

Fourth Trimester Podcast

Episode 68: How To Handle Visitors When You Have A New Baby

Sarah Trott: [00:00:05] My name is Sarah Trott. I'm a new mama to a baby girl and this podcast is all about postpartum care for the few months following birth, the time period also known as the Fourth Trimester. My postpartum doula, Esther Gallagher, is my co-host. She's a mother, grandmother, perinatal educator, birth and postpartum care provider. I've benefited hugely from her support. All parents can benefit from the wisdom and support that a postpartum Doula provides. Fourth trimester care is about the practical, emotional and social support parents and baby require, and importantly, helps set the tone for the lifelong journey of parenting.

When I first became pregnant, I had never heard of postpartum Doulas, let alone knew what they did. So much of the training and preparation that expecting parents do is focused on the birth and newborn care. Once a baby is born, often the first interaction parents have with medical or child professionals, other than the first pediatrician visits, is the six-week checkup with the OB/GYN. *What about caring for mama and family between the birth and the six week doctor visit? What are the strategies for taking care of the partner and the rest of the family while looking after your newborn?*

Our podcasts contain expert interviews with specialists from many fields to cover topics including postpartum doula practices, prenatal care, prenatal and postnatal yoga, parenting, breastfeeding, physical recovery from birth, nutrition, newborn care, midwifery, negotiating family visitation, and many more.

First-hand experience is shared through lots of stories from both new and seasoned parents. Hear what other parents are asking and what they have done in their own lives.

We reference other podcasts, internet resources and real-life experts who can help you on your own parenting journey. Visit us at <http://fourthtrimesterpodcast.com>

Sarah Trott: [00:00:50] Today we have a great topic which is all about visitation and visitors and it's a topic we've touched on and discussed as part of other episodes. But today this is a dedicated deep dive on the subject. So Esther you've had so much experience working with postpartum parents and this subject comes up constantly from what you tell me.

Esther Gallagher: [00:01:17] Yes, it does. And you know when I'm fortunate enough to be working with clients who I'll be both their birth doula and their postpartum doula we usually have an opportunity to speak about what it's going to look like when you're postpartum and who's going to visit and why and how and what they need to maybe know to make good decisions around that.

Esther Gallagher: [00:01:44] But I do find that it's an interesting situation when I'm on the other side not having worked with clients prenatally. And it's always interesting whether or not but, when I'm working with them just for postpartum care, often these questions are coming up in the first two weeks. And, or, situations are arising that are either quite lovely or to be brutally honest, very, very stressful for new parents when visitors arrive and really just either don't understand or don't want to understand how vulnerable new parents are on every level.

Esther Gallagher: [00:02:36] So I thought it's time for us to just do that little deep dive. And I want to reiterate something from past episodes and say that while I will be speaking using the term breastfeeding parents specifically I am not emotionally excluding any parent.

Esther Gallagher: [00:03:04] Ok. I think that as I've said in the past the metaphors of how we care for our children are deep and abiding. And while I do have the tendency to focus on the physiology of breastfeeding and the hormone changes and all the things that are happening simultaneously there is always so much going on when there is a new family member in the home. And there's quite a lot of adjustment that has to happen and it's always lovely if people can be very, very respectful of that reality.

Esther Gallagher: [00:03:51] And I'm hoping this podcast episode will address not only the why but perhaps a little bit of the how. Sarah is going to jump in with questions and so we'll just get started. So I want to say that you know when there's there's a new baby in the house, everything's disrupted. Sleep is disrupted. Eating is disrupted. Self care: brushing your teeth, going to the toilet, brushing your hair, like all of the daily routines are disrupted as you are responding to somebody whose needs are 24/7 and broken up in very very short increments. Whether that's eating or sleeping. Relative to their developmental stage.

Esther Gallagher: [00:05:02] So, it's sometimes difficult for people who haven't been pregnant and or haven't been going through the adoption process where everything is on somebody else's time frame to walk into your home and be sensitive to that very fundamental fact that you are biologically, emotionally, socially and spiritually attuned to somebody who at any moment will fall asleep, wake up, need a diaper change, burping. Rinse and repeat.

Esther Gallagher: [00:05:46] And that doesn't seem like such a big deal. People show up we visit is no big deal. I have to take care of the baby. But if you are doing that on little or no sleep. If that baby's sleeping while your visitor is there, that two hour nap you might have had, could be the nap of the day that keeps you sane for the rest of the 12 hours that you're up against currently.

