

Fetal Alcohol Disorders Often Misdiagnosed as ADHD

07.17.09, 04:00 PM EDT

Behavioral difficulties can look the same, researchers note

FRIDAY, July 17 (HealthDay News) -- Children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) are often initially diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, since the two problems can manifest in similar ways, a new study shows.

However, children with FASD have more difficulty interpreting social information than children with ADHD, and this results in more severe behavioral problems, the researchers found.

The study also found that children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) have a high risk of psychiatric problems.

"Behaviorally, FASD and ADHD can look quite similar, particularly with respect to problems with very limited attention, physical restlessness and extreme impulsivity," study author Rachel Greenbaum, a clinical psychologist with the Children's Mental Health Team at Surrey Place Centre in Toronto, Canada, said in a news release.

The study of 33 children with FASD, 30 children with ADHD and 34 children without disorders focused on their social cognition and emotion-processing abilities. Social cognition is the ability to consider and differentiate between the beliefs, thoughts, feelings and intentions of oneself and others. Emotion processing is the ability to understand and process information related to feelings.

"Our findings show that ... overall, children with FASD have more severe behavioral problems. In terms of social cognition and emotional processing, the core deficit in FASD appears to be in understanding and interpreting another's mental states and emotions," study corresponding author Joanne Rovet, a professor at the University of Toronto and senior scientist in neurosciences and mental health at the Hospital for Sick Children.

These problems with social cognition and emotion processing "may underlie the severe conduct problems" seen in children with FASD, including behaviors such as lying, cheating and stealing, she suggested.

"It is imperative that these children receive assistance in social and emotional processing domains, specifically targeting interventions to deal with their unique deficits," Rovet said.

The study, which appears online, will be published in the October print issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*.

More information

The Nemours Foundation has more about [fetal alcohol syndrome](#).