” duties rotate through the group. Mothers who can think in terms of “my doctor” or “my midwife” are in the minority. It’s the luck of the draw when they go into labor in terms of who will be attending their birth. The resulting lack of continuity in care and multiple gaps in the maternity care system, leave moms and babies at greater risk of complications. It is a fact that infant mortality rates in the U.S. consistently compare abysmally with those of other industrialized countries, despite (or because of?) our high-tech approach to this essentially healthy and normal life process. Meanwhile, a new generation of mothers are feeling increasingly anxious and fearful about their upcoming births, lack trust in their medical care providers, and are in need of guidance.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the role of the doula emerged as a means of meeting unmet needs and filling systematic gaps in modern maternity care. An element of continuity is restored as the doula meets with her clients prenatally, provides continuous assistance in labor regardless of the number of shift changes in medical personnel, and is available postpartum to ease the transition into parenthood. A professional doula has completed evidence-based doula training and, in many cases, a post-training certification process. She charges a fee for her specialized support services. I’m a big fan of doulas and make my living as a doula trainer. In recent years, a growing body of research is establishing the benefits of having a person continuously present at birth whose sole job is to support the mother. We can easily make the case that doulas reduce epidural and cesarean rates, save Medicaid dollars, and improve birth outcomes for both moms and babies. However, not everyone has access to doulas nor the money to hire a doula. And I cannot deny the fundamental truth that the required support for moms and babies does not mandate the exchange of money nor professionalization in order to be effective.

This brings me to the role of the birth companion, a person who provides continuous one-on-one support to the laboring mother as an act of love. A birth companion is usually a close friend of the mother or a family member. She is typically untrained in the art of labor support, relying instead on intuitive guidance or personal experience. For those who possess a nurturing spirit, it’s a perfectly natural thing to do.

### **Have you been asked to be a birth companion?**

If you have been invited to help a friend, sister or daughter at her birth, consider your answers to the following questions:

- Can I wholeheartedly support the birthing mother and the choices she is making, even if I don’t agree with her choices or would not make the same ones for myself?
- Can I make the “on-call” commitment, typically defined as being available 24/7 for two weeks before and after her expected due date?
- What back-up arrangements do I need to have in place (at work, for child care, with my professors, etc.)?

- What are the expectations of me, explicitly?
- Do I *want* to be part of this experience?

The most important aspect of agreeing to fill this role for a loved one is to be there and be fully present. You can increase your capacity to support her by becoming more informed about the process, how it unfolds, and how to roll with any challenges that come up. Our new **Birth Companion One-Day Workshop** will increase your confidence and enhance your natural support skills to be the very best birth companion you can be.