Esther Gallagher: [00:06:15] So, I'm going to go through my little list of things that it would be really really lovely if our listeners - particularly those who don't have babies - could really think about and really really take into consideration and wrap your minds and hearts around before you decide that it's important for you to visit somebody with a brand new baby.

Esther Gallagher: [00:06:54] At the top of my list is that parents with new babies especially in the first three months. And all the more especially in the first 6 weeks because babies are not in any kind of rhythm or routine yet that their parents really must sleep when the baby sleeps. If they're not sleeping when the baby sleeps they cannot

possibly accrue enough restorative sleep - enough rest that will help their wounds heal, their minds stabilize, their cardiovascular system come into a healthy place.

Esther Gallagher: [00:07:50] I mean all of the things that have to happen physiologically when you're healing and recovering from giving birth have to now happen in small increments. Nobody says hey go sleep for 12 hours. It'll be OK. And that's especially true if you're a breastfeeding mother. There is no way your body is going to let that happen. Your breast will be waking up to feed that baby whether or not the baby is awake sometimes. So sleep is critical and parents need to sleep when babies are sleeping.

Esther Gallagher: [00:08:29] So if you're not somebody who can show up, go in the kitchen and prepare the food that you've brought over, feed those parents while their baby is awake breastfeeding and notice Oh the baby's asleep now maybe it's time for the parents to go lie down. If you're not that person you probably don't belong in the household. If somebody has a baby under the age of six weeks old. And I know that's really strong. But I'm going to just say that I'm the person who shows up after you've been there and sees how wrecked new moms and their partners (if they have partners) are after your visit.

Esther Gallagher: [00:09:25] A corollary of this is that new parents cannot entertain. So if you show up thinking that they're going to make you lunch and boil water for your tea and sit for three hours and hear all about your life. And what's going on and discuss the terrible news - political social and otherwise - then you really don't do not understand what is going on for parents of babies under the age of six weeks let alone three months.

Sarah Trott: [00:10:03] Well Esther I mean we've been dying to see this baby, we've been so excited. We threw a baby shower. We love the baby. How else is the parent going to know that we love them if we don't show up?

Esther Gallagher: [00:10:16] Well there's lots of ways they can know that. That's a brilliant question. And I'm going to start with the hard news which is just

because you love the baby, you are not entitled to a visit. OK. There are lots of ways to communicate your love. You can write a card. You can send an e-mail. You can send the gift of food. You can help pay for the postpartum doula.

Esther Gallagher: [00:10:46] You can ask politely in a non obtrusive way: What are the ways that you think would be really helpful to you right now while you're healing and recovering and learning about your new baby? You can think about how patient you might want to be and communicate how patient you're willing to be between now and whenever those parents determine that in fact they are ready and able to have a visit. And you can respect whatever boundaries those parents have expressed in terms of that. We are not ready. We need two to six weeks to integrate these big changes we're going through. We love you. We're looking forward to seeing you. But we need some space around ourselves to heal and recover.

Sarah Trott: [00:11:56] So let's say I'm mom and I thought about this beforehand and I told my friends I'll probably need some downtime. I've been thinking about it. I'll let you know when I'm ready. I'm so excited to show with my baby - don't I need to just buck up and make it work and warm some hors d'oeuvres and open the champagne and show my perfect baby?

Esther Gallagher: [00:12:21] Well that's so lovely because of course parents very much are so you know excited and proud. Most of the time and really right out of the gate can make some big mistakes about all that because they feel so good on day 2 that they say to people oh my gosh we can't wait. And then by day five when they've invited friends over they're a little bit of a train wreck and they really can't handle it right. And you probably remember the changes right Sarah like the first couple days postpartum, you are sort of surprised how great you felt. I know I was. And that was a long time ago I remember this 40 years ago.

Sarah Trott: [00:13:08] What I slept so great that first day that was fantastic. Wow. And my baby just slept so well.

Esther Gallagher: [00:13:15] Yeah. Yes. But things are changing so dramatically from day to day. Any plans that we make today really really could be subject hopefully to veto on the day that we planned them for. And so that's another approach - that's something to keep in your back pocket. You can say to people hey we're thinking we'd like to have you over and we're thinking that you know Thursday afternoon at 2:00 o'clock would be good. We know that things can change quickly with the baby. And we can't promise a visit that will last even an hour. But if you feel like you want to perhaps drop by from two to three, we'll see how it goes. And I just want to warn you based on the advice of my postpartum doula that it may be that within the hour of seeing you as last minute as half an hour or so we may have to call and say we just can't do it. We just cannot do it today.

