

**best start  
meilleur départ**

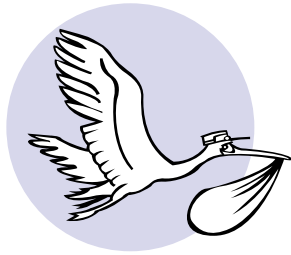
Ontario's maternal, newborn and early  
child development resource centre

Centre de ressources sur la maternité,  
les nouveau-nés et le développement  
des jeunes enfants de l'Ontario



A B U S E I N  
P R E G N A N C Y

Information and Strategies  
for the Prenatal Educator



## Introduction

Pregnancy is a time when abuse (intimate partner violence) can begin or if pre-existing, can become more severe. Some studies indicate that one in five abused women report that they were first assaulted during pregnancy. The literature suggests that abuse during pregnancy occurs more frequently than placenta praevia or gestational diabetes (Health Canada, 1999). During pregnancy a woman is routinely screened for both of these conditions. Most are not routinely screened for abuse.

There is shame and fear attached to abuse during pregnancy. Many women keep it a secret and are not aware of how prevalent it is and that there is help available. No one wants to talk about it. Many of the current interventions for woman abuse are indicator based and the health care and justice systems respond only after an abused woman's situation has become a crisis. There are various effective clinical approaches for woman abuse. It is critical to ask direct questions about woman abuse whenever signs are observed. Routine screening for all women is also recommended. While these approaches are necessary, the first step is always education. Prenatal Educators need to be aware of the issues related to woman abuse and incorporate effective strategies to address abuse during pregnancy. They must also be prepared to respond should disclosure of woman abuse occur.

It is not expected that Prenatal Educators develop the skills of woman abuse experts. Addressing the issues, providing resources and supporting women who disclose are the first and most basic steps. Without advanced training, it would not be prudent for Prenatal Educators to intervene as counsellors.

## What is woman abuse?

***Woman abuse is a means to exert control over a female by her intimate partner. It always causes harm. It can take many forms. The following are examples of different types of abuse.***

### PHYSICAL ABUSE

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- Hitting, slapping, biting or shoving.
- Destroying her property.
- Using a weapon or other objects to threaten or hurt her.
- Denying her access to a health care provider such as a doctor, midwife or dentist.
- Taking away aids for a disability such as a guide dog or a cane.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL OR EMOTIONAL ABUSE

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- Threatening to take the children away from her. The threat could be to leave with the children or to call child protection services.
- Stalking or harassing her.
- Controlling her time and what she does.
- Isolating her from family and friends.
- Threatening to hurt someone she cares for.

### VERBAL ABUSE

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- Calling her names and other verbal means of attacking her self-esteem.
- Humiliating her in the presence of others.

### SEXUAL ABUSE

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- Denying sexual intimacy or forcing her into unwanted sexual acts.
- Forcing her to get pregnant or to have an abortion.
- Infecting her with sexually transmitted infections.

### SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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- Belittling her spiritual beliefs.
- Not allowing her to attend the place of worship of her choice.

### FINANCIAL ABUSE

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- Limiting access to family finances.
- Using her credit cards without her permission.

## Abuse During Pregnancy

***With abuse during pregnancy there are two victims: the mother and her fetus. The abuse does not usually stop when the child is born. There is a strong association between woman abuse and child abuse. When women are abused during pregnancy the impact can range from decreased self-esteem, maternal depression, misuse of alcohol, tobacco and other substances, physical injuries, internal bleeding to even death. In many countries homicide is one of the leading causes of death among pregnant women. For the fetus the abuse can result in preterm birth, premature rupture of the membranes, rupture of the placenta, low birth weight, fetal hemorrhage, miscarriage or stillbirth.***

### RISK FACTORS

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Although abuse can occur in all age groups and across the social strata, there are certain risk factors.

