

What Happens when Children with FASD Grow Up?

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Recent epidemiological studies that actively looked for signs of alcohol effects in first grade children in the United States have found a much higher number of cases than was previously believed. It now appears that 1 to 4 % of children may be affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol. It is surprising then that fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and the other disorders on the fetal alcohol spectrum (FASD) are rarely reported in adults. This difference raises several questions. The first is, does FASD go away with time? Secondly, if it doesn't go away, why is it not being identified by professionals in health care and social agencies who work with adults? Are other things being blamed for the effects of alcohol on behavior and adaptive functioning? Does FASD look different in adults than in children? Are professionals like doctors, psychologists and social workers who see adults not trained to recognize the effects of alcohol in this age group?

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is planning to look at these questions over the next few years. As part of a project that is sponsored by the Collaborative Initiative on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (CIFASD), the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and the Spray Foundation, we will be getting in touch with people that we first "met" before they were born between 1979 and 1986. At that time, their mothers agreed to be in a research project that was one of the first in the world to examine the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure on the children's outcomes. Many of these families and children have worked with us over the years to help understand these disorders and their help has made an important contribution both to science and to the care of affected children.

In our new study, adults who are now in their 30's and 40's will be re-contacted and asked to help to understand more about health and social functioning. We are particularly interested in finding out if prenatal exposure affects health as people grow older. There is some evidence already that there may be a higher rate of cardiac and blood pressure problems as well as difficulties related to immune functioning. We will be working with an expert in Canada to analyze blood samples to identify patterns of inflammation in affected adults. People who participate in this study will also be offered the opportunity to enter a Registry of people who would be willing to participate in research in the future so that they can continue to help others with these disorders.

In addition to our study in Atlanta, researchers in Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia will be carrying out matching studies. By working with these different populations, we will have a better idea of how common health and social problems are in alcohol-affected adults. The results of this research will help us advocate for the services and supports that adults with FASD need for better lives.

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Further Reading

May, PA, Baete, A, Russo, J, et al. (2014) Prevalence and characteristics of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Pediatrics, 134 (5), 855-866.

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