

Fourth Trimester Podcast

Episode 108 How Partners Can Prepare for Parenthood (The Power of Snuggling)

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: [00:00:01] Hi, this is Sarah Trott and welcome back to the Fourth Trimester podcast. Esther and I are here today to talk about a great topic, which is fatherhood and partners, and the role that partners play through preparing for birth, the birth and postpartum. And so we have a great discussion planned for you around that. So we'll dive right in.

Sarah Trott: [00:00:28] And before we do, I want to remind you that we have a website which is fourthtrimesterpodcast.com where you can go and sign up for our newsletter, and you can have resources and information delivered straight to your inbox. Please also hit subscribe or follow wherever you listen to this podcast. It's a great way of supporting us, and you will also be alerted every time we release a new episode.

Sarah Trott: [00:00:59] So here we are. Esther. Hi there. This topic came up for us, in part because it's just something that you discuss often with couples around preparing for birth. And it's something that we've always wanted to discuss and record together. but I'd love for you to just give us all some context and tee up the conversation a little bit from your perspective.

Esther Gallagher: [00:01:41] Sure. Because I've been doing this work for 32 years in Bay area specifically. And also this work prior to that, but in a very different way and in a very different context. One of the through lines over these now 32 years that I've picked up on is that so much of the conversation even just during interviews when people are just wanting to reach out, get to know me and find out whether or not they want to work with me as their birth and postpartum doula, tends to want to circle back to what I'll put in a kind of large, fluffy box called "practical matters". Right? And it's sometimes the only thing people can actually talk about.

Esther Gallagher: [00:02:52] But when you make enough room, maybe even massage the conversation enough, what starts to kind of. Come up. Is that, mom / the pregnant bodied person, is really reaching for a sense of being held and safety and, you can see the sort of the low level or not necessarily low level of anxiety just kind of simmering away there. And partners often move more and more than into the practical. What do we need? Even when they're talking about skills, right? Like what? What do I need to be

able to do? What do I have to know how to do? And, Okay. You know, two very valid camps, right? I think it's easy in this culture to get set up with a list of to dos that are very practical, and even then, not nearly enough guidance on is this really practical? Is this really necessary? Does your baby really need this? If your baby has this thing, is it going to make your life actually easier? Are you going to find the thing you're looking for?

Esther Gallagher: [00:04:28] At least I think one of you is looking for if there's two or more in this conversation, which is intimacy, safety, love. You know, I like to call it the oxytocin bubble. The love bubble, you know. And is it gonna and and and if not, what? What's going to be the result, right? The fallout from not having maybe set aside this sort of focusing our anxiety on practical stuff ... And stuff. I can't underline the stuff part enough. Right?

Esther Gallagher: [00:05:19] Instead of then turning towards a thing that might feel more difficult. Because we're so poorly prepared to be doing that in this culture, which is sitting on the couch, snuggling up close together, getting into a sense of ease in the body, setting aside and and with skill. And we'll talk about this more skillfully, setting aside all the past and the future mindset and turning that's always there, to be truly present in this moment. And then, allow for the sorts of interactions that will deepen that sense of safety, that sense of ease, that sense of being held by something that is your relationship that feels healthy and safe.

Esther Gallagher: [00:06:37] We really put people on the nine month timeline of like, here's all the things on your to do list. And often that falls squarely on the pregnant person, right? You have to make sure that these things all get done. And then that pregnant person is thinking, oh, well, it's my job to manage this project. I have to be the manager. I have to make sure everyone else knows what to do, or I have to assume that they know what to do. And if I just give them a job, that that job will be accomplished, hopefully on my behalf. I mean, that's a secret wish, is that people care enough about me to show me that they do by doing these things for me. And there's a problem in there.

Because the problem is, none of us is very well prepared to know what those things are. Let alone have the skill set to actually show up for those things. I mean, anyone can cook. If they learn how to write, anyone can clean a house. Well, if they learn how, anyone can prepare a sitz bath if they learn how, But when it comes to being a family in this culture. The evidence is that not anyone can show up, be present, be mindful, be open to what is. And not what we wish was happening, but what actually is. In a way that doesn't exacerbate anxiety and all its concomitants, which necessarily, then is going to bring down the level of oxytocin and bring up the level of cortisol.

