

Clinician Guide for Collaborating with Doulas



Overview

What Doulas Do and Don't Do

Evidence for Doula Support

Voices From the Field

Tips for Navigating Challenging Scenarios with Doulas

Doula Collaboration Checklist

Overview

Doulas are non-medical professionals who provide continuous emotional, physical, and informational support to clients before, during, and after childbirth. Doulas can specialize in different services, but oftentimes they support clients across the full care continuum.

This continuity allows doulas to understand their client's values, preferences, cultural context, and goals for their care in ways that can meaningfully complement clinical expertise.

It can be helpful to think of doulas as an extension of their client's chosen support network—similar to a partner, family member, or friend—but with specialized training¹ in childbirth support. Unlike clinical team members, doulas:

- Are selected and hired by the client
- Maintain primary accountability to the client
- May continue supporting the family in the postpartum period



There are no laws requiring doulas to be licensed or formally certified. However, most doulas complete structured training programs. **Multiple organizations offer doula training and certification**, and requirements vary by program.

Recognizing this distinction can help set clear expectations. Doulas are not substitutes for clinical staff, nor are they independent medical decision-makers. Their role is to support the patient's experience and understanding within the clinical environment.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that doula support is associated with improved birth experiences and outcomes. Despite this, collaboration with doulas remains inconsistent — limiting the impact they can have for families and care teams.

This Guide is designed to:

- Clarify the doula role and scope of practice
- Share evidence on the impact of doula support
- Offer practical strategies to strengthen collaboration with doulas



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What Doulas Do



Doulas do not provide medical care. Instead, they focus on:

- ✓ Education and preparation for labor, birth and postpartum
- ✓ Comfort measures and coping support during labor for both medicated and unmedicated births
- ✓ Reinforcing clients' understanding of clinical information
- ✓ Supporting communication between the client, their partner, and clinicians
- ✓ Actively involving their client's partner or other support people in the birth process
- ✓ Encouraging their clients to advocate for their preferences
- ✓ Providing an added layer of psychological safety and emotional support during procedures or in the operating room
- ✓ Connecting families to lactation, mental health, and community resources

What Doulas Don't Do



- ✗ Make medical decisions
- ✗ Perform clinical exams or procedures
- ✗ Provide diagnoses or medical advice
- ✗ Prescribe treatments or medications
- ✗ Operate medical equipment
- ✗ Serve as a medical interpreter unless certified
- ✗ Replace clinical care or mental health services

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Shorter labor duration



Higher breastfeeding initiation rates



7% lower risk of cesarean birth among Medicaid enrollees



Lower pharmacologic pain use



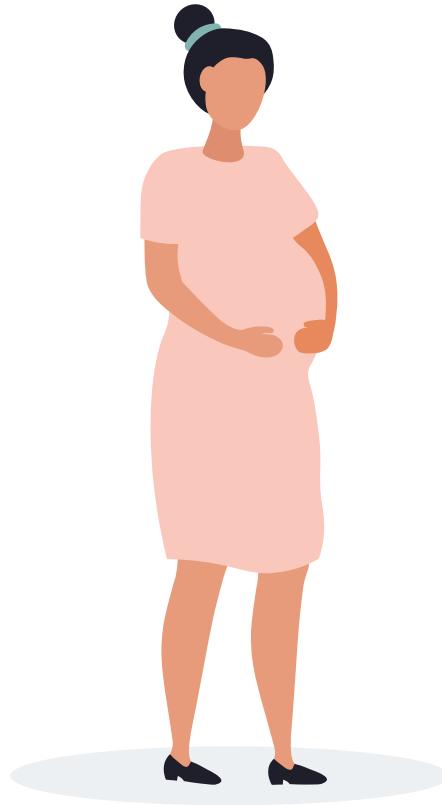
57% lower likelihood of postpartum depression/anxiety



29% lower risk of preterm birth among Medicaid enrollees



Lower average cost of care



Reduction of clinician workload



Higher neonatal APGAR scores among low-risk births



Higher patient satisfaction scores

Scan this QR code for a full list of references.



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Voices from the Field: What Doulas Want Clinicians to Know



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)

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 have seen firsthand how doulas can change the environment in the labor room and postpartum to positively impact the patient experience and clinical outcomes.”

CERTIFIED NURSE
MIDWIFE in TN

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If a doula speaks for their client

Re-center the patient in the conversation and invite them to speak directly.

SAMPLE SCRIPTING: *“Thanks for sharing that, [doula name], I appreciate your input. [Patient name], I would love to hear from you. How do you feel about _____?”*

“[Patient name], I would never proceed without your consent. I’d love to check in with you directly about the plan. What questions or concerns do you have?”

If a doula advocates against medical advice or their client seeks medical advice from the doula

Explore where this recommendation may be coming from and reinforce that it is the role of the clinician to provide medical advice, although everyone has a role that is valuable. Try keeping the focus on the patient’s safety and understanding.

SAMPLE SCRIPTING: *To doula or patient: “Tell me more about where this advice is coming from? What questions, concerns or fears do you have about [recommended treatment]?”*

“It sounds like we may have different perspectives or concerns. Let’s walk through the options together so I can make sure we are all on the same page.”

“We all want you to have the safest experience possible. Let’s talk through what that looks like medically.”

If you believe the doula’s advice is based on misinformation

Explore, educate, and recenter on the patient and their preferences.

SAMPLE SCRIPTING: *“There is a lot of misinformation out there which can be hard to untangle. Part of my role is sharing my expertise to make sure you have the most accurate medical information possible. You’re the expert in your own body, though, so let’s talk about a plan we can all agree on to keep you and your baby safe.”*

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If a doula interferes with a clinical team member

Consider first having a sidebar conversation with the doula, emphasizing shared goals of client safety and being on the same team.

SAMPLE SCRIPTING:

“I really appreciate the support you’re providing for your client. Can we step aside for a quick moment so we can make sure we’re all aligned on the plan moving forward?”

“I value the role you’re playing in supporting your client. Let’s take a minute to connect so we can make sure our approaches are working well together.”

If a conflict continues despite efforts to de-escalate

Document incidents and subsequent patient counseling objectively in the EHR. Follow your facility’s policies for escalating concerns if needed.



GENERAL TIPS:

Clarify roles and expectations early

SAMPLE SCRIPTING:

“[Doula name] will be supporting your overall experience. We’ll work together to align care with your preferences as best we can.”

Include doulas in team huddles

SAMPLE SCRIPTING:

“[Doula name], you’ve been working with [client name] really closely, and that is very helpful. Let’s huddle to discuss options and next steps together.”

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Doula Collaboration Checklist

This checklist provides several strategies to consider to promote successful doula collaboration at your facility.

Structural Supports

- Clearly define check-in procedures for doulas & provide a badge or sticker that identifies their role
- Review OR policy to determine appropriate role for doulas
- Consider establishing a doula collaborator program or a defined communication channel (e.g., listserv, liaison, regular touchpoints) to:
 - Ensure doulas at your site stay up-to-date on relevant policies, practices, and resources
 - Create opportunities for staff and doulas to share direct feedback and suggestions
 - Establish norms (e.g., requirements around certification)

Onboarding & Training

- Include doulas in relevant onboarding or training sessions when appropriate
- Ensure doulas have access to key resources and training materials
 - For TeamBirth facilities, see the TeamBirth Doula Training package [\[Download the training package\]](#)
- Ensure clinicians understand a doula's scope of practice and role in care
 - Review [this guide \[PDF download\]](#).

Engagement & Relationship-Building

- Host doula-clinician meet & greets
- Encourage doulas to attend prenatal appointments and maternity tours when appropriate
- Create a doula directory for prospective parents

Bedside Practices

- Remind staff that doulas are part of the team
- Encourage staff to include doulas in bedside huddles and care planning conversations



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