

## Practice Tip – Impact of Domestic Abuse on Unborn- Feb 2019

One in four women experience domestic abuse or domestic violence at some point in their lives. It can be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological or financial, and is often experienced as a combination of these.

Pregnancy can be a trigger for domestic abuse and existing abuse may get worse during pregnancy or after giving birth, as the partner may seek to exploit vulnerability in the mother at this time.

Pre- birth assessments must reflect on what is known in a family regarding attitude towards and if identified as happening, the frequency of the abuse. The impact on an unborn child can be life threatening.

Domestic violence during pregnancy physically endangers both the pregnant woman and her unborn child. It increases the risk of:

- miscarriage
- infection
- premature birth
- low birth weight
- fetal injury
- stillbirth.

Injuries may not be detected by health professionals if the mother is prevented by the partner from accessing regular ante-natal care. A controlling partner may enforce that they attend every appointment making it difficult for mother to disclose any anxieties to the Midwife or GP. Furthermore she may not disclose any violence due to fear of repercussions from the partner and also that from the agencies. Health and social care professionals should make any opportunistic attempts to raise the issue of abuse, whilst acknowledging that support is available if the mother requires it.

If there is a belief domestic abuse may be present, all attempts to see the mother on her own must be made by all agencies.

Besides the more obvious physical impact there is the emotional or psychological impact on both the mother and the unborn baby, in particular the impact from stress, fear and anxiety.

If the mother lives with heightened stress and fear due to any circumstance but in particular as a result of domestic violence, the body continues to produce the stress hormone Cortisol. The amount of cortisol increases and passes to the baby. The baby is not able to process the high levels of the cortisol and toxic stress, also known as chronic stress, develops. Toxic/chronic stress can influence the development and structure of the baby's brain. This can lead to difficulties in regulating emotion, concentration levels, ability to retain information and manage social settings.

Baby may be born in a heightened state of arousal, the outcome of which can result in an anxious, fractious and unsettled baby. Their experiences of fear and danger within the womb are replicated once born and the baby is left in a state of arousal waiting for the next incident to occur.

A small baby may be difficult to settle, is easily startled, highly responsive to noise and light, unable to feed or attune to others. They may present as fractious and unable to relax.

A toddler may exhibit high impulse behaviours with little regard for risk to self or others. They may continue to have difficulties settling and concentrating and so present as uncontained, aggressive, hyperactive and demanding. Other behaviours which professionals should look out for include speech delay, toileting troubles and withdrawn children who may not seek help from adults.

An older child may find it difficult to learn as concentration and retaining information is problematic due to the interrupted brain development as an unborn baby. They may have increased impulsivity, high non-attendance at school, no hopes or ambitions and have low self-worth or a low self-esteem .

**Questions to ask a parent you believe may be at risk of domestic abuse:**

- Is everything alright at home?
- Do you feel safe (at home)?
- Do you ever feel threatened at home?
- How are arguments resolved?
- Do you feel you need some extra support?
- Are you being looked after properly at home?
- Does your family member etc. ever threaten you?
- Does your family member etc. put you down?
- Do you feel you are in an abusive relationship?
- Does your partner get very jealous/angry?

Further information can be located

Domestic Abuse Tool Kit

<http://sites.southglos.gov.uk/safeguarding/wp-content/uploads/sites/221/2018/10/SGSCB-Domestic-Abuse-Toolkit-October-2018.pdf>

South Glos Safeguarding Website –

<http://sites.southglos.gov.uk/safeguarding/children/i-am-a-professional/domestic-abuse/>

Practice Tips and Guidance on Tri.X.