Esther Gallagher: [00:08:44] And I know on this show we must have spoken about because it's my I bang on about this a whole lot, That the whole project of becoming a family. Is learning. How to lower cortisol and raise oxytocin. That's it. Sounds easy is not because we've got so much training that is geared towards doing the opposite. Right? Yeah. So. I don't have any easy answers for this, but I do have the suggestion which I make again and again and again and again on this program and everywhere I turn. Which is, we would all do well to invest that money that would have gone to the newest Snazziest stroller, which we don't need because somebody has one they can give us. Right? Yeah. And for the same money, invest in an eight week mindfulness-based stress reduction course. Right? Sounds fancy. But it's learning how to practice being in the present moment. So that's always my number one suggestion.

Esther Gallagher: [00:10:22] My second number. One suggestion is that because I hear again and again and again from, we'll call them just for the moment, female bodied people, specifically pregnant ones that they've been traumatized. They know they've been traumatized, right? they've been abused. Often it's sexual abuse. Often it's childhood sexual abuse. And now. They're saying this out loud, and they're hoping they're going to find a doula who understands that and is going to get them through their birth with ease and love and. Great.

Esther Gallagher: [00:11:05] Right. Well we're trying. And there is a very well considered, well practiced, skillful approach to all of this, which is somatic experiencing. I've said this before in this program. Right now, the thing we're not hearing is all of those things as they've come down on the head of male bodied people and trans bodied

people, right? And often that's because, well, if you happen to be male bodied or want to be male bodied, you're just supposed to tough that shit out and just right, behave as though, well, that's just I'm okay with it, right? You're not. It's gonna bubble up again and again. Your reactivity is going to get fired up anytime you feel the least bit anxious. And there's a lot in this world that is aimed at making you feel that way.

Esther Gallagher: [00:12:11] So if you're going to be parenting, if you're going to be present for somebody who's going through anything, if you're going to be present for yourself in your own body. All of us would do well. To sign ourselves up for somatic experiencing. It's therapeutic. It gets you to a much better place for witnessing what you're experiencing in your body..

Esther Gallagher: [00:12:47] So those have always, since I've known about them, which has been for a long, longish time, have been my strongest recommendations for anybody, for everybody, anybody and everybody. You know, unless you grew up in a, I don't know what a Buddhist household maybe. Lucky you. Maybe you're lucky. You know, I don't even know that that's necessarily true. Ashrams are wonderful, safe places, but they don't necessarily prepare you for what happens when you step outside the ashram, which we're always doing. We may feel nice and safe in our bedroom, but we have to step outside, even if it's just to go to the bathroom. Who knows what surprise might meet us when we get to the bathroom.

Esther Gallagher: [00:13:38] So, we have this little list, that is addressed in a previous podcast about, like, the list of things that would be really good for us to all have addressed, have had addressed once we're ready to go into labor. So education and finances and expectations and what are our shared agreements? Who are our village? What roles are we going to take? Right? I mean, we've had some handed down to us by our families, but now we're melding two family histories, so there's likely to be some ordinary confusion about whose roles are what if we don't have a discussion.

Esther Gallagher: [00:14:34] Now, do I believe in roles? Not that much. Right? I believe that anybody. Can jump in and do that thing. Right? Like it's not based on being feminine. If you don't have breasts that produce milk, that might be the one thing you

can't do. And you can't heal and recover from being pregnant if you haven't given birth. So those two things maybe you can't do, but you can probably do almost everything else surrounding that. From changing a diaper to just bringing that baby into your body and, feel your feels and let that baby feel their feels and learn what your baby's expressing with you. that's going to come in handy when they're teenagers, because it's not going to look like adult stuff, and it's going to be a lot of body stuff, right? So yeah, who's who's going to feed who, who's going to water who, who's going to how is this all going to who's going to walk the dog? These are all practical considerations.

Esther Gallagher: [00:15:47] And I often will say anybody can cook for you if they know how to cook, anybody can clean your house for you if they know how to clean a house. They don't have to ask you how to do it if they know how, right? Laundry. All the practical things can be recruited from the outside, but those aren't going to be people that you snuggle in bed with your newborn and be in the love bubble with. That's the partner. And I think a lot of times I just noticed that nobody's talked about it. Gosh. You know, during the run up to labor, which is the third trimester, and labor, which is the beginning of the transition to the fourth trimester and then the fourth trimester, which is three whole months. These are three chunks of three, right? Who's gonna just lay around in bed loving this kid and loving each other without a program other than to just do that?

