

Integrating Doulas in the Hospital Setting:

A Guide for Clinicians



Doula Overview

What Doulas Do and
Don't Do

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Doula Overview

A doula is a trained patient-selected advocate who provides continuous emotional, physical, and informational support to patients throughout pregnancy, labor, and the postpartum period.

Doulas focus on providing education and relationship-building, helping patients and their support people feel informed, empowered, and respected as they navigate care.

Their scope of support can vary—from prenatal education and birth preparation to hands-on labor support and postpartum care. Some doulas specialize in supporting people through specific experiences, such as NICU support, bereavement, and/or abortion.



TIP: Ask doulas about their scope! For example, “Do you primarily support clients during labor, postpartum, or across the full journey? I know there are many ways doulas show up in care.” OR “How long have you been working with your client?”

Did you know that...

Doulas are trained, non-medical professionals; however, there is currently no national licensure or regulatory body for doulas. Many pursue certification through training organizations.

Doulas may work as private contractors, hospital-based staff, volunteers, or members of community-based organizations.

Payment models vary widely, including out-of-pocket payments from clients, grant-supported care, employer or hospital-based pay, and Medicaid reimbursement in some states.

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What Doulas Do



- ✓ Support birth and postpartum planning
- ✓ Advocate for the patient
- ✓ Support with physical comfort measures during labor (e.g. position changes)
- ✓ Facilitate communication between patient, their support people, and care team
- ✓ Provide psychological safety and help bridge communication and language gaps
- ✓ Connect families to services such as lactation support, mental health care, or social services

What Doulas Don't Do



- ✗ Make medical decisions or speak on behalf of the patient
- ✗ Perform clinical exams or procedures
- ✗ Provide diagnoses or medical advice
- ✗ Prescribe treatments or medications
- ✗ Replace clinical care or mental health services

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Voices from the Field: What Doulas Want Clinicians to Know



Acknowledging me helps patients feel seen and supported too.

“I have stories of providers never looking at me, not speaking to me, not making eye contact and it becomes palpable that I can feel it and patients can feel it too.”

LENA—(Self-employed birth doula; 5 years experience; supports clients prenatally, during labor, and postpartum)

I am here to amplify the patient's voice, preferences, and values.

“This is where doulas shine—they work on the birth plan, understanding what the patient is afraid of, their big goals, and their values.”

RILEY—(Community-based doula; 8 years experience; specializes in full continuum from pre-conception through postpartum)

My role complements yours, we're on the same team.

“It's about everyone leaning into their strengths... Doulas don't make medical decisions, but we help patients understand what's happening, process their fears, and feel centered.”

JORDAN—(Volunteer hospital doula; 2 years experience; Supports clients during labor & inpatient postpartum)

Mutual respect creates a safer, more inclusive space for the patient.

“Experiences where providers used my name and put me on the whiteboard and made sure I was included in questions in that moment...it really changes things when there is a united front.”

MARIA—(Hospital-employed doula; 10 years experience; specializes in NICU support)

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Shorter
labor times



Minimized Pitocin
usage



Decreased cesarean
delivery rates



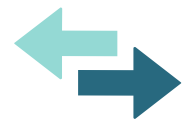
Pain reduction/
Reduction of pain
medication



