



In the Spotlight

Monthly Issues of Interest Presented By
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Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: 100% Preventable Disabilities

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There are not many causes of disabilities that are 100% preventable but Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders are just that, preventable in EVERY situation. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders or FASDs represent a range of effects that can occur as the result of prenatal exposure to alcohol. Some of these effects can be more severe, such as full blown Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) which is characterized by growth problems, abnormal facial features and central nervous system problems.

A diagnosis of FAS usually results when all of these characteristics are present and it is known that the mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. However, there are many other effects that aren't as visually obvious but that can have equally detrimental consequences throughout an individual's lifetime. Poor coordination, hyperactive behavior, developmental disabilities, mental retardation, and learning disabilities all can be the result of exposure to alcohol during prenatal development. This range of other disabilities under the general category of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders that occur as the result of exposure to alcohol during pregnancy are referred to as Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE), Alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders or alcohol-related birth defects. Many times, it is not known for sure whether these disabilities are the result of prenatal alcohol exposure and it is believed that FASDs are grossly underestimated.

Solid statistics on how common FASDs vary greatly depending on the population studied and the methods used. Studies from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimate rates of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome at a range of 0.2 to 1.5 per 1,000 live births in different areas of the United States. The CDC also concludes that other Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders occur at three times the rate of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Government survey data from 2002 and 2003 indicate that almost 10% of pregnant women aged 15 to 44 reported drinking alcohol and 5.1% reported binge drinking (considered 5 or more drinks at once in this particular study). It is believed that binge drinking by pregnant women is particularly concerning because it causes the level of alcohol in the blood to spike which may result in a more severe effect.

It is not known exactly how much alcohol during pregnancy causes FASDs or at what phase. Some researchers have concluded that alcohol use earlier on in pregnancy when the brain is forming can result in the greatest damage. However, because individuals have differing tolerances for alcohol, it is best to assume that there is no safe amount or no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy or even prior to conception if pregnancy is being planned. Oftentimes, pregnancies occur that are not planned and as a result, they may not be known about for several weeks. Significant development may already have occurred during this time frame so awareness and education on the potential consequences of alcohol use during pregnancy is crucial for all women of childbearing age.

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LDANYS

1190 Troy-Schenectady Rd.

Latham, NY 12110

Ph: 518-608-8992

Fax: 518-608-8993

E-Mail: statelda@ldanys.org

Website: www.ldanys.org

(OVER)



LDA Regional Affiliates

LDA of the Capital District
(a.k.a. Wildwood Programs)
2995 Curry Road Extension
Schenectady, NY 12303

LDA of Central New York
722 West Manlius Street
East Syracuse, NY 13057

LDA Life & Learning Services
339 East Avenue, 4th Floor
Rochester, NY 14604

LDA of Long Island
44 South Elmwood Avenue
Montauk, NY 11954

LDA of the Mohawk Valley
401 Columbia Street
Utica, NY 13502

LDA of New York City
27 West 20th St., Rm. 303
New York, NY 10011

LDA of the Southern Tier
112 Nanticoke Avenue
Endicott, NY 13760

LDA of Western New York
2555 Elmwood Avenue
Kenmore, NY 14217

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AT WWW.LDANYS.ORG**

The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State (LDANYS) was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents in 1958 and is a statewide 501c3 nonprofit, parent-driven organization that advocates on behalf of children and adults who have learning disabilities. LDANYS is the New York state affiliate of the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our regional affiliates located throughout the state provide a variety of programs and services for children and adults with learning and other developmental disabilities and their families.

For more information about our organization or about the content contained here, please contact our state office at 518-608-8992.

FASDs– continued

The impact of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders are lifelong and the disabilities and behaviors that can result are often misunderstood by parents, teachers, doctors and others in the lives of the impacted individual. Children in school may often go undiagnosed, un-served and labeled as “lazy”, “troubled” or just “brats”. Without supports such as special education services in place, children with FASDs are at risk for mental health problems, criminal behavior, dropping out of school and unemployment. FASDs are not one of the thirteen categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and they continue to be under-diagnosed in our society.

As an organization that works to raise awareness on prevention of learning disabilities whenever prevention is possible, the Learning Disabilities Association of New York State (LDANYS) is working to raise awareness on the link between learning disabilities and prenatal alcohol exposure. Learning disabilities that result from alcohol use during pregnancy are 100% preventable.

LDANYS will be conducting a statewide training program on prevention of FASDs beginning in 2010. This training program is the result of a grant from the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council and will be geared towards professionals such as healthcare workers, teachers, and others who work with women and potentially impacted children. The training will focus on how to recognize FASDs and provide strategies for professionals to work with children who’s disabilities may be the result of prenatal alcohol exposure.

LDANYS’ training program will be offered in several locations on Long Island, throughout New York City and in several key locations throughout upstate New York. For more information about our Prevention of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders training program, please call our office at 518-608-8992.