- Pregnancy
- Prior abuse
- Poverty
- Substance misuse
- Adolescence

### WHY ABUSE DURING PREGNANCY?

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- Competition for attention. The fetus is seen as an intruder into the relationship.
- Financial concerns.
- Loss of power and control. The partner may resent contact with others. Pregnancy may be a threat to a controlling, abusive partner who believes the woman could be influenced against him each time she sees a health care provider.
- Dislike of physical and emotional pregnancy changes.

**Note:** An abusive partner may target the pregnant woman's breasts, genitalia and abdomen to inflict injury. This may be in order to hide the assault and target those body parts associated with pregnancy.

## Prenatal Classes

*The following provides some strategies to incorporate into prenatal classes.*

### PRENATAL CLASSES FOR WOMEN ONLY

A prenatal class for women only may provide a more comfortable atmosphere in which to bring up the topic of abuse during pregnancy.

- Provide short, succinct information. Extensive detail may cause discomfort in the class. It could as result in a discussion debasing men.
- Include a definition of abuse and how it manifests itself during pregnancy.
- Discuss briefly the screening for abuse and whether there is a protocol in your community for screening.
- Keep the group together. This topic requires a more directive approach.  
**Small group activities do not work well.**
- Have resources and information available.
- Consider inviting a local guest speaker who is expert in the area of woman abuse.

### PRENATAL CLASSES FOR COUPLES

There are extra challenges when discussing the topic of abuse in classes for couples. Not only could it result in either men or women debasement, couples who are in an abusive relationship may stop attending for fear of being exposed. There may also be a partner who will want to talk in great detail about abuse during pregnancy. An abusive, controlling person may want to focus on this in order to deflect attention from his/her own behaviour.

- Integrate abuse during pregnancy information into other subject matter such as stress management.
- Divide the class into pregnant women and partner groups. It is ideal for each group to go into a separate room. If there is only one room, try to keep the two groups as far away as possible from each other.
- Give the partners an activity to work on. Stress management focusing on finances or time management usually works well. These topics can generate a lot of discussion and laughter. It can also prevent the partners from eavesdropping on any discussions the women may have.
- Move to the women's group and give them a brief synopsis of abuse during pregnancy without informing the partners. The following is a sample synopsis you could use:  
*Pregnancy is a time of joy but it also has many added stresses. Did you know that woman abuse can start during pregnancy? If you were abused in the past, it can get worse once you are pregnant. The abuse will not stop once the baby is born. It is against the law for anyone to hit, slap or call you names. There is help available.*
- Inform the women about resources on abuse and where they can access them.
- Some woman abuse experts feel partners need to be educated about abuse during pregnancy. While the couples are still separated, provide the partners with brief, succinct information on abuse during pregnancy before moving on to other stress related topics.

**Resources:** Always have up-to-date resources available. Discreet placement of resources is recommended. Post information on abuse in safe, accessible locations such as in the women's washrooms or on a table to the side. Some agencies provide their resource lists and information in other forms such as an empty lipstick tube. Avoid giving brochures on abuse with the other general prenatal information provided to class participants.

## Screening for Woman Abuse

The indicators for woman abuse are many. Although not mandatory, it is good practice, when the Prenatal Educator suspects woman abuse, to do a brief screen with that woman. Ensure privacy before you do any screening. While there are many screening tools available, keep in mind that the Prenatal Educator does not have the time or resources to do in depth screening. The SAFE tool is short and can be used quickly.

### SAFE TOOL

- S:** How would she describe her **Spousal** relationship?
- A:** What happens when she and her partner **Argue**?
- F:** Do **Fights** result in her being hit, shoved or hurt?
- E:** Does she have an **Emergency** plan?

(Midmer, 1995)

### NON-DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE

If the Prenatal Educator suspects abuse and the woman does not disclose abuse, reassure her there is help available if she requires it in the future. Offer her a brochure on woman abuse. If she refuses to take the brochure, respect her decision. Document the intervention.

### DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE

Most women do not disclose their abuse during pregnancy, however they will discuss it if they feel comfortable and are able to trust the person asking. On average it takes about two years for women in abusive relationships to admit their problem and seek help.