Esther Gallagher: [00:17:06] And I can tell you from experience, personal and professional, that again and again and again I see a form of grieving, which is that the person who's supposed to breastfeed and change her pad and make sure they're getting enough to eat is grieving and longing for the closeness and intimacy of the person they made this baby with. However, they did that right, and there's lots of ways to do that. but the closeness and intimacy of that, that other person in the room touching, aiming at feeling safe and warm and, fed and watered. Not as a task, but as a done deal, a shared experience, a shared experience. we're all looking to connect. And this is one of the opportunities we're given if we're given this opportunity.

Esther Gallagher: [00:18:21] And I'm going to go out on a limb and even talk about what's that child's experience? And what's that child's experience going to be in three

months when parents are going off to work? And now there's a whole new set of ways we have to navigate life. But we never did establish the shared experience, and now we're just at odds trying to still figure it out. And then what's that child's experience when those parents are teenagers? Are those they're a teenager and those parents don't connect? Never did. Still, aren't. We all know that we need to. It's ineluctable. It's just in us. We know we need to. It's for survival.

We're not trying to think of an animal that's just a complete solo operator. Never connects with anything otherwise. Like we don't even know many animals that doesn't that don't literally create connection on behalf of themselves and their children. It doesn't mean we can't be wonderful families without it. But sadly, we don't cultivate this thing as the first thing that we want to have. Not the thing that will get around to once we've got the Diaper Genie and we've got the stroller and we've got the doula and we've got etc.

Esther Gallagher: [00:20:01] So I don't want to be anybody's marriage counselor. I do not want that. And Sarah and I were talking earlier and we talked about if you haven't gotten on a wavelength about your finances and about who's getting the mortgage paid and all the things that are they're they're important things in this culture. And you're concerned that they're necessarily going to be stressful. And we know they are kids, sex, money. The divorce. Right? Straight line. If you cannot have a healthy, loving conversation about any of those things, then it's time to outsource them.

Esther Gallagher: [00:20:57] If you're pregnant now, you're not going to learn how to have healthy conversations soon enough. You do need to. But it's time to acknowledge that those conversations aren't being had in a way that doesn't raise cortisol and lower oxytocin. Okay, we accept that. That's how it's been for us. We don't have the skill set to do it another way. We don't know how. There's. This is not a crime, right? You're not committing a sin if you don't know how to do something. But there are people who know how to guide you in a way that's going to lower cortisol and make room for some oxytocin. They're called mediators, right?

Sarah Trott: [00:21:48] It could also be a therapist. It could be a couples or family therapist. And they're not necessarily going to be a long term part of your process, but maybe just enough to get some of those conversations feeling safe.

Sarah Trott: [00:22:05] And I'll just interject for a moment because you were on such an amazing flow there. I didn't want to interrupt, but I mean, summarizing a bit of what you're saying, it's almost like we're talking about two categories of preparedness. Yes. One is the social emotional safety part and connection and vulnerability part. Talking about, can we have these important conversations in a safe, loving way?

Esther Gallagher: [00:22:34] And then can we just be in the same room in a safe loving way. Not talking. Simply that being present.

Sarah Trott: [00:22:46] Sit on the couch and snuggle to your point. Yeah.

Sarah Trott: [00:22:49] And then the other bucket is this practical set of things that we've outlined lots of different ways. And in fact, I'll reference a couple of other podcasts while I'm here. Previous episodes we'll link to in the show notes, which are so good around this. Some practical questions from Marisa Belger, one of the authors of the First Forty Days book. I think we have it listed as fortifying your relationship with the four relationship saving questions you need to ask before baby arrives. So we recommend that one. And another couple of great episodes around fatherhood from David Arrell. One is about defining yourself as a father and transitioning into parenthood and that role. And then the other one is around fatherhood support groups. So we also recommend those if this is the topic and path that you're on at the moment.

Sarah Trott: [00:24:13] And so, yes, there's the connectedness and then there's the practical. And if the connectedness is there, this is what we were talking about beforehand, that it makes that second bucket of practical things around, talking about your finances and talking about who's going to do what in your agreement before baby arrives, ideally, or even afterwards. If you're now in it and you're realizing some of this stuff is hard and now you're hearing this maybe for the first time. Getting that

connectedness there first really helps all of those subsequent more practical conversations. So, yeah.

Esther Gallagher: [00:24:53] And I, I want us to just be reminded that so often the way we think in this culture specifically is binarily we we divvy things into two, right? You know, we we've codified it like it's it's a law that a family is two adults and their offspring, right? Not all families look like that around the world, right?