Reduction of
negative experiences



Increased
spontaneous
birth vaginal



Task shifting
through other
clinicians and doulas



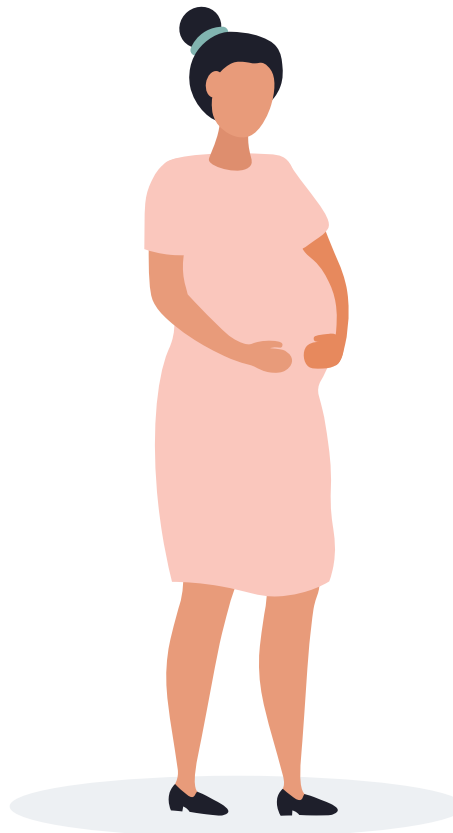
Reduction of
clinician workload



Increased neonatal
APGAR scores



Increased patient
satisfaction scores



Scan QR on last page of this guide for references

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Common Doula Misconceptions—*Debunked*

✗ Doulas interfere with the role of nurses or doctors

FACT:

Doulas aim to collaborate with the care team to support patient goals. Evidence shows that positive relationships between doulas and clinicians enhance outcomes and patient satisfaction.

CLINICIAN TIP:

Ask doulas to share how long they have been working with their client and how they can best partner with them.

✗ Doulas only support patients during labor

FACT:

Doulas may offer a full spectrum of services before, during, and after labor. Some of these services include but are not limited to prenatal and postpartum support.

CLINICIAN TIP:

If your patient has a doula, ask how they've been working together to strengthen continuity of care and support shared goals. Invite the doula to participate in prenatal care visits, if possible.

✗ Doulas are only for unmedicated births

FACT:

Doulas support all birth choices - medicated, unmedicated, planned cesareans, and more. Their role is to inform and support their patient's choice.

CLINICIAN TIP:

Doulas can help patients feel more confident and informed, no matter the birth approach. Their presence is about supporting autonomy.

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Common Doula Misconceptions— *Debunked*

✖ Doulas speak for the patient

FACT:

Doulas should not speak on behalf of the patient. Instead, they help patients understand their options and encourage them to speak up and engage in direct communication with the care team. They support informed decision-making, not replace it.

CLINICIAN TIP:

Call a huddle to make sure everyone's on the same page about next steps.

✖ Only some patients need doulas

FACT:

People of all backgrounds, cultures, and risk levels choose doulas. Research shows doulas are especially impactful for patients who experience systemic barriers.

CLINICIAN TIP:

Offer information about doula support to all patients. Doulas can be a key support for informed decision-making and improved outcomes across populations.

✖ Doulas provide medical care and advice

FACT:

Doulas provide non-clinical support: emotional, physical, and informational. They do not perform medical tasks or give clinical advice. Their role complements, not disrupts, clinical care.

CLINICIAN TIP:

Introduce yourself early and share how you work. A quick check-in can build mutual respect and improve teamwork at the bedside. and improve teamwork at the bedside.

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Integrating Doulas into the Care Team

Despite their value, doulas are not consistently integrated into care teams. Their roles are often misunderstood and collaboration with clinicians can vary widely. These barriers can limit the potential impact doulas have in supporting patients and fostering a person-centered care environment.



