

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder - What You Need to Know

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term that has been increasingly used to describe the spectrum of disabilities and diagnoses that are associated with prenatal exposure to alcohol. Resultant effects may include such things as physical, mental, behavioral and or learning disabilities that have life long implications. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), one example, is said to be the leading cause of developmental disability among Canadian children. While it is 100% preventable, FASD is a complex, multi-faceted, public health and social issue that affects Canadians in all walks of life and in all regions of the country.

A mother's use of alcohol during pregnancy affects the developing fetus, causing a range of serious physical and mental defects. The impact of alcohol varies with the amount, timing and frequency of alcohol consumed, and depends on a number of other factors, including the genetics of the fetus and mother, and the overall state of health of the mother as well as other social, economic, physical and environmental factors.

FASD is a difficult community issue to address. Some communities are not ready to acknowledge it as a problem. Other communities prefer to blame individual women, judging them as immoral and allowing them to be shamed and degraded. Because of this, birth mothers can find it impossible to reach out for help or to stand up and be heard and acknowledged. To assist with community empowerment, we need to know where our communities are at in understanding this issue and how they may then need to be encouraged to change.

Since the early 1980s, awareness campaigns and activities have grown to support women at risk of using alcohol during pregnancy, as well as to meet the needs of people and communities affected by FASD. Research, monitoring and evaluation of individual initiatives have also increased.

A Vision for the Future

- ***Imagine a world in which***...individuals, families/caregivers and communities across Canada protect children from prenatal exposure to alcohol because they are supported and informed in a way that recognizes and reflects their health, social, economic and ethno-cultural circumstances and needs... a world in which FASD is effectively prevented in all communities across Canada.
- ***Imagine a world in which***...people with FASD and their families are eligible for diagnosis, treatment, supports and services that are accessible - geographically, economically and ethno-culturally. These supports and services are appropriate for all stages of the lifespan and meet the needs of the individual, the family and the community.
- ***Imagine that in this world***, Canadians recognize FASD as a disability and demonstrate compassion and respect for those with FASD and address their needs where they live, learn, work and play so that they are able to participate in society to the best of their abilities. Frontline workers are aware of and understand FASD and are able to provide the necessary supports and services.
- ***Imagine that***, at the same time, Canadians have compassion and respect for women at risk of having a child with FASD and understand that this disability is preventable through effective and concerted action to address the underlying risk factors - through action by governments, organizations, communities, families/caregivers and individuals.

With this vision in mind we need to take action aimed at:

- **Preventing FASD** - through a range of social and economic supports that enable women who may use alcohol during pregnancy to make informed and positive decisions about their health and the health of their family, and by improving awareness of the dangers and impacts of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

- **Building a system of supports and resources** - developing an integrated system characterized by leadership, direction, partnership and collaboration at the national, provincial/territorial and community level, working together to prevent FASD and to meet the needs of people living with FASD and their families.
- **Meeting the needs of individuals with FASD, their families and communities** - to improve their outcomes and enable them to develop to their full capacity, through the development and provision of screening tools and interventions that are appropriate in terms of both gender and culture.
- **Understanding and addressing the context of FASD**, including factors that contribute to the role of alcohol in society, the use of alcohol during pregnancy and even perceptions about the value of women and children in society is crucial. These are important issues that are fundamental to achieving a world without FASD. At the same time, tangible steps can be taken to reduce the incidence of FASD, to improve awareness among professionals and the public, and to improve the quality of life of people living with FASD, their families/caregivers and communities.

Keep the discussion going, integrate new ideas and approaches and work towards results that will keep the *Vision for the Future* alive.

Mark your calendar: September 9, 2008 – National FASD Awareness Day

Tracy Young – Mental Health Promotion Clinic

FASD Workshop - September 9, 2008

Ag Centre—1129 Queens Avenue Brandon, Manitoba

Featuring: Ms. Lia Braun Workshop Facilitator Fetal Alcohol Family Association of Manitoba Inc. For more info call Viola 729-3845 or Terri Dutchyshen 571-7268