

The Doula Effect: How and Why Doulas Help Mothers Have Shorter Labors, Less Pain, and More Satisfying Births

Amy L. Gilliland, Ph.D., BDT(DONA)

I. Bonding and Attachment

A. Bonding is an event that refers to the feelings that parents have for their child
“falling in love”

B. Attachment refers to the feelings that the child develops towards his or her primary caregivers over the first year of life. It is a **process** based on sensitivity and responsiveness to infant cues

Caregivers help infants to *regulate* and *organize* emotions

C. Secure base behavior is exhibited as infants explore the world and experience pain, fear, anxiety

D. *Attachment figure* -mother, father, caregiver, boy/girlfriend, mate, husband/wife, etc.

E. *Attachment behaviors* directed towards someone to elicit comfort and regulate emotions.

II. Doula Labor Support Study: Doulas

Twenty-nine doulas from across North America were interviewed

Doulas represented a variety of locations, practice differences, and experience levels.

None used clinical skills in her doula practice nor in any other job or career.

(since then I have interviewed 15 more doulas for a total of 34 doulas)

Doula Labor Support Study: Mothers

Ten mothers were interviewed in their homes at 8 to 14 weeks postpartum.

All had independent practice doulas; first or second live birth.

Pregnancy was not “high risk”; doula care was continuous, used no clinical skills.

No life threatening complications for mother or baby.

At least one other family member present during labor and birth.

Emergency cesareans were excluded; infant spent no time in the NICU.

(since then I have interviewed 24 additional mothers for a total of 34 mothers)

III. Definition of a Secure Base in Adulthood

In the presence of a trusted companion fear of situations of every kind diminishes; when, by contrast, one is alone, fear of situations of every kind is magnified. Since in the lives of all of us our most trusted companions are our attachment figures, it follows that the degree to which each of us is susceptible to fear turns in great part on whether our attachment figures are present or absent...

Not only must an attachment figure be accessible but he, or she, must be willing to respond in an appropriate way; in regard to someone who is afraid this means willingness to act as comforter and protector. Only when an attachment figure is both accessible and potentially responsive can he, or she, be said to be truly available. (John Bowlby, 1973)

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Secure Base As Described by A Mother

I just felt safe, like protected. Like someone was there that knew what was going on and knew all my options and wanted the best for me, and was, you know, was kind of watching over me. That's how I felt like she was a mother. Just, she's such a caring, loving person, and you know, there were lots of hugs... I think just the, I just felt safe with her, and I know she's such a good woman. Just like mother-nurturer, you know? Like she'd know, I just felt like she knew everything. -Natalie, mother

The doula becomes a secure base for the mother through her continuous presence, genuine encouragement, and comforting touch.

IV. Properties of the Secure Base Function

A: The mother perceives the doula as *Available* to her at all times during labor
The doula is available when the mother first wants her during labor.

The doula's presence is continuous during labor and birth.

B: The doula needs to *perceive the mother's emotional needs accurately*.

C: The *mother is able to trust the doula* to effectively represent her interests during labor, to other people and to the mother herself.

D: The doula is viewed as *strong and capable*, both emotionally and physically.

E: The doula is seen as *having resources*, such as information and knowledge, *which the mother does not possess*.

F. It is the *perception* by the mother of the doula as possessing these resources that is significant, not only their application.

