

**The Birth Partner: A Complete Guide to
Childbirth for Dads, Doulas, and All Other
Labor Companions, Third Edition**

Penny Simkin

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For 40 years, Penny Simkin has been teaching, devising educational materials, introducing the concept of doula care, and enjoying day-to-day connections with birthing women and practitioners. All this work has reinforced her conviction that women who have companions at their side during labor are likely to give birth with confidence and remember their experiences as positive and empowering.

This *The Birth Partner* expands on the 2001 edition. It contains more information about doulas' skills (the author is a founder of DONA International), a wider variety of techniques used to relieve pain and enhance the mother's sense of well-being, a deepened discussion of "the 3Rs" (relaxation, rhythm, and ritual) for coping with contractions, and updated information about medications, tests, technologies, and interventions, including some prevailing reasons for the increasing rate of first and repeat cesarean births.

It may be difficult to remember that hospital policies once excluded women's partners from labor rooms, midwifery and home births were rare, and birthing centers nonexistent. However, all along, as part of the childbirth education movement, mothers have made it clear that they want companions of their choice to accompany them through labor, as well as the attending physician or midwife. Today, in most places a birthing mother can choose whomever she wants to be at her side.

The book does its utmost to make sure that these loved ones, family members, and friends know about a mother's needs and are sensitive to her wishes. Simkin's strength is that she makes every chapter come alive by setting learning into motion, information into action—once one understands the labor and birth process, there are measures to be taken and things to do.

The four parts of the book—Before the Birth, Labor and Birth, The Medical Side of Childbirth, and After the Birth—describe first, what is happening and the underlying physiological reasons, second, the mother's feelings and needs as well as her partner's, and third, what a partner can do to prepare for both expected and unpredictable eventualities. Chapter 3, "Moving Through the Stages of Labor," contains questions for each phase: What does the mother feel? What does the caregiver do? How might you (the partner) feel? How

can you help? What does a doula do? Subjects in Chapter 7, “Complications in Late Pregnancy, Labor, or Afterward,” range from premature labor and high blood pressure to prolapsed cord and fetal distress. The author’s responses throughout the book are abundant, nonprescriptive, and all clearly garnered from her broad experience with expectant parents’ situations.

Chapter 4, “Comfort Measures for Labor” could serve as a handbook complete in itself. It describes how women may express themselves during labor, creatively adopting their own rhythms and ritualistic patterns to deal with strong contractions and pain. Chapter 5, “Strategies for Challenging Variations in Normal Labor” expands on how partners, in concert with doulas, midwives, nurses, and physicians, can deal with situations as varied as a slow-to-start or a too-rapid labor, encouraging the baby to change position, even handling a birth outside of the planned birthplace. It is unusual and mind-opening to regard these situations as *extra* aspects of normal labor, rather than as problems immediately requiring medical solutions.

Part Three, *The Medical Side of Childbirth*, describes the clear medical reasons for administering tests, technologies, procedures, and drugs, listing the benefits and risks involved, and the disadvantages of their *routine* use, and then mentioning possible alternatives. “Cesarean Birth and Vaginal Birth After Cesarean” critically discusses some current rationales for the increasing cesarean rate, presents medical indications for the operation, and describes what to expect while it is happening, and after.

One point: it seems strange to me that throughout the book, midwives seem to disappear, relegated to the

category of “practitioners,” their traditional supportive techniques actually replaced by those of doulas and partners.

Simkin describes, in everyday, down-to-earth language, the factors shown by current formal evidence-based research to be most beneficial and healthiest for mothers and babies. The concerns she emphasizes—preparation, knowledge, nurturance, and empathy—may not be completely quantifiable, but are absolutely invaluable for birthing mothers. All of the chapters contain useful line illustrations, with easy-to-read charts and checklists, such as Normal Labor in a Nutshell, Positions and Movements for Labor and Birth, and Medications for Pain during Labor.

The Birth Partner offers a bulwark against an expanding arsenal of tests and procedures. It suggests actions and attitudes that can lessen the deleterious effects of medicalized birth and enhance individual women’s experiences. The book has the potential to help reduce or replace the fragmented, technologically oriented maternity care in the United States—but only when a truly significant number of mothers, caregivers, medical organizations, and institutions work in concert to adopt its woman- and family-centered point of view. Lay people and professionals will greatly benefit from the information, advice, and wisdom found in *The Birth Partner* for as long as the present obstetrical system exists, and beyond.

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