Alcohol Exposure and the Transition to Adulthood: Promoting Resilience

Resilience is defined as “the ability to recover after adverse events” as well as “…success at beating the odds.” Young people who were prenatally exposed to alcohol are a very high risk group who might be thought to have the odds stacked against them. In addition to their prenatal exposure, they often have difficult caregiving experiences. Many have learning and behavior problems. And yet, not all young adults are equally affected by their prenatal alcohol exposure. Some alcohol-exposed individuals have difficulty in meeting the challenges presented by adulthood while others do not. To support the most positive outcomes, it would be helpful to understand the characteristics of successful young adults and their families.

We investigated this question in a group of young adults, average age 22 years, who we first “met” before they were born and have been privileged to work with ever since. In this group, we looked at those aspect of their lives that predicted more positive outcomes as they began to deal with challenges presented by the responsibilities of adulthood. The challenges most important at this stage in life are education, finding a job or career, maintaining positive mental health despite the stresses of life, and avoiding substance abuse and trouble with the law. We examined information about young adults when they were born, during early adolescence and at the transition to adulthood to find those things that predicted how they would meet these challenges. We looked at characteristics of the persons themselves, like sex, ability, amount of prenatal alcohol exposure, and their own positive and negative life experiences. We also looked at family and environmental factors like family stability, exposure to violence, and parenting style. We did not look at Race and Socioeconomic Status which are often important predictors because all of the young people in our sample are African-American and, originally, all came from disadvantaged backgrounds. By using regression models, we explored the contribution of these different factors on outcomes in young adulthood as well as ways to support resiliency in this high risk group. We found that the most important positive influences, over all, were being female, full term
birth, authoritative parenting (good supervision and warmth), freedom from violence and other adverse life events, experiencing positive life events and avoiding alcohol and drug use as a young teen-ager. Early life experiences, like good parenting, were particularly important in developing positive mental health and avoiding excessive use of drugs and alcohol.

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