V. How Doula Strategies Support the Secure Base Functions

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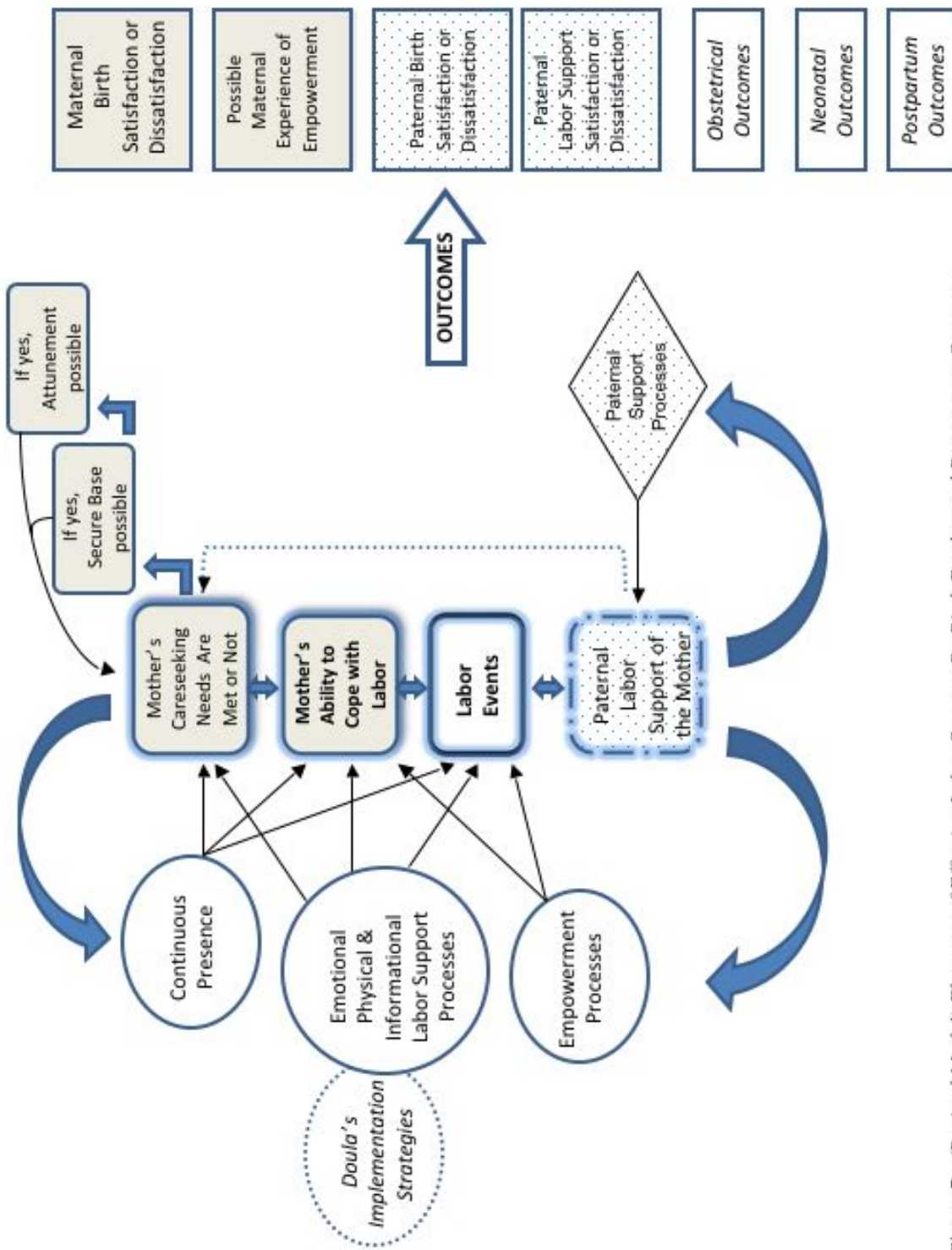


Figure 7. (Revised Model) Elements of Effective Labor Support By Birth Doulas and Postpartum Outcomes

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VI.

Interrelationships between the Secure Base Functions and Support Strategies and Processes

Secure Base Functions:	Availability	Accurately perceive her emotional needs	Effectively represent her interests during labor	Strong and capable, both emotionally and physically	Having resources which the mother does not possess
Level of Strategy	Strategy				
Basic	Continuous Care	X			
Specific	Emotional Support		X	X	X
Specific	Physical Support				X
Specific	Informational Support			X	X
Specific	Advocacy			X	X
Specific	Negotiating Relationships		X	X	X
Implementation	Leading by Following		X		X
Implementation	Showing Up		X		X
Implementation	Be Who She Needs Me To Be	X	X	X	X
Implementation	Mother's Goals are Doula's Goals			X	X

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This table shows how each of the doula's strategies support fulfilling the secure base functions for the mother. The levels of strategy refer to the elements of effective labor support outlined in the Elements of Effective Labor Support figure.

VII. Attunement

- A. ...is the culminating process of effective labor support between mothers and doulas.
- B. ...is the occurrence over time of a rhythmic, patterned, sequence of events where both the doula and the mother feel a sense of trust, oneness, and communication of sensations and the mother's need during the first stage of labor.
- C. begins during the first stage of labor (dilation)
may extend into the second stage (pushing)
if not present during the first stage, it will not begin during second stage.
- D. ...is a complex set of interactive, dynamic processes involving all of the people present, events of the birth, and actions of the doula.
- E. ...cannot be created by the doula, however the doula can work to create conditions where attunement is likely to occur.
- F. ...is "the acts and processes that let other people know that you are feeling something very like what they are feeling" -Daniel Stern, 1985
- G. ...is an outgrowth of the mother's labor rhythm and coping ritual. (Simkin, 1989, 2013)
- H. Doula's experience of attunement is all encompassing & non-verbal

"Oftentimes you know what they need without them speaking. I don't know if its reading body language or what, but it's like you're definitely in it together. It's not something that comes and goes. Like when I'm with a woman in labor, I have every contraction with her. I'm not thinking about what I'm making for dinner or any other thing. It's totally consuming for me. Unless I need to pee." [laughs] - Marci, doula

VIII. Conditions for Attunement (See Attunement Diagram)

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IX. Affect Attunement Between Mother and Infant (Daniel Stern)

A. Describes the acts and processes through which the mother lets the infant know that she understands her child's internal feeling state.

