

I am a doula, massage therapist and mother. I have been hired as a doula for both hospital births and home births. When I was first hired as a doula for a home birth I wondered what my role would be. I was accustomed to my role at hospital births. To me the birth team that was based on midwifery was so complete, I wondered if I would have a place. After being a doula at several home births I have realized that the role of doula is important in all birth settings.

My role in each of these situations is obviously different in many ways. In the hospital I have the very crucial job of interacting with the medical staff and advocating for my client's decisions and rights. I have not noticed the need to intervene in this way with the home birth midwives I have worked with. Usually with home birth the client has a well-developed relationship with all caregivers present. There is no need to go over a birth plan every time a new nurse is on duty or a resident doctor comes in to check on the mother. Everyone present at a home birth knows the woman and knows her wishes in regards to her birth. Because I do not have deal with a hospital staff I feel I can be more focused on the woman or couple. I have more time to use my skills as a massage therapist. I have more time to focus on the whole experience that the new family is having and add to that in very satisfying ways. When I am hired for a hospital birth I usually go to the woman's home in early labor. We establish a rhythm at home and then try to bring that with us to the hospital. With home birth, early labor is still a time for establishing a rhythm, but labor continues without a car ride or hospital admission procedures.

I have been asked if it wasn't overkill to have a doula and a midwife, because the midwife gives such complete care. I have not noticed this to be the case at all. The group of home birth midwives that I have worked with assigns two midwives and one apprentice to each birth. I feel like this gives an opportunity for very complete care. Even with this situation I have felt that my role was very important at each birth. I am sure that in the case of an emergency it would be very helpful to have someone else to calm and inform the mother while the midwife takes prompt action. I have asked the midwives and the apprentices if they felt the same way. The feedback I got was all very positive. The apprentices especially were grateful for my presence because they are often the one who takes on the "doula role" at the births. Since I could fill this need they were able to really learn a lot at these births. They could concentrate on the physiology of the birth and less on fulfilling emotional needs.

I feel that having a doula at a home birth is very helpful. A doula can take care of comfort measures while the midwife is busy setting up supplies. A doula can give relief to a midwife at a long labor. The midwife can rest easy knowing that a knowledgeable and caring person is with her client.

I personally love doing my doula work at home births. The home births I have attended have been beautiful and rewarding for me. I think the work at hospital births is very



rewarding also and in some ways more crucial than at a home birth. Often a doula really helps maintain the normalcy of birth in the pathology-oriented setting of the hospital. A doula can really make a difference at a hospital birth. She can help the mother avoid dangerous interventions. Those interventions are less likely to occur at a home birth, with or without a doula. I have been a part of many beautiful and spiritual births in the home and hospital; at home there is just less to wade through to get there. I hope to have many more experiences with both kinds of birth. I love my job. I feel so honored to work with birthing mothers wherever they choose to birth.

I am pregnant with my fourth child and planning my second home birth. After reflecting on my last home birth I feel a doula would add a lot to my birth experience. I have hired a doula along with the midwives for this birth. I think it will be very beneficial, especially since I will have my two children as well as my husband present for the birth. A number of people will have separate emotional needs during this important family event. I feel very supported and nurtured by my midwives. I trust in their knowledge and skills. I feel that by hiring a doula I am making their job easier. I feel they will better be able to do what I hired them to do, help me have a safe and gentle birth. I respect their work so much and I feel a doula complements it beautifully. ♦

Barb Koehler is a massage therapist, doula and monitrice. She is married to Ben Arnold. They have two children, a boy, Kasimir, who is 9 years old and a girl, Alaina, who is 3. Barb is expecting her third child around June 28th and is planning a home water birth with midwives and a doula.