



HELPING

Giving birth is a momentous occasion, and who you have in the room with you when it happens can have a huge effect on your experience, says **GREGOR STRONACH**.

So who will you choose to be your birth partner?

I was present at my son's birth and I loved every minute of it. By which I mean I lingered up the top end of the bed, away from the 'business end' of proceedings, and made what I thought were appropriately soothing sounds whenever my wife had a contraction. She crushed my hand, had a few choice words for me about the pain, and then begged for – and got – an epidural, after which things calmed down a bit.

When baby Liam arrived, I couldn't think of any place in the world that I would rather have been. Talking with my dad about it the following night over a beer or two, however, I realised something: he hadn't been there when I was born.

Not because he didn't want to be, but because it just wasn't the done thing.

TIMES GONE BY

As recently as the early 1970s, the very idea of a father being present at the birth of his child was unacceptable, and the role fathers played on the big day usually involved pacing around a waiting room, getting ready to hand out cigars.

However, social attitudes and practices surrounding childbirth have changed a fair bit over the years – especially when it comes to choosing a birth partner. Dads, grandmothers, doulas and even the occasional BFF have been given the nod by women around the country and, as a result, women have more options now than ever before.



HANDS

“There’s been a marked change in the choices of birthing partners for mums over the past 20 years,” says Robyn Dempsey, a Sydney midwife in private practice. “As hospital staffing levels fall, the attention women get from the hospital midwives is dropping off. They are there, primarily, to monitor the mother and baby and will often have two or three labouring women ‘on the go’ at one time. They can’t be there to give 100 per cent, focused support, which is why the right support person is crucial for a woman in labour.”

But it’s a pretty big decision, and one that shouldn’t be made lightly. So what are your options in terms of choosing a birth partner, and what are the pros and cons of each?



PARTNER PITCH: THE FATHER

Anecdotally, having the baby’s dad along for the ride seems to be the most common choice. Most women expect that the father will be there and most dads feel the same way – the days of fathers hovering tensely in waiting rooms are long gone. The end result: dads in the delivery room, trying valiantly to be as supportive as possible while gently freaking out at seeing their nearest and dearest in pain.

“Having the father there is really important,” says Robyn, “provided, of course, that he wants to be there. If he doesn’t, then he’s not going to be as much help as he could be.”

But there are some fundamentally solid reasons for having Dad in the delivery room, chief among them that it will provide an excellent chance for him to be a part of the delivery and share the experience with the mother of the baby.

CASE FOR:

- ✓ He’s the dad and has an emotional link to both you and the baby.
- ✓ Usually you’ll know him – and he’ll know you – better than anybody else in the world.
- ✓ It’s a great way to help with bonding, and the shared experience is something that you’ll both remember forever. >



CASE AGAINST:

- ✗ It can be hard for partners to remain objective in times of high stress, particularly when it's their partner who's in pain.
- ✗ Having the father there can have an influence on how the mother behaves, and in some cases can be inhibiting for her.
- ✗ Some fathers simply aren't prepared to be at the birth, but may feel that they cannot say no.

**PARTNER PITCH:
A FEMALE RELATIVE
OR FRIEND**

This option harks back to the way things used to be done. The women of the village, history tells us, would gather at the home of the woman giving birth, usher the men out and get to work delivering the baby.

"The female relative or friend is a bit of a double-edged sword," Robyn explains. "If they've had a baby of their own, they can end up bringing their own fears and preconceptions to the delivery."

These days, it's not entirely unusual for a woman to want her mother or sister in the delivery room. It makes sense, as they're probably among the most trusted people in her life and are a good option, especially if the father's either not in the picture, or too squeamish to be of any use on the big day.

"If you're thinking of asking your mother, remember that your mum's role in your life is a very protective one and something that could cloud her judgement if she needs to advocate on your behalf," Robyn says.

CASE FOR:

- ✓ Mums and sisters are most likely to be people you're extremely close to and comfortable with.

- ✓ Having Mum there can be one of the most comforting things for a new mother.
- ✓ Your mum understands you well enough to know how you're likely to react to certain stresses, and can act accordingly.

CASE AGAINST:

- ✗ Unless you've thoroughly talked through your views on giving birth, there could be a generational gap in knowledge and practices.
- ✗ Some midwives believe that having someone too close to the mum-to-be as the support person can be a hindrance in the delivery room.
- ✗ Asking a friend can be tough and she needs to be 100 per cent committed to be as helpful as she can.

**PARTNER PITCH:
A DOULA**

The role of a doula during birth lies somewhere between midwife and birthing partner, but with a strong focus on the emotional wellbeing of the mum-to-be. Doulas don't take the place of any medically trained staff at the birth, and a competent doula will not eclipse the father's role in the process at all.

Gwen Teasdale, a Hunter Valley doula with eight years' experience, is very positive about her role in the birthing process. "I love that I get to work really intimately with a couple and support them through something so important," she says. "That's why you want to make sure that you get someone who's in line with your values, and will support you in what you want for your birth experience."

Having a doula can work well if the father of the baby isn't entirely confident in his role, but would still like to be present at the birth.

And if Dad isn't 100 per cent sure about being part of the birth, a doula can help there, too.

"When they engage the doula, the fathers often step back in, because the pressure's off," Gwen says. "And those dads often end up being fantastic support people."

CASE FOR:

- ✓ A doula isn't governed by shifts – she'll be there from beginning to end.
- ✓ If you have organised your doula well before the big day and she's been helping with your pregnancy, continuity of care is a huge bonus when it comes time to deliver bub.
- ✓ Doulas are objective and can be very effective advocates for you in the delivery room. An experienced doula will know how to communicate on your behalf with medical staff.

CASE AGAINST:

- ✗ Doulas cost money – and some don't come cheap.
- ✗ Making sure the doula's a good fit for you can be a time-consuming exercise.
- ✗ If you don't get to know your doula well before the birth, she can be another 'stranger' in the room.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

At the end of the day, the choice is in the hands of the mum-to-be – after all, you're doing all the heavy lifting on the big day and the birth partner's just there to make sure you've got the support that you need.

As Robyn says, "Ultimately, it has to be someone that you can trust, 100 per cent." And whether that's the father of the baby, a female relative or someone who you've paid to be there, as long as you are all comfortable with your decision, then it's probably the right one. ★