B. Three conditions are necessary for this non-verbal process to occur:

1. Respondent reads the feeling state from the overt behavior.
2. Respondent performs some behavior that is not a strict imitation but nonetheless corresponds in some way to the communicator's overt behavior.
3. The communicator must be able to read this corresponding response as having to do with their own original feeling experience and not just imitating their behavior.

C. Matching Behaviors are:

1. Cross Modal: Visual, Kinesthetic and Auditory
2. Head nodding; Facial expressions; Eye contact; Sounds
3. Level of intensity is matched in different modes
4. Changes of intensity over time are matched

X. Conclusions

Doula care is more complex than we have imagined.

Maternal attachment needs arise during labor and the doula is uniquely suited to meet those needs.

Doulas use a variety of strategies to meet mother's needs and involve complicated mental and behavioral processes to provide effective labor support.

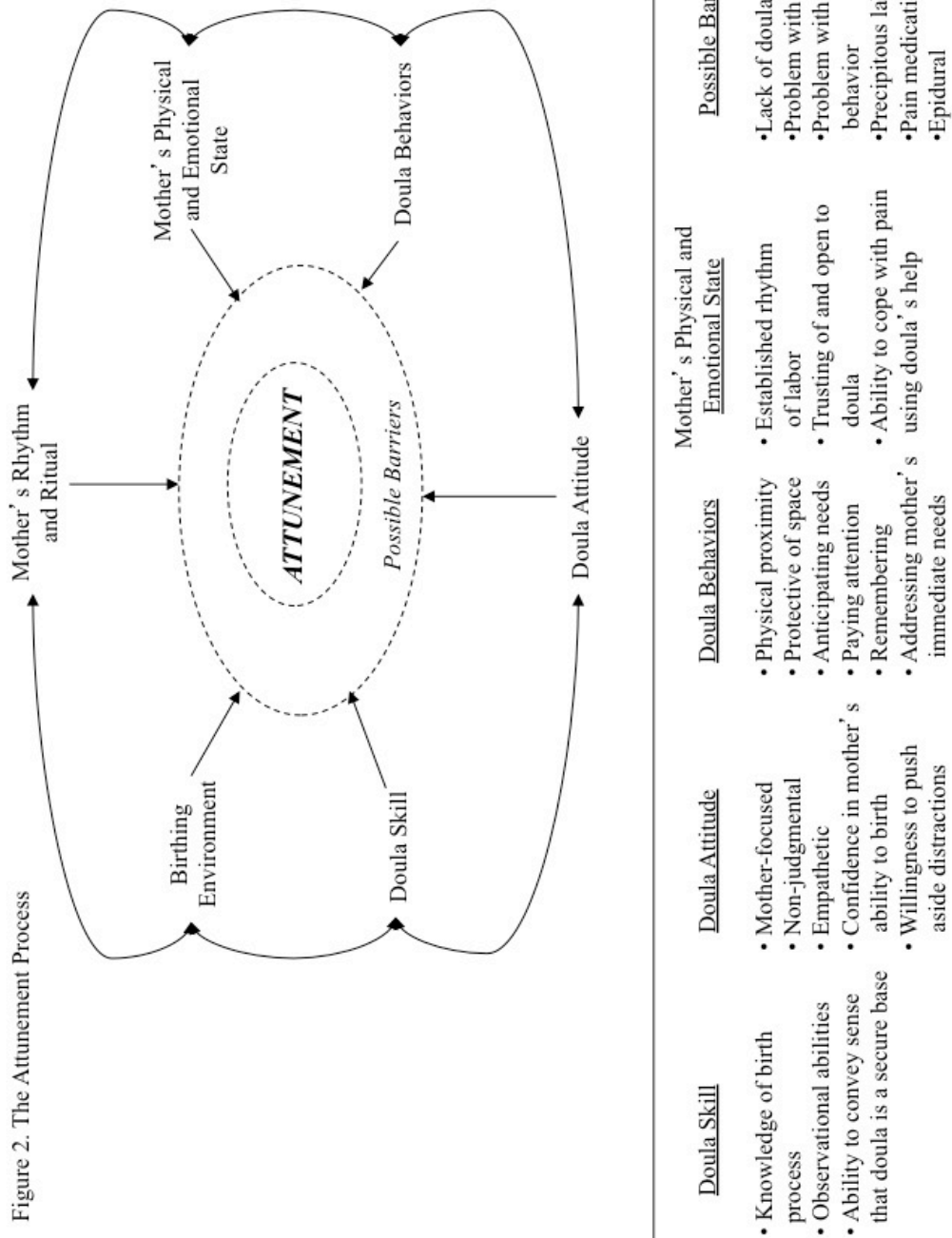
Future Questions

If mothers are cared for sensitively during labor and their attachment needs are met, do they become happier or better mothers? Do they care for their infants more sensitively? Is the attachment system between mother and infant affected by effective doula support? Between father and infant?

Does empowerment of the mother during labor make a difference in her "fierce mothering" of her infant?

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