Esther Gallagher: [00:14:28] So if you have those kinds of friends and family let's hope you do that can hear that and understand that you know something about your experience. Then you're kind of good to go. Right. The best thing about all of this would be if people can retain a kind of imminent flexibility around these questions and not make any solid plans I mean the problems that new parents run into again and again and again because we live in this long distance neo local society is they tell their parents they're pregnant and what their due date is and their parents have already bought the plane ticket, and don't want to change it for some reason. So that's again the other situation where we run into problems of the same nature.

Sarah Trott: [00:15:34] This is not black and white. You might really really get the support you need from a parent or good friend who has bought their plane ticket. What are the signs or signals of when it's a good thing versus less good thing?

Esther Gallagher: [00:15:51] Well I like to always say to my clients I want to sit quietly with this question. I have no judgments. And you know these people. You know their strengths and their weaknesses vis-à-vis everything we've discussed. You know whether they're the person you would call up if you know had to be hospitalized for some reason. Right. So. When I'm working prenatally with couples I ask them to sit quietly with themselves and each other if they have each other and ask themselves

really without any form of denial without the love you have for these people getting in the way so to speak.

Esther Gallagher: [00:16:49] Each of these people whose acts have they have expressed the desire to help them in some way to show up for you in some way to visit you. And they've told you when they want to come whenever those that list of people is, go through individually and make really good decisions about whether or not this is somebody who you trust to be in your presence in a nonjudgemental way in a non egocentric way in a loving and helpful way if there in your home visiting you.

Esther Gallagher: [00:17:28] Are they somebody that you can say gee I'm tired now. The baby is sleeping I'm going to go take a rest, I can't talk any longer. That that person can go entertain themselves outside your home and either return at an appropriate time or spend the rest of the day. Like just remembering to stop and not just have to say yes to everybody.

Esther Gallagher: [00:17:59] And then the second part of that would be to think about how you can communicate to people in advance about things like the kind of bandwidth you're having. So I kind of went over that earlier. But you can sort of set the stage plant the seed so to speak and say things like when we're ready for visitors, short, helpful visits are going to be what we can integrate. And then you tell people you know everybody gets the same messages one e-mail sent to everybody. Right. So there is no unfairness for not directing one set of people one way and another set of people another way but grocery shopping, laundry, meal and snack preparation, baby care in the form of diaper changes and burping out while you have a chance to use the vacuum yourself. So these are simple tasks most people ought to know how to do them. If they don't know how to do any of these tasks they don't belong in your house for six weeks honestly. Because how can they be helpful?

Esther Gallagher: [00:19:22] I mean I think you know if they can hold the baby while you're going to the bathroom I mean even people who are somewhat infirm or elderly if they can hold the baby and they want to hold a baby. And they have a way to get into their home and out of your home safely in a timely fashion. Great. Right. And I think you

know I think just having a realistic idea of what people are capable of and frankly what they're not capable of if they're not capable of not telling their terrible story of birth and postpartum to you when you're in the thick of your own story which may or may not be terrible. You know if they're not capable of containment, you might think twice about whether you're ready for them when you're in that very very emotionally vulnerable state of the first six weeks postpartum.

Esther Gallagher: [00:20:52] Another bit of advice I've given to some parents which has worked for some parents but been mildly disastrous for others is the idea that you're going to wait for a month or two. And then you get to have a two hour potluck and everybody gets to come and everybody brings food. And you'll have some non parental adult who is the host. So you designate that truly stellar friend. Maybe it's a friend who put on your shower for you before you have the baby. And they're the host. And that way you can leave. You can go upstairs to your own bedroom and that's a good place for you to take a break get a nap while people are partying or you show up for an hour eat other people's potluck offerings and then you go before other people leave and they can party and you can get out of there. Because your actual physical bandwidth through something like this is going to be very short. But this way everyone who isn't sick can show up in one place, say hello to you, see your gorgeous baby, give you well wishes having you with you. And then you're off the hook. Everyone's gotten that thing. They say they wanted.

Sarah Trott: [00:22:42] I love that idea of having a gathering. Everyone comes in is exactly the time you need. You know it's when baby is going to be awake, ideally and it's great event to eat.

Esther Gallagher: [00:22:54] Yeah. And it's limited right. It's clearly boundaries by what mom. Can do. If she has to show up a little late. Nobody's going to get hurt if she has to leave a little early. Nobody's going to be hurt.

