



College of  
**Midwives**  
of Ontario

Ordre des  
**sages-femmes**  
de l'Ontario

# Guideline on Appropriate Professional Behaviour with Clients

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## Introduction

The midwife–client relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. When a client seeks care from a midwife, the client trusts that the midwife will treat them in a professional manner, which includes maintaining appropriate boundaries.

This guideline has been developed to assist midwives in understanding how to maintain appropriate professional boundaries with clients. Midwives are expected to apply this guideline broadly and use their judgment in assessing what would constitute a boundary violation in their daily practise of midwifery.

## Boundary Violations

Boundary violations result when there is confusion between the needs of a midwife and those of a client. They are a sign of impaired professional judgment on part of a midwife, which in turn can result in a midwife making recommendations to a client’s detriment. They can also undermine a client’s trust in their midwife and the midwifery profession.

Personal boundary violations can be subtle intrusions and are often unintentional. Such violations may be characterized by excessive personal disclosure by the midwife or a reversal of midwife–client roles.

Sometimes, boundary violations can cause delayed distress to a client, which may not be recognized or felt until harmful consequences occur. A client’s perception of a boundary violation can depend on a variety of factors, such as their personal preferences, culture, past history and temperament. The client may not feel free to express themselves in defence against such violations.

## Preventing Boundary Violations

In order to support and maintain appropriate professional behaviour with clients, midwives should:

### Ensure an Appropriate Environment

- Let the client know they are entitled to have a support person with them
- Let the client know they are entitled to have an additional person present whose role is to safeguard professional behaviour
- Only meet the client in those places where professional care is to be provided (e.g. a midwifery clinic, birth centre, a client’s home, a place for giving birth or a hospital)
- Respect the client’s personal sense of space

### Ensure Appropriate Communication

- Do not use words that are inappropriately affectionate

- Do not make sexualized or inappropriate comments about a client’s body or clothing
- Do not ask questions about a client’s sexual history or sexual preferences that is not related to the purpose of the midwifery care being provided
- Do not initiate or engage in a sexual conversation with the client that is not related to the purpose of the midwifery care being provided
- Do not make inappropriate or excessive personal disclosures
- Use the right vocabulary for body parts and procedures
- Provide the client with an opportunity to ask questions
- Know when to call an interpreter. Speak directly with the client when working with interpreters and members of the client’s support network
- Be sensitive to the client when discussing personal issues

### Ensure Appropriate Physical Contact

Physical contact can be open to misinterpretation. Midwives should avoid causing unnecessary distress or embarrassment to clients by inappropriate or unnecessary touching.

Midwives should use gloves when appropriate, as this can increase the professional distance that may be necessary.

Midwives should also adhere to their statutory obligations under the Health Care Consent Act<sup>1</sup>. In particular, midwives should:

- Obtain client consent.<sup>2</sup> Agreement acquired verbally or non-verbally is required before a client may be touched.<sup>3</sup>
- Provide information and explanations throughout an assessment or procedure that requires physical contact. The client is entitled to know why, where and when they are to be touched.<sup>4</sup>
- Respond to verbal and nonverbal cues indicating that the client may have withdrawn consent, as consent may be withdrawn at any time during an assessment or procedure<sup>5</sup>

Midwives should check the level of understanding and consent given by the client. It is better to repeat the request for consent than to wrongly assume that consent has been given or continues.

### Ensure Physical Privacy

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<sup>1</sup> *Health Care Consent Act*, 1996, S.O. 1996, c. 2, Sched. A.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, s. 10(1).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, s. 11(4).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, s. 11(3), which requires a client to be informed of the nature of the treatment.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, s. 14.

Midwives should also take steps to protect the physical privacy of clients. Midwives should:

- Appropriately drape clients and make available appropriate covering for clinical procedures such as Pap tests and physical assessments
- Allow clients to have independence, enough time and privacy while disrobing
- Request a client's permission for students or others to observe procedures and respect the client's choice not to have others present

### Ensure Appropriate Etiquette

- Acknowledge a client's fear or embarrassment, which are natural emotions during pregnancy and childbirth
- Do not exhibit behaviour, gestures or expressions that are sexual, seductive or sexually demeaning to the client
- Exercise appropriate judgment in accepting or providing gifts or favours, as some can be perceived as boundary crossing or a conflict of interest. Factors to consider include:
  - The nature of the gift or favour
  - The timing of the gift or favour
  - The occasion for the gift or favour

### Recognize & Manage Signs of Sexual Attraction

Midwives should exercise appropriate judgment in recognizing and managing the signs of sexual attraction. In particular, midwives should:

- Recognize when they are paying more attention to personal appearance if they know they are seeing a certain client. This can detract focus from objectively assessing a client's needs.
- Be aware of treating clients differently on the basis of physical attraction. It is important to be impartial and provide a high standard of clinical care to all clients.
- Consider whether a client's inappropriate behaviour has led to a breach of trust and/or has compromised the ability to provide safe care

### Ensure Appropriate Professional Behaviour with a Client's Family & Support Persons

In addition to a client, midwives should also apply this guideline to their professional behaviour with a client's family, friends, support persons, etc. (for example, anyone present with a client during the delivery of midwifery care services, as well as a client's spouse/partner even if that person has not generally been present during the provision of midwifery care).

Failure to maintain appropriate boundaries with a client or a person that the midwife comes to know as a result of providing care to a client can constitute professional misconduct.



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