Esther Gallagher: [00:25:28] And in this, this world, they're also often an assumption that there's a feminine aspect and a masculine aspect, right? And so we have this category in our culture called fatherhood. Because that's what we've done. And it doesn't fit every family. Right, because not every family thinks of one, even if they're a couple thinks of one as masculine and going to take on traditional masculine roles, and one is feminine and taking on traditionally feminine roles.

So, as I often do, I invite you to think way outside those two boxes that, even in this day and age, are very, firmly entrenched in most, most American families. They don't work that great, right? The divorce rate in this country is very high. Single parenting is just de rigueur. I can say from experience. It's just what you do. Because it didn't work out. Because you couldn't talk and you didn't feel safe. Yeah. So. Yeah, massaging those kinds of, Things. you know, we're hearing all the time about toxic masculinity in this culture, and that's a real thing. And anybody who identifies as masculine ought to be questioning it for their own sake. Men die sooner because it's too much cortisol in one lifetime for one body.

Esther Gallagher: [00:27:21] So all of these things are important. It's, and it goes beyond the practical. It really does. It goes into the imaginal. Like, what do you really want? What do you really want to have? Be your experience in this lifetime as a parent? and as a partner in that project?

Sarah Trott: [00:27:47] Yes, I love that summary. And, I would love to hear your take on maybe some experiences, if you're willing to share some stories anonymously about

how you've witnessed some of these struggles come up in interviews or in working with people in various settings and different partnership dynamics.

Esther Gallagher: [00:28:29] Well. I think whenever there's something somebody identifies as worry. We are now getting more sophisticated and calling it anxiety because we understand that it's a whole body experience. You know, and we understand that things that we're calling worries are often running our show. We're distracted by them. Our mind is running them again and again. They come up unbidden as well as during more practical moments, if those are a thing. And, And so. I see this come up in interview all the time, right?

So, as I said before, parents, soon to be parents, are asking, could you help us in these practical ways? And one of them is naming their history as a cause for concern about how they're going to get through labor. I think needing support and acknowledging that is always great. But as an example, I recently interviewed a couple. They are officially what we would call a heterosexual couple and really lovely. And this was the thing, right? Like I originally thought I just wanted to be my partner, and I. But then our friends told us about their experience with the doula. And recommended that we just at least interview to find out more. And now I'm hearing all these things. And it really sounds like it would be great to have this added in thing.

Esther Gallagher: [00:30:51] And, you know. The fact is that they're going to have to hold those things. This is part of their lives, and they're going to be holding these things skillfully or unskillfully. Through labor into postpartum, until death do us part. And beyond that even. Right? So compartmentalizing pregnancy, labor and birth as this little one off moment that's somehow going to be a crisis and therefore needs extra added. Isn't wrong, and it's not the whole picture. It's not really right either.

Esther Gallagher: [00:31:43] So again, examining these things as part of the life you're living together. Which isn't a practical thing. Life together is not practical. People are very skillful in making it that way, and I admire it, but, just making room for these things I think is important, and what I see, I guess if that's the question, what I see is, a lot of collapse and depression amongst everybody. And it looks different ways coming from

different people. So, a postpartum partner who's depressed may be expressing a lot of anger and a lot of frustration.

Esther Gallagher: [00:33:20] So what I see during labors is things becoming crisis oriented, right? Like I can't take it. I can't take it. That's pretty normal to feel in labor at some juncture. And then that being met with a lot of anxiety which crashes the capacity. Now we're just in a squirrel cage of I can't, nothing can happen. And the typical response in our culture to that is, how can we make that stop? Hmm. All right, let's just make that stop. And the way we do that in our culture is to either emotionally or physically become numb. Let's just not feel. And then we won't have a problem.

Esther Gallagher: [00:34:24] Here's an interesting example. I once had a client who was doing great. With their first labor. No problems at all. And they sensed, okay, things are starting to really move. Things are going to get more interesting and bigger. And they turned to me away from their partner and turn to me and said, I think, I think now is when I need to get that epidural. And I'm like, oh. And they said very clearly, like, this is a clear understanding in this agreement, in this relationship. She said, oh yeah. I can totally handle it. But he can't. So I'm going to get the epidural.

Sarah Trott: [00:35:15] Interesting.