Esther Gallagher: [00:23:14] You know now that we've sort of hit some of the how tos. I'm going to circle around to the whys and I'm going to start by saying this and that's that parents in that first three months are in such a state of physiological, social, emotional,

and spiritual transition. And that's an energetic process. It can become exhausting for some at it very quickly. [00:23:50] And what [00:23:51] can be exacerbating of that is when the attention and energy is drawn away from them in this project to something that they really don't have the energy for which is pretty much everything. In my many years of observation and this is why I say again & again that to new parents and about new parents that you don't owe anyone your birth story. That each time you tell your birth story if it is not a moment of joy and empowerment that you are not obligated to revisit things about your experience with people other than those people who you wish to. Just because you went through it that can become traumatizing and that you should not be put in a position to have to manage others at all. It's all you have the bandwidth for to get from one meal to the next one sleep to the next one toilet break to the next. And half the time to just enjoy being in the presence of your new person. And your family. So. Really I just encourage new parents to make a lot of spaciousness around themselves.

[00:25:34] The reality in our culture as Sarah you'll remember is that if you haven't had a home birth, you're going to be expected to leave your home to go to a pediatrician's visit. You're going to be expected to leave your home to go to you know obstetrical follow up visit maybe not until 6 weeks but you might be ready at six weeks. You're going to be asked to take care of yourself at this speed and on the timeline and schedule of others in the American medical system. That's already too much. So, being able to just have the spacious to rest, to recover, to begin to make sense of all of this to go through the joy and grief and stress and excitement to experience those things fully in the time that they are happening. Right. You cannot postpone a baby's growth spurt. They're going through it whether or not you're ready. Whether or not you'll have time to recover. You can't postpone a breastfeed -the baby needs to eat. They need to eat.

[00:27:09] Right. So all of these elements. You cannot post around. Day three when your estrogen and progesterone hormone levels dive into the toilet and you feel irritable and anxious that that's going to happen whether you're ready for it or not. And so to make some time and space around yourself some protection for yourself and that vulnerability and to have onboard people around you who will do so on your behalf is no small thing.

[00:27:48] Birth is usually very often accompanied by wounding. You will have physical wounds and perhaps emotional social wounds that need time to repair. You can't postpone that. Your body's going to do the best it can with all of this. You need time to integrate the changes that breastfeeding is going to create for you. So all of these things just need a nice big soft nest around the mother and the family when they are happening.

[00:28:30] And as you know from listening to this podcast listeners that I am somebody who thinks that the message that moms should just back up and push through is unkind, uncompassionate, and potentially very very dangerous for new moms Physiologically, Mental health wise, certainly emotionally. So I think that covers what I think is important for parents to be new parents. And everybody who might be in their purview as well as those of you who are not planning to be parents currently who don't have any friends that might be going to have babies any time soon. We all need to know these things about this transition in people's lives. After all we were all babies during that transition in life and no doubt experienced what ever was going on ourselves. Whether or not we remember it. And I think in respect to babies and new mothers it wouldn't hurt if all of us learned about this transitional state and how to respect and honor it appropriately.

Sarah Trott: [00:30:04] Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom. Esther as always we have learned so much from you about this topic in particular. I would love to follow up with you on this subject as it relates to outside help for the family because I think these topics can be confusing and overlap.

Sarah Trott: [00:30:24] You're setting boundaries and protecting the new parent and the baby experience for what's best for rest and recovery and bonding and self identity and all of these major topics right out the gate. But then also there's the other topic of how do I get the support I do need. Which is different from visitors. It's different from people dropping off a gift. It's different from people wanting to cuddle your baby and say hi. So let's let's talk about that next time.

Esther Gallagher: [00:30:54] I think it's a great subject. Thanks Sarah.

Sarah Trott: [00:31:00] Thanks as always. So I think now is a good time for us to sign off I want to remind all of our listeners that we have a website which is fourthtrimesterpodcast.com. Please go and sign up for our newsletter so you can be reminded of every time we publish an article and hear other great stuff from us too which is outside of the podcast. So take you listeners. We love you so much.

[00:31:23] Hang in there share the podcast with every new and expecting parent in your life and we'll talk to you next time.

Sarah Trott: You can find out more about Esther Gallagher on <http://www.esthergallagher.com/>. You can also subscribe to this podcast in order to hear more from us. [Click here for iTunes](#) and [click here for Google Podcasts](#). Thank you for listening everyone and I hope you'll join us next time on the Fourth Trimester. The theme music on this podcast was created by Sean Trott. Hear more at <https://soundcloud.com/seantrott>. Special thanks to my true loves: my husband Ben, daughter Penelope, and baby girl Evelyn. Don't forget to share the Fourth Trimester Podcast with any new and expecting parents. I'm Sarah Trott. Goodbye for now.