



Mothering the Mother without Being a Mother

By Krista Maltais, B.S. Family Studies, PCD(DONA), CLC

Postpartum doulas are supposed to mother the mother; they draw on their education, training, passion and experiences to help women find their way into motherhood. Many postpartum doulas are mothers themselves and are able to connect with their female clients through this special relationship. However, not all doulas are mothers; in fact, I am not a mother. When I first began my doula training, I was 23 years old. I had recently graduated from college and knew that I wanted to work with postpartum women and their families. I completed my preparation work, attended a DONA approved postpartum doula workshop and was lucky enough to join the local doula group in my area. I was as ready for my first client as I could be and yet, like so many women, I doubted myself and my abilities. I asked myself again and again as I awaited the birth of my first client's baby, "Who am I to tell someone about transitioning into parenthood when I myself have never been on that journey?"

The right qualifications

This question formed into a doubt that plagued me in my early days as a postpartum doula and would resurface occasionally if I encountered questions about my age or motherhood status. Would someone not hire me because of my youth? Would a client not take my suggestions because I did not have the right type of experience? Would other birth and postpartum professionals not take me seriously or think of me as an equal? Would I not be able to mother the mother since I was not a mother?

I have spent years working and learning about families. I graduated *summa cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in family studies; since then, I have worked as an adjunct professor at a reputable local college

teaching in the Early Childhood Education Department. I have become trained and certified as a lactation counselor and postpartum doula and I have become an active member of the local doula group in my area. I have worked hard to become an informed, professional postpartum doula and these experiences have helped to build my confidence.

I know, by most standards, I am well-educated and prepared for my work and yet two statements seem to diminish my accomplishments and threaten my expertise—"You are much younger than I expected" and "Oh, so you don't have your own children." While I have only heard these statements a handful of times (at a prenatal interview or by a visiting grandparent for example), it is enough to make my hidden doubts resurface and bring out my self-consciousness.

I DOUBTED MYSELF AND MY ABILITIES

Relinquishing doubts

It is at these moments, when I fear that I am not the right kind of doula that I think back to my doula training and the time I spent with my first client. I remember that our job as postpartum doulas is not to have all the answers or tell clients how to be parents. Our job is to listen, observe, encourage and assist our clients so that they may gain the confidence and skills needed to take care of their children for the rest of their lives. I also remember that as I worked with my first client, my age and non-mother status meant very little to her. What was important was sitting together and listening to her fears and joys, holding the baby so she could take a hot shower and spend time with her older



child and continually assuring her that she was a great mother. The realization that I do not have to be a certain age or be a mother in order to be a proficient doula is something I continue to rediscover with each additional postpartum family I work with. This has changed my perspective profoundly and helped me to overcome my ever-nagging self doubts.

Perhaps for some people, age is equated with experience and being a mother is associated with understanding. It is true that I have yet to reach 30 or suffer a mid-life crisis, but I have calmed more babies, comforted more parents and learned more about how families develop than the average person; those are all valuable experiences. It is true that I have not created, carried and welcomed my own children into this world and that I cannot empathize with the women I serve, but I can sympathize over the challenges and achievements that occur daily when dealing with children; and in this way, I can understand. I can listen, I can assist, I can comfort and I can encourage. With these abilities, I am confident that I can be a postpartum doula. I have discovered that I can mother the mother without being a mother.



Krista Maltais is a DONA certified postpartum doula and certified lactation counselor living in the Seacoast, New Hampshire area. Since her first client four years ago, she has worked with dozens of postpartum families and has developed her business, Koru Care Postpartum

Doula Services. When Krista does become a mother, she will do so with her husband and a DONA birth doula by her side.