Esther Gallagher: [00:35:18] And what that really means, even more so is I don't want to have to deal with what they're going to throw. If I actually have my authentic experience in my body and express myself in it. I can't do both. And people, this is common. Why is this common? Why are pregnant bodied people numbing themselves out? Because someone else in the room can't handle it. We should be asking ourselves this question and applying it to everything else we do, right? Why is that person not safe? When I do something that people, human bodies do thousands and thousands and thousands of time every day. Yeah. Why? We've got a whole medical specialty that's just for this. And then and then we have to ask yourself, what does this bode for our children? Yeah. And how they get to behave. And learn and grow and express themselves.

Sarah Trott: [00:36:43] And we're not saying there's anything wrong with having an epidural if that's something that you want. I think the commentary here is more like, is it for you? Is it for you and your experience that you want, or is it something that you're doing for someone else to appease something or to avoid something? And I wonder what discussion could be had prior to labor, which would enable a sense of equality in feelings and respect and trust.

Esther Gallagher: [00:37:19] Precisely. And I will keep throwing in the word skillfulness. Because I have no doubt that the projection that somebody outside ourselves won't feel safe if we're authentically ourselves is probably based on experience. Everything doesn't feel safe suddenly, right? But also. If we look at it from a certain angle, it's a lack of skillfulness. It's a lack of feeling like we individually have the tools that will help us have the kind of experience that we actually are moving towards, where we actually would like to invite that we actually want to have with that other person.

They've never experienced this thing that we both could probably imagine if we took a minute to let ourselves imagine it, right? We just don't yet have those tools. So how do we have the discussion that then allows us to point ourselves together in becoming skillful.

Sarah Trott: [00:38:44] Yeah. And this reminds me of what we were talking about earlier around this notion that if there's a fear or anxiety, that if we express it, we have to do something about it. Versus, we can express it and you were saying the example of I'm noticing that when I think about finances or whatever it may be, I, I'm feeling a sense of worry or I'm feeling anxious. And just letting that be. Mhm. But expressing it and communicating openly is key. And that extends potentially to this labor scenario that you're describing where if someone's comfortable just letting it be and not having to fix it. Then that could be a lot more smooth.

Esther Gallagher: [00:39:37] And I think there's some wonderful things to be learned. If we authentically and genuinely commit ourselves to a kind of learning another area of skillfulness. There's a whole program called Nonviolent Communication. But one of the

tidbits in there, in terms of having a discussion that's less charged is, rather than sort of projecting an expectation onto somebody, which nobody enjoys. Really, actually.

So, we we come to the conversation and if we have an idea about how something could happen, we're inviting rather than demanding, and that can look like, would you be willing to or are you willing to consider blah, blah, blah, or do this thing or take this course with me towards maybe becoming more skillful? And there doesn't have to be an immediate answer, right? The answer to am I willing to X isn't something I necessarily know yet. It might take me a while to know whether I am willing to have this thing happen, to participate in it.

Esther Gallagher: [00:41:12] But this is also a way that we then get to learn in a reality based way about our partner and ourselves, right? Because not all of us have come to any relationship in our lives fully prepared. And not always even fully willing, right? Willingness is a many layered thing. And getting to it and through it is a process. And I think it's fair to circle back and say, one could understand a pregnant bodied person feeling a certain amount of urgency around establishing what we're calling safety.

Sarah Trott: [00:42:14] Well. Do you have any final thoughts? You want to leave listeners who are curious about this topic?

Sarah Trott: [00:42:22] Yeah. Well, always in all things in life. Better late than never. Yeah. If you have teenagers now and you never got around to this stuff, it's not too late to do a mindfulness course. Offer them somatic experiencing practice by way of finding a therapist. Teens could really use it. Developing an inner witness. That's a whole thing to do in this life. And I'll say it's ongoing. You know, I still don't feel that I've reached some pinnacle of skillfulness in any of this. And, That's not my goal. My goal is to cultivate skillfulness. And that's like a garden. That's not something you suddenly have - the garden just doesn't, not need input anymore. So, yeah, I guess that would be my wrap up.

Sarah Trott: [00:43:37] Beautiful. Thank you for this conversation. And, listeners, we hope that you found this valuable. Please do share this with others in your life who you think can benefit. We would recommend everyone, of course.

Esther Gallagher: [00:43:56] This podcast for everyone.

Sarah Trott: [00:43:58] See you next time.

Esther Gallagher: [00:44:01] Ciao.

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 Spotify](#). 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.