***Prenatal Educators need to be aware that the woman's greatest risk of severe abuse usually occurs around the time of disclosure. First and foremost the Prenatal Educator needs to assess the woman's danger level. If the threat of danger is high, ask for permission to consult with local police for advice. The Prenatal Educator is a part of the obstetrical care team. Request permission to report disclosure of abuse to the woman's primary health care provider: family physician, obstetrician, nurse practitioner or midwife.***

Keep an updated record of your local woman abuse services such as the following:

1. Telephone number for the local woman abuse program
2. Address and telephone number of the local hospital
3. Local police and/or O.P.P. telephone number
4. 24 hour crisis line
5. Telephone number for the local shelter
6. Family and children's services' telephone number
7. Name and telephone number of counsellors who have experience with woman abuse issues
8. Name and telephone number of a multicultural and an Aboriginal contact
9. Telephone number for the local Public Health Unit (Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program or the Mental Health Program)
10. In communities that do not have a program for abused women or a shelter, provide a list of provincial and/national resources

## Provincial and National Resources

***The following is a list of some of the provincial and national resources for abused women:***

**Assaulted Women's Help Line** is a crisis line for assaulted women across Ontario with simultaneous translation in 150 languages  
1-866-863-0511  
416-863-0511 (Greater Toronto Area)  
1-866-863-7868 (TTY)  
[www.awhl.org](http://www.awhl.org)

**FEM-AIDE**  
Régions du Nord et du Nord-Ouest  
1-877-336-2433  
Elle-écoute  
Régions du Centre et Sud-Est Lignes régionales pour les femmes francophones victimes/survivantes de toutes formes d'abus  
1-877-679-2229

**Victim Support Line** provides abused women with information and referral to local services 1-888-579-2888

**Shelternet** is a national website which provides information, services and resources to abused women. Shelternet also shows you how to hide your internet activity [www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca)

***Leaving an abusive relationship is a process that takes place over a period of time. The Prenatal Educator's role is to inform the woman of her options but the woman herself must make the final decision.***

- Be supportive.
- Believe her and do not judge her.
- Give her information and give her time to make her own decisions.
- Do not insist that she leave her partner or put her down for staying with her partner.
- Share information how abuse can escalate if nothing is done.
- Help her devise a safety plan. Provide her with resources, emergency telephone numbers and information in her own language. Work with her to develop a plan whether she decides to leave or to remain in the relationship.
- Develop an emergency escape plan. This can include hiding or putting in a safe place the following items:
  - Identification for the woman and her children
  - Other documents such as passports, health cards and bank books
  - Credit card
  - Cash
  - Keys
  - Prescriptions or medications
  - Clothing
  - Children's items

## **REINFORCE KEY MESSAGES**

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- Violence is never warranted. The abuse is not her fault.
- The mother's and the children's safety is always the most important.
- She is not responsible for changing her partner's behaviour.
- Apologies and promises will not end the abuse.
- The abuse affects the children both directly and indirectly.
- It is a crime to abuse a partner.

## Legal Issues

In Ontario it is mandatory to report woman abuse to child protection services when there is exposure to abuse in children under the age of 16. As a Prenatal Educator you are required to inform the child protection agency in your community if you suspect woman abuse and there are already other children in the household. Although not mandatory, it may be prudent to refer to child protection services during the prenatal period when woman abuse is suspected and there are no other children.

In order to assist you in maintaining a trusting relationship with your clients, ensure that you have advised them of your duty to report suspected woman abuse/family violence. This works well as a general statement given at the beginning of the prenatal class series. You may have to reinforce this with the woman when you suspect abuse or the woman has disclosed abuse. Offer her the opportunity to be involved in contacting child protection services.

## Conclusion

Woman abuse is not a private matter; it is a health issue. Informing women of woman abuse during pregnancy reinforces that it has serious consequences and that there is help available. By providing education and referring women who have disclosed abuse, Prenatal Educators assist in reducing the risk to the women and their future children.

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## Acknowledgements

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# ABUSE IN PREGNANCY

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***Best Start is a key program of the Ontario  
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***Best Start: Ontario's Maternal, Newborn  
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