

Review Article

The Influence of Birth Companion in Mother Care and Child Care Outcomes

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2454.325X.202505>

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How to cite this article:

Sharma L K, Verma T, Lata S, Singh P. The Influence of Birth Companion in Mother Care and Child Care Outcomes. *Int J Preven Curat Comm Med.* 2025;11(1&2):18-24.

Date of Submission: 2025-03-06

Date of Acceptance: 2025-04-15

A B S T R A C T

The presence of a birth companion during labor and delivery has gained recognition for its positive impact on both maternal and neonatal outcomes. This review explores the influence of birth companions on maternal care experiences and child care outcomes, examining both physical and psychological aspects. Evidence suggests that the support of a birth companion—whether a partner, family member, or trained doula—can improve maternal satisfaction, reduce anxiety, pain perception, and the likelihood of interventions such as cesarean sections. Additionally, the role of birth companions is linked to enhanced neonatal outcomes, including improved bonding, breastfeeding success, and reduced stress for the newborn. This article synthesizes findings from a range of studies and presents the critical role of birth companions in promoting a positive birthing experience and optimizing maternal and child health outcomes.

Keywords: Maternal care, Birth Companion, Social Support

Introduction

Evidence-based literature consistently demonstrates that the presence of a Birth Companion, or intrapartum social support, demonstrably enhances the childbirth experience for parturient. Parturient who receive robust social support frequently exhibit reduced labor duration, improved pain management, and a decreased requirement for medical interventions. This discourse will address the modalities of emotional support, reassurance, and respectful care that a Birth Companion can provide, alongside strategies to promote these crucial roles within the perinatal care paradigm.

Defining a Birth Companion

A Birth Companion is typically defined as a woman with prior childbirth experience who provides continuous, individualized support to a woman in labor.¹

Benefits of Birth Companions: The integration of a female relative as a Birth Companion constitutes a cost-effective intervention with documented benefits. Birth Companions provide emotional support through consistent reassurance, disseminate information regarding labor progression, suggest coping techniques, offer comfort measures, including tactile stimulation and massage, promote hydration, and advocate for the parturient's preferences.

Criteria for a Birth Companion

Ideally, a Birth Companion should be a female relative with a history of childbirth. In healthcare facilities with privacy protocols, the parturient's spouse may be considered. The Birth Companion should be free from communicable diseases, maintain clean attire, demonstrate willingness to remain with the parturient throughout the labor process, refrain from interfering with healthcare personnel, and dedicate their attention exclusively to the parturient in the labor room.²

Policy Implementation in India

The Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has acknowledged the significance of Birth Companions by endorsing their presence within public health facilities. This policy aims to mitigate maternal and infant mortality rates, in alignment with India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This initiative underscores India's efforts to expedite high-quality interventions in maternal care.

World Health Organization (WHO) Recommendations on Birth Companions

The World Health Organization (WHO) advocates for labor companionship as a critical component in enhancing maternal and neonatal health outcomes. The WHO advocates for the presence of a support person to provide intrapartum support to facilitate monitoring of maternal and fetal well-being. Studies indicate that trained Birth Companions contribute to reduced anxiety, shorter labor duration, enhanced maternal sense of control, decreased rates of obstetric interventions and cesarean deliveries, increased partner involvement, improved neonatal outcomes, facilitated mother-infant bonding, reduced incidence of postpartum depression, and improved maternal satisfaction with the childbirth experience.³

The Essential Role of the Birth Companion in Intrapartum Care^{4,5}

Core Function

The primary function of a birth companion is to provide continuous support encompassing physical, emotional, and informational domains to the laboring woman throughout the intrapartum period. Figure 1

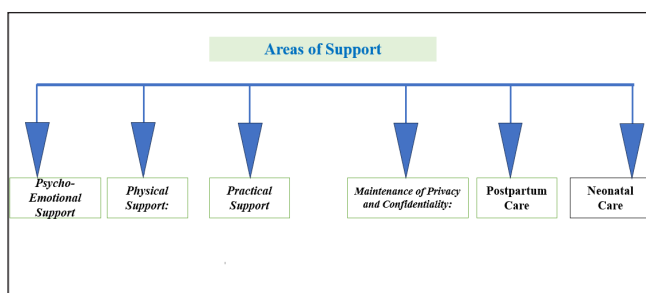


Figure 1. Areas of Support

Psycho-Emotional Support

- **Sustained Reassurance:** Offering consistent verbal encouragement and employing calming techniques to mitigate maternal anxiety and fear.
- **Promoting Tranquility:** Utilizing therapeutic communication and reassurance to foster a calm environment during labor.
- **Alleviation of Distress:** Assisting in the reduction of maternal distress and offering reassurance during uterine contractions and other challenging phases of labor.

Physical Support

- **Tactile Comfort:** Employing tactile comfort measures, including massage (e.g., back massage), hand-holding, and gentle touch during uterine contractions.
- **Facilitating Movement:** Encouraging and assisting the parturient in adopting positional changes to potentially alleviate pain and optimize labor progress.
- **Maintenance of Hydration and Nutritional Status:** Ensuring adequate maternal hydration and nutritional intake through the encouragement of oral fluids and sustenance when clinically appropriate and permitted.
- **Guidance in Respiratory Techniques:** Instructing and guiding the parturient in the utilization of breathing techniques for pain management and to prevent premature Valsalva maneuver.

Advocacy and Communication

- **Maternal Advocacy:** Facilitating communication of the parturient's preferences and advocating for adherence to her documented birth plan, where applicable and medically sound.
- **Promoting Respectful Interprofessional Communication:** Fostering clear and respectful communication between the parturient and healthcare providers, ensuring maternal autonomy and agency in her birthing experience.

Practical Support

- **Monitoring for Clinical Warning Signs:** Observing for and reporting any emergent maternal or fetal warning signs, such as excessive vaginal bleeding, pre-syncope, or severe cephalalgia, and promptly seeking professional medical assistance if indicated.
- **Assistance with Lactation Initiation:** Aiding the mother in initiating early breastfeeding immediately postpartum to promote maternal-infant bonding and support neonatal health.
- **Promotion of Immediate Skin-to-Skin Contact:** Encouraging immediate post-delivery skin-to-skin contact between mother and neonate to facilitate mother-infant bonding and breastfeeding initiation.

Maintenance of Privacy and Confidentiality

- **Respecting Patient Privacy:** Ensuring privacy during physical examinations and in safeguarding sensitive patient information, adhering to the parturient's preferences regarding information disclosure.
- **Non-Interference with Clinical Management:** Respecting the professional roles of the healthcare team and refraining from interfering with their clinical decisions and procedures.

Contraindicated Actions for a Birth Companion^{6,7,8}

- **Avoidance of Premature Pushing Encouragement:** Unless explicitly instructed by medical personnel, the

birth companion should not advise the parturient to initiate expulsive efforts prematurely.

- **Refraining from Medical Advice Provision:** The birth companion must not offer any medical counsel that contradicts the guidance provided by qualified healthcare professionals.
- **Abstinence from Unauthorized Therapeutic Interventions:** The birth companion should avoid offering any non-prescribed or non-evidence-based treatments, including traditional remedies or unapproved medications.

Postpartum Care Assistance

- **Facilitating Postpartum Recuperation:** Assisting the postpartum individual with immediate physical needs following delivery, such as provision of oral fluids, nutritional support, or assistance with ambulation as appropriate.
- **Lochia Management:** Utilizing sanitary pads for lochia absorption and maintaining perineal hygiene with cotton undergarments, employing lukewarm water for perineal cleansing.

Neonatal Care Guidance

- **Umbilical Cord Care:** Post-delivery, the umbilical cord stump will undergo spontaneous desiccation and separation within a typical timeframe of 1-3 weeks.
- **Maintenance of Cleanliness:** Gently cleanse the peri-umbilical area with a soft, damp cloth or cotton pledget moistened with warm water.
- **Maintaining Dryness:** Avoid forceful manipulation or traction on the cord stump, allowing for spontaneous detachment.
- **Dressing Considerations:** Consult a healthcare provider if signs of omphalitis, such as purulent drainage or malodor from the umbilical stump, are observed; utilize a sterile gauze dressing if clinically indicated and advised.

Additional Recommendations

- Employ loose-fitting infant clothing to minimize irritation to the umbilical area.
- Ensure appropriate diaper application and positioning to prevent friction against the umbilical stump; consider folding the superior diaper edge inferiorly to maintain separation from the stump.
- Adhere to meticulous hand hygiene protocols before and after neonatal handling, particularly concerning the umbilical stump.

Promoting Mother-Neonate Dyad Bonding

Facilitate bonding through activities such as sustained skin-to-skin contact, lactation support, and maintaining thermal homeostasis for both mother and neonate.

The interplay between the maternal support system, encompassing family members and designated birth companions, is a vital determinant of maternal well-being throughout gestation, parturition, and the postpartum phase. Optimal maternal health is inextricably linked to the presence and quality of this support network.

This essential relationship framework is predicated upon several key pillars:^{6,8,9}

Psychological and Emotional Well-being

- **Mental Health:** Family and birth companions serve as crucial sources of psychosocial support, mitigating maternal anxiety and stress during pregnancy and labor. This support is foundational for maternal mental health, with subsequent positive implications for both mother and neonate.
- **Security and Comfort:** The presence of familiar support persons during labor and delivery fosters a therapeutic and secure environment for the parturient, contributing to a more positive birth experience and reduced psychological distress.

Practical and Logistical Support

- **Intrapartum Support:** Birth companions, frequently family members or close associates, provide valuable non-pharmacological comfort measures during labor, including massage, guidance on maternal positioning, and verbal encouragement. These interventions can contribute to pain attenuation and potentially facilitate labor progress.
- **Postpartum Care and Recovery:** Familial support is paramount in the postpartum period. Family members can assist with household management, caregiving for existing children, and provide essential practical assistance, thereby enabling maternal focus on physiological recovery and mother-infant bonding.

Patient Advocacy and Interprofessional Communication

- **Maternal Autonomy and Preference Advocacy:** Birth companions can act as advocates for maternal preferences and needs during labor and delivery, ensuring these are effectively communicated and respected by healthcare providers. This promotes maternal empowerment and enhances birth satisfaction.
- **Facilitating Patient-Provider Dialogue:** Family and birth companions can bridge communication dynamics between mothers and healthcare teams, promoting maternal comprehension of the care plan and fostering informed decision-making regarding maternal and neonatal care.

Sociocultural Integration and Support Networks

- **Cultural Context:** In numerous cultures, familial involvement in childbirth is a culturally significant practice that reinforces community cohesion and cultural norms. This provides mothers with a profound sense of belonging and culturally relevant support.
- **Strengthening Social Support Systems:** The inclusion of family and birth companions strengthens maternal social support networks, which are critical for maternal psychological well-being and resilience, particularly during the perinatal transition and early parenthood.

Impact on Maternal and Neonatal Health Outcomes

- **Positive Perinatal Experiences and Outcomes:** Evidence-based research consistently demonstrates that supportive birth companions are associated with reduced labor duration, decreased utilization of obstetrical interventions, and increased maternal satisfaction with the birth experience. These factors collectively contribute to improved maternal and neonatal health outcomes.
- **Long-Term Maternal and Family Well-being:** Consistent emotional and practical support from family and birth companions exerts enduring positive effects on maternal mental health, subsequent parenting behaviors, and overall family system dynamics, fostering a nurturing environment conducive to optimal infant development.

A Triadic Model of Perinatal Support: Maternal-Birth Companion-Healthcare Provider Partnership^{10,11}

Description of Birth Companion Role (Integrated): The function of a birth companion, exemplified by a doula, encompasses diverse roles and responsibilities across the birthing process and early childcare. These include providing continuous labor support, emotional reassurance, physical comfort measures, advocacy for maternal preferences with healthcare providers, and facilitating communication within the maternal-family-healthcare team. The relationship between the doula, mother, family, and healthcare providers is characterized by collaborative efforts to optimize the birthing experience and ensure patient-centered care during labor, delivery, and the early postpartum period.

