Fetal Pain
There is a growing awareness that a preborn baby possesses all the physiological equipment necessary to experience pain at approximately 20 weeks gestation.

Dr. Kanwaljeet Anand, the world’s foremost authority on research into pain perception in the fetus and newborn child, testified in a trial in New York City. He stated that two independent studies show that stress hormones are released in response to pain at 16 and 19 weeks and that blood circulation and breathing also change in response to pain.

In the last 20 years, medical researchers learned:

1. The pain system makes its first appearance when the unborn is still an embryo, when tiny pain receptors under the skin appear over the face.

2. Over the next few weeks, these pain detectors spread to cover the entire body. Long slender connecting wires (“axons”) grow to hook the receptors up to the central pathways in the spinal cord and brain stem, and eventually to the central pain relay station, called the thalmus: all by 14 weeks old.

3. The final push from the deeply-located thalmus up to the brain surface, where pain “awareness” takes place, occurs by 20 weeks. It is at this stage that the unborn baby possesses all of the cells on the surface of the brain that are present in an adult. If an unborn baby is hurt at this point or beyond, the unborn baby will feel it!

The preborn might feel pain even earlier. It has been known since the late 1980s that blood circulation in the fetal brain changes in response to pain (just as it does in adults) as early as 16 weeks. A 1994 British study startled the world with its finding that a painful procedure performed on a preborn child as young as 18 weeks triggers a massive release of stress-related hormones—just as it does in adults!

How Should Pro-Lifers Think About Fetal Pain?
Both abortion advocates and abortion critics use the idea of fetal pain to bolster their cases. Abortion advocates claim the fetus doesn’t feel pain until late in gestation, rendering early-term abortions unproblematic. Abortion critics attempt to gain sympathy for fetuses, realizing that many who think killing is sometimes justified are much more reticent to allow procedures that inflict suffering. How should abortion critics view fetal pain? What resources can we use to study when the unborn begins to feel pain? What strategic concerns should pro-lifers consider when using fetal pain arguments in conversation? This short article by Steve Wagner from Stand to Reason answers these questions and cites a number of internet resources for the study of fetal pain.