

Recognizing & Responding to Family Violence

What does family violence look like? There are many overlapping signs and symptoms of intimate partner violence and children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV). Below are some of the most common signs and symptoms based on history taking, physical exams, and ongoing assessments while a client is in your care.

Keep in mind that these signs may be unrelated to family violence or there may be no signs at all. A client is more than the sum of potential symptoms. Use your judgement when thinking about the next steps, such as offering support and making referrals.

Signs & Symptoms

Birthing Parent

Physical Health:

- A history or current signs of threatened preterm labour, preterm birth, bleeding, miscarriages or terminations of pregnancy
- Repetitive urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections, or yeast infections
- Chronic pain or functioning disorders
- Injuries that do not fit the history or are at various stages of healing; injury to face, wrists, genitals, breasts, and abdomen
- On-going non-specific complaints of pain and discomfort reduced or excessive weight gain in pregnancy
- Substance use causing harm
- Chronic physical disorders
- Sexual health issues

Behavioural:

- Repetitive cancelling or missing appointments
- Paging/calling with non-specific complaints
- Always attends with partner/support person, defers to partner/support person to answer questions

Newborn/Child (signs of exposure to IPV)

Newborn/Child Physical Health:

- Poor weight gain or failure to thrive in an otherwise healthy infant
- Unexplained injuries or injuries that do not fit the history

Older Child:

- Somatic complaints (e.g., headaches)
- Gastrointestinal disorders (e.g., nausea, diarrhea)
- Speech, hearing, and visual problems

Newborn/Child Behavioural Signs:

- Persistent crying and inability to calm in an otherwise healthy infant/child
- Withdrawing behaviour or overly aggressive behaviour in older children
- Sleep difficulties (e.g., nightmares, bedwetting)

Birthing Parent and Child Mental Health

- Problematic or increased substance use
- Eating disorders
- Self-harm
- Deficits with attention and memory (may be due to traumatic brain injury)
- Anxiety and sleep disorders
- Other mental health issues

Factors that may influence chances of family violence

- Recent separation
- New partner
- Financial stress
- Loss of employment
- Relocation away from family and support
- Young age
- Previous history of IPV or other forms of violence

Practitioner Tips:

Build a relationship of trust

Be mindful of the clinician-client relationship as *how* you ask questions is just as important as the questions themselves.

Make your office a safer space

Complete an environmental scan of your office to assess if your office is a safer space.

What to look for:

- Does your space feel calm and welcoming?
- Does it provide privacy?
- Is support information posted in bathrooms, for example, contacts for advocacy agencies, crisis centres, local shelters (www.sheltersafe.ca)?
- Is the information posted inclusive and culturally sensitive to your client population or does it reinforce stereotypes? Are resources available in different languages?

Food for thought: [creating a safe space for clients](#)



SUPPORTING RESOURCES:

Visit canadianmidwives.org/family-violence/resources/ for our companion resources on recognizing and responding to family violence:

- Asking about Intimate Partner Violence & Children's Exposure to IPV
- Assessing the Immediate Risk of Violence
- Child Maltreatment & the Duty to Report
- Follow-up Protocols

REFERENCES:

Cherniak, Donna, et al. "Intimate Partner Violence Consensus Statement - SOGC Clinical Practice Guidelines." *JOGC*, vol. 157, no. 374, 2005, pp. 365–88.

Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. *Woman Abuse: Screening, Identification and Initial Response*. 2005, <https://rnao.ca/bpg/guidelines/woman-abuse-screening-identification-and-initial-response>.

Milani, Asra, et al. *Recognizing and Responding to Intimate Partner Violence Resource Guide for Refugee Resettlement Assistance Programs in Ontario VAW Recognition & Response Resource Guide 2*, <http://rapworkers.com/resources/resource-guide/>. Accessed 10 March 2023.