Alcohol in pregnancy causes children to have impaired social skills

Researchers at the Semel Institute of Neuroscience and Human Behavior within the University of California, Los Angeles have recently published an article that examines how social skills are manifested uniquely in children exposed to alcohol prenatally. The study sample includes 125 children, between the ages of 6 and 12, and is divided into categorical groups representing children who met the diagnostic criteria for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and those who did not. In order to be included as cases in the study, the children had to have measurable social deficits, a composite IQ of \( \leq 70 \), and have had no previous diagnosis of an intellectual disability (ID) or a significant developmental disorder. To assess overall social skills, each child went through an extensive assortment of cognitive, social, adaptive functioning, and emotional evaluations.

The results of the assessments indicated that out of the 97 participants with prenatal alcohol exposure (PAE), 10 were classified as having fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), 43 as partial FAS, and 44 were considered to have alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND). The children in the alcohol-exposed group showed significantly lower scores in executive functioning, attention, linguistic abstraction, working and visuospatial memory, emotional and behavioral functioning, adaptive behavior, and social cognition. At an interpersonal level, children with PAE showed a greater presentiment towards hostile behavior in situations in which they were not provoked. PAE children were also reported to have more hyperactive behavior by their parents and were more likely to present with the symptoms of depression. Even whilst controlling for IQ, children with PAE demonstrated indications of social problems more often than in their non-PAE peers. This finding helps debunk a firmly held viewpoint that IQ alone is the primary marker of social expectations and performance.
These results highlight the importance of socially and cognitively evaluating PAE youth early in the developmental stages of their childhood. Also, the findings show that it is becoming increasingly more evident that effective intervention programs are needed to target these children in order to maximize their potential for harnessing effective social skills and improved functional development.

References


For further information regarding this article, please contact Jonathan Cook, at the Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 12 Executive Park Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329. You can also phone us at 404-727-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD.

The Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development is funded by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD)