

## Pregnancy and Beyond

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### NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Relationship-focused practice

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Observing & listening
- Advocacy

Reflection:

- Self-awareness
- Curiosity

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Pregnancy can be an exciting time, but it can also be stressful. There are many stressors during this time that may impact a pregnancy. As home visitors, you provide nutritional, physical, and emotional information and support. The curriculum you use and the resources you provide to prenatal families give their babies a healthy start in life. According to the most recent Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count data (2019), there were 22,960 births in New Mexico. There were 2,742 or 12% preterm births in New Mexico, which is the same as the national percentage, and 2,126 or 9.3% low birth weight births in 2019 compared to the national percentage of 8.3%. This is important because birth weight is an important indicator of an infant's health. Babies born at low birth weight, less than 5.5 pounds, have a high probability of experiencing developmental challenges and potential short and long-term disabilities.

We know prenatal care is very important to a child's development and learning. Prenatal care helps keep both the mother and the child healthy throughout the duration of the pregnancy. Several key elements to good prenatal and postnatal care are:

- See a doctor or other health care provider from the start of pregnancy.
- Do not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take drugs.
- Eat healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, low-fat milk, eggs, cheese, and grains.
- Take good care of your health and exercise sensibly.
- Have baby checked by a doctor or health care provider right after birth and throughout childhood.

Prenatal care helps keep both mom and baby healthy through the duration of the pregnancy. We are all familiar with the three trimesters of pregnancy that most curricula and literature discuss, but many of us know little about the newly described and critical time period in women's lives, known as the "fourth trimester". The fourth trimester is the period of time between birth and 12 weeks postpartum.

During pregnancy, women have their prenatal care visits, ultrasounds, and lab tests. Their final weeks of pregnancy include weekly visits for fetal heart checks, maternal blood pressure, weight evaluation, and may even include anticipatory guidance for the process of labor and birth. Though some attention is given to preparing pregnant women for the challenges of breastfeeding and the pitfalls of

postpartum depression; women, families, and healthcare providers tend to focus on healthy outcomes at birth.

According to Goldfarb (2021), while the postpartum period right after birth is a time of great joy for many, it is also a very vulnerable time. The routine postpartum visit is scheduled for six to eight weeks after childbirth. This long interval between giving birth and a postpartum visit with their obstetric provider is considered to be adequate. Most women who give birth have survived the pain caused by tearing during a vaginal birth, a surgical incision after a cesarean delivery, and/or hemorrhoids in the first two to three weeks. Many are coping with the physical and emotional challenges of breastfeeding. They have grappled with sleeplessness and may have overcome their initial baby blues. Pregnancy care must go beyond achieving a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby to include a healthy mother!

Women need to talk with their obstetric team to learn what sort of support is offered during the fourth trimester. Goldfarb (2021) encourages families to create a “postpartum plan” as the one Mara Acel-Green developed. Having a plan can help to anticipate difficulties and be prepared for the types of support needed. This can be very challenging to navigate when you are sleep-deprived during the early weeks following childbirth. Acel-Green’s postpartum plan also includes planning support for the partner during the post-partum period. How is the partner feeling and coping with the changes in their family’s dynamics?

Birth can be pretty overwhelming for the newborn as well. During this time, the infant’s body is working on the brain and nervous system development. Infant depends on their caregiver to help them meet their need to sleep, self-regulate, and eat. As home visitors, you can help caregivers understand the importance of holding or feeding a fussy baby, changing a diaper, turning down the lights, and/or reducing loud sounds to help an infant self-regulate. During the fourth trimester, infants are using all of their senses to learn about their environment. Helping caregivers understand that sometimes this can be overstimulating and their baby may tell them that they are overstimulated by looking away, crying, spitting up, or hiccupping. Babies will move through several states of alertness in these first few months. It will feel like they are sleeping all the time. When babies are awake during the first 3 months, encourage parents to take advantage of the awake time to talk quietly or introduce new sensations like a rattle, a soft toy, or their finger. Babies may need to adjust to a routine, but as long as they are consistent with sleep and feeding times, babies will begin to learn the routine. Remind parents that there is no possible way to spoil an infant.

Supporting both parents and baby during and beyond pregnancy can lead to positive outcomes for the entire family. Helping them advocate for themselves and prepare for the fourth trimester will increase their confidence as new parents.

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### **Questions to encourage discussion and reflection.**

- How do you prepare prenatal families for the time following the birth of their child?
- When do you start talking about what to expect after their child is born? How do you include the partner in the discussion?

- How do you balance the need for the family to have privacy and bond with their newborn and ensure they have the support they need?

## References

Acel-Green, M. LICSW. *Birthing Healthier Families Your Positive Postpartum Plan*. Accessed online Jan. 31, 2022 at: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/67f9ba\\_06d7cdb9fbfb408fa13c1d7eab7cea4b.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/67f9ba_06d7cdb9fbfb408fa13c1d7eab7cea4b.pdf)

Goldfarb, I.T. *The fourth trimester: What you should know* (April 6, 2021) Harvard Medical School Harvard Health Publishing. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-fourth-trimester-what-you-should-know-2019071617314>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) *Kids Count Data Book Interactive*. Accessed online Jan. 20, 2022, at: <https://www.aecf.org/interactive/databook?d=h&l=35>

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## Resources

Birthing Healthier Families Your Positive Postpartum Plan.  
[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/67f9ba\\_06d7cdb9fbfb408fa13c1d7eab7cea4b.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/67f9ba_06d7cdb9fbfb408fa13c1d7eab7cea4b.pdf)

New Mexico Department of Health Maternal and Child Health Programs  
<https://www.nmhealth.org/about/phd/fhb/mch/>

Postpartum Support International (PSI) New Mexico 1-800-944-4773  
[www.postpartum.net/locations/new-mexico/](http://www.postpartum.net/locations/new-mexico/)

Care Net Pregnancy Centers of Albuquerque (505) 880-0882  
<http://Caretabq.com>

Care Net of Las Cruces (575) 526-6242  
<http://carenetlascruces.com>

Care Net Pregnancy Centers of Santa Fe/Espanola (505)995-1998  
<http://Santafepregnancy.com>