The Birth Companion: A Triadic Model of Perinatal Support

A birth companion provides continuous emotional, physical, and informational support to the parturient, her family, and the healthcare team throughout the antepartum, intrapartum, and early postpartum periods. The primary objectives are to promote patient autonomy, facilitate

effective communication, and contribute to a safe, respectful, and positive birth experience. Figure 2

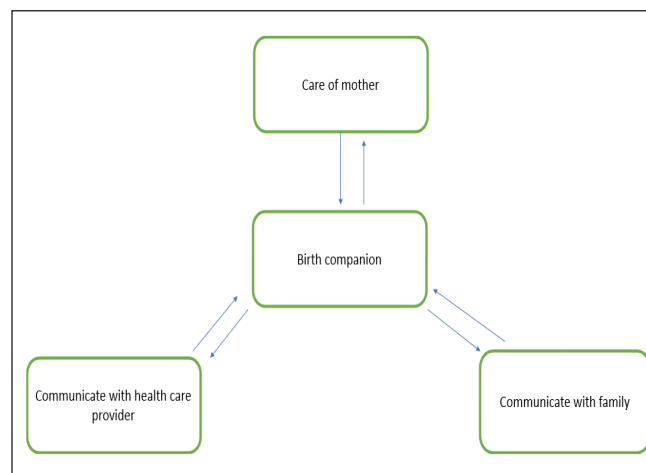


Figure 2. Triadic Model of Perinatal Support Patient-birth companion Relationship: Empowerment and Advocacy⁸

Function

To promote patient empowerment in informed decision-making, advocate for patient needs, and provide consistent emotional, physical, and informational support across the entire perinatal continuum.

Role

- **Antepartum:** Patient education regarding the physiological processes of pregnancy and childbirth, collaborative development of a birth plan, addressing antenatal anxiety, and establishing a therapeutic and trusting relationship.
- **Intrapartum:** Implementation of non-pharmacological pain relief modalities (e.g., massage, optimal fetal positioning), continuous emotional encouragement, articulation of patient preferences to the medical team, and fostering a calm and supportive environment conducive to labor progress.
- **Postpartum:** Lactation support, provision of neonatal care guidance, and assistance with maternal psychological adaptation to parenthood.

Responsibilities

- Conduct consultations with the patient to ascertain preferences and collaboratively formulate a personalized birth plan.
- Maintain continuous presence and support during labor, implementing comfort measures and providing emotional reassurance.
- Facilitate patient comprehension of medical information to enable informed consent and shared decision-making.

- Support the patient's chosen infant feeding method, whether breastfeeding or formula feeding.
- Provide postpartum support during the initial postpartum period, as per the mutually agreed-upon plan.

Relationship

Characterized by trust, support, and patient autonomy. The doula functions as a patient advocate and ally, prioritizing patient needs, preferences, and self-determination.

Birth companion-Family Relationship: Facilitation and Support⁹

Function

To support family integration into the birthing process and neonatal care, ensuring inclusivity, empowerment, and a sense of value, while maintaining respect for the parturient's stated preferences.

Role

- **Antepartum:** Family education regarding the physiological processes of childbirth and practical strategies for supporting the parturient.
- **Intrapartum:** Supporting the partner's role by suggesting comfort measures and emotional support techniques; ensuring family understanding of the labor progression and opportunities for positive contribution.
- **Postpartum:** Guidance to family members in providing practical assistance with neonatal care, household management, and emotional support to the new mother.

Responsibilities

- Engage in consultations with family members to understand expectations and address concerns.
- Enhance family member confidence and competence in their supportive roles during the intrapartum and postpartum periods.
- Facilitate open and respectful communication dynamics between the parturient and her family.

Relationship

Collaborative and family-centered. The doula facilitates active family participation while upholding the parturient's autonomy and preferences as paramount.

Birth companion -Healthcare Provider Relationship: Collaboration and Advocacy^{3,4}

Function

To enhance interprofessional communication between the parturient and the healthcare team, advocate for the parturient's wishes within accepted medical safety parameters, and contribute to the efficient and safe management of the birthing process.

Role

- **Antepartum:** Dissemination of the patient's birth plan to the healthcare team.
- **Intrapartum:** Conveying patient preferences to healthcare personnel, clarifying medical information for patient understanding, and respectfully advocating for patient choices (e.g., mobility, positioning, non-pharmacological analgesia).
- **Postpartum:** Reporting any concerns regarding maternal or neonatal well-being to the healthcare team.

Responsibilities

- Maintain professional and respectful communication with all members of the healthcare team.
- Adhere to scope of practice by not providing medical advice or interfering with medically indicated procedures.
- Advocate for patient preferences while respecting clinical recommendations and ensuring patient safety.