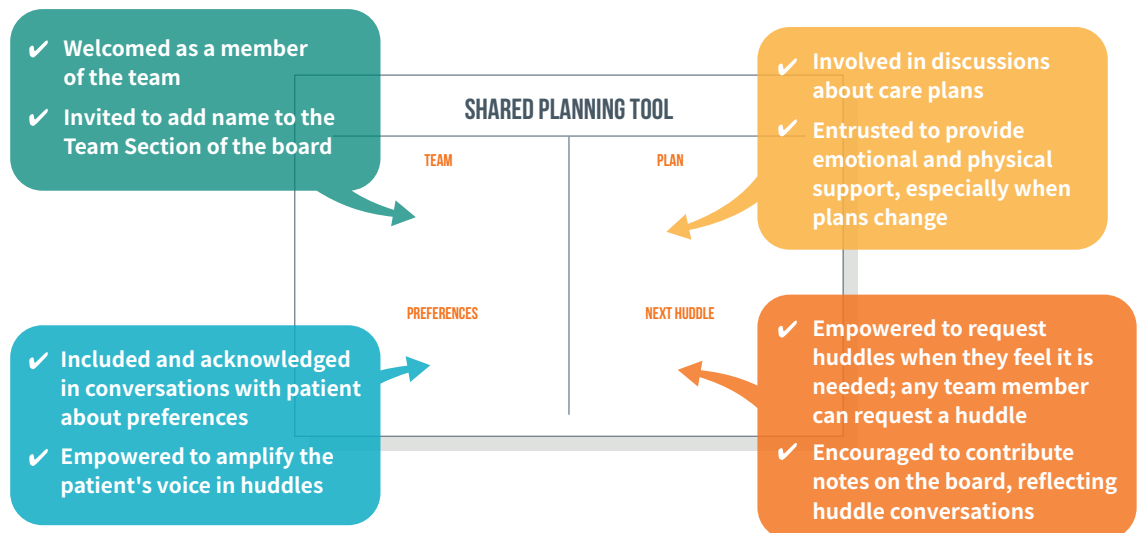
TeamBirth is a collaborative model designed to improve communication, teamwork, and shared decision-making during labor and delivery. It encourages alignment across all members of the care team—including doulas—around the patient's goals, preferences, and clinical needs.

Within TeamBirth, doulas serve as important advocates for patient voice and preferences, contributing to shared understanding and aligned care planning.

Doulas are part of the care team and help foster trust, improve communication, and enhance the labor & delivery experience for both patients and clinicians.

Doula Integration: Signs of Success

A doula providing support at a TeamBirth birthing facility should be:



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Doula Readiness Checklist for TeamBirth Facilities

This checklist is designed to help facilities assess and plan for integrating doulas as part of the care team within the TeamBirth model. The first section outlines core clinical team practices that should be in place at all TeamBirth sites. The remaining sections offer additional strategies for consideration to foster a doula-friendly environment.

Core Clinical Team Practices

These **core practices** reflect minimum expectations for all TeamBirth sites to support doula integration:

- ☐ Clinical team recognizes doulas as part of the care team
- ☐ Clinical team understands the doula's scope of practice and role in TeamBirth
- ☐ Doulas are welcomed and invited into bedside huddles when present
- ☐ Doulas are familiar with the Shared Planning Tool and how to support its use

Training, Communication, and Feedback

These **recommended practices** strengthen collaboration and doula engagement:

- ☐ Doulas have access to TeamBirth onboarding and training materials
- ☐ A designated point of contact or liaison for doulas is identified
- ☐ A feedback mechanism exists for doulas to share concerns or suggestions

Facility & Operational Readiness

These **recommended policies and practices** promote a more doula-inclusive hospital environment:

- ☐ Clear support person policy that explicitly includes doulas as non-visitors
- ☐ Registration and check-in procedures for doulas are well defined, avoiding unnecessary administrative barriers or burdens
- ☐ Recognize doulas as part of the care team by providing badges or stickers that identify their role
- ☐ Designated space is available for doulas to store personal belongings
- ☐ Doulas are included in safety or orientation protocols relevant to the unit
- ☐ Consider doulas being permitted in the OR as standard practice unless clinically inappropriate

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Additional Resources

- [TeamBirth doula two-pager](#)
- TeamBirth Training Package for doulas (coming soon)



Additional Resources

Scan this QR Code below for additional
resources on the benefits of doula support.



401 Park Dr, 3rd Fl West
Boston MA 02215
ARIADNELABS.ORG



Brigham and Women's Hospital
Founding Member, Mass General Brigham



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