Relationship

Characterized by collaboration, mutual respect, and professionalism. The doula is a collaborative member of the perinatal care team, advocating for patient needs while acknowledging and respecting the healthcare team's expertise and responsibility for medical management and safety.

Core Principles Across All Relationships²

- **Respect:** Demonstrate mutual respect for all individuals involved in the perinatal experience.
- **Communication:** Maintain transparent, clear, and professional communication.
- **Professional Boundaries:** Respect the defined scope of practice for each role, particularly in relation to healthcare providers.
- **Patient Autonomy:** The parturient's wishes, decisions, and well-being are consistently prioritized.

Interprofessional Collaboration: Enhancing Partnerships between Healthcare Providers and birth companion

A robust collaborative partnership between healthcare providers and doulas is crucial for providing comprehensive perinatal support. Strategies to strengthen these relationships include:

- **Promote Open Dialogue:** Healthcare providers should proactively engage in open communication with doulas, including discussion of the patient's birth plan, preferences, and any concerns raised by the doula.
- **Information Sharing:** Ensure transparent communication regarding labor progress, potential clinical interventions, and expected intrapartum and postpartum

management to facilitate informed doula support and patient care.

Recommendations for Integrating Birth Companions in Maternity Care¹¹

Active Engagement of Birth Companions in Patient Care

- **Facilitate Participation:** Integrate birth companions into the patient care paradigm by enabling their involvement in comfort measures during labor and delivery, as well as in discussions pertaining to the maternal care plan.
- **Value Birth Companion Role:** Clinicians should recognize and validate the integral role of birth companions in providing maternal support, acknowledging their contribution as a vital component of the multidisciplinary healthcare team.

Education and Empowerment Strategies for Birth Companions

- **Disseminate Educational Resources:** Provide birth companions with access to appropriate educational materials or structured workshops aimed at enhancing their knowledge of intrapartum support techniques, obstetric procedures, and postpartum care protocols.
- **Implement Healthcare Provider Training:** Ensure that healthcare professionals receive comprehensive training in effective communication and engagement with birth companions, emphasizing the psychosocial dimensions of the birthing process.

Cultivation of a Supportive Clinical Environment

- **Foster a Welcoming Clinical Milieu:** Healthcare facilities should establish a welcoming environment for birth companions, characterized by adaptable policies and designated spaces conducive to birth companion comfort and sense of value within the care setting.
- **Promote Collaborative Teamwork:** Encourage a team-oriented approach that fosters collaborative dynamics among healthcare providers, parturients, and birth companions, emphasizing mutual trust and cooperative care delivery.

Proactive Management of Needs and Concerns

- **Maintain Approachability:** Healthcare providers should maintain approachability and availability to address inquiries or concerns from birth companions, facilitating open dialogue and fostering trust in the provider-patient-companion relationship.
- **Implement Routine Check-ins:** Establish a protocol for regular check-ins with both the parturient and birth companion to proactively address any needs and provide ongoing reassurance throughout the peripartum period.

Continuous Quality Improvement via Feedback Mechanisms

- **Solicit Feedback Systematically:** Postpartum, healthcare providers should actively solicit feedback from both the parturient and her birth companion to identify areas for enhancement in clinical care delivery and communication protocols.
- **Engage in Reflective Practice:** Encourage healthcare providers to engage in reflective practice regarding their interactions with birth companions to refine approaches to maternal care, identifying effective strategies and areas for professional development in this aspect of patient-centered care.

Conclusion

The presence of a birth companion demonstrably enhances the maternal childbirth experience by providing critical emotional, physical, and informational support. Evidence-based studies indicate that birth companions are associated with reduced duration of labor, improved pain management, and decreased rates of medical interventions, ultimately contributing to improved maternal and neonatal outcomes. Beyond the provision of comfort and reassurance, birth companions are instrumental in advocating for maternal preferences and facilitating effective communication with healthcare professionals. Acknowledging the significance of this support modality, prominent organizations such as the World Health Organization and the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare endorse the integration of birth companions into maternity care protocols to optimize maternal well-being and achieve global health targets. Through the cultivation of robust collaborations among birth companions, families, and healthcare personnel, a nurturing and empowering environment for parturients can be established, promoting positive birth experiences.

Conflict of Interest: None

Source of Funding: None

Authors' Contribution:

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted

Technologies in the Writing Process: None

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