



In the Spotlight

Monthly Issues of Interest Presented By
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The Importance of Recognizing and Diagnosing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

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What is the connection between drinking during pregnancy and learning disabilities and why is it important to diagnose Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders? When a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy, the risk of her giving birth to a child with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) increases. FAS is more easily diagnosed than FASD as children with FAS often exhibit outwardly visible characteristics including facial deformities, deficient growth and brain damage. FAS can also damage internal organs such as the heart, liver and kidneys. Children with FAS may also experience vision and hearing problems.

Some children may not, however, exhibit the full-blown characteristics of FAS but may experience less obvious, harder to diagnose characteristics of FASD. FASD is an umbrella term to describe a range of effects that can result from exposure to alcohol during pregnancy. These “effects” can include physical, mental, behavioral and/ or learning disabilities. The impact of these effects can be life-long and can persistently manifest in several aspects of life, for example, academic difficulty in school, difficulty making friends, and poor judgment, decision-making and organizational skills. Children who suffer from FASD are often misdiagnosed or go undiagnosed altogether and may ultimately end up experiencing “secondary disabilities” as a result such as mental health disorders, trouble with the law, inappropriate sexual behavior, confinement in jail or treatment facilities and substance abuse.

There is an overlap between the academic, social and behavioral deficits of children with learning disabilities and ADHD and those with FASD but determining whether a child’s disability is the result of an FASD is significant in that the treatments, interventions and teaching strategies may differ and be specifically targeted to address the FASD. It is important that professionals who work with children such as teachers, daycare staff, social workers, mental health professionals, nurses, healthcare providers, early intervention providers and others are aware of and can recognize a potential FASD so that proper referral to a trained professional qualified to make a diagnosis of FASD can occur. Children with FASD need to be properly diagnosed so that they can receive appropriate interventions including health, mental health and special education services. Receiving an actual diagnosis of FASD can also provide a sense of better self-awareness and

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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.

Importance of FASD Diagnosis– continued

understanding for a child who may have been told much too often that he or she is just lazy, impulsive or a behavior problem. Understanding the reasons for why a child experiences these struggles can help that child begin to address some of the self-esteem challenges that are also frequently associated with FASD. As alcohol use and abuse can be an inherited trait, a diagnosis of FASD is also significant because it can open a door for a child at risk to receive appropriate interventions and treatment to prevent the cycle of alcoholism from repeating itself.

FASD and FAS are very serious issues that have widespread implications for our entire nation. According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, each year in the U.S., as many as 40,000 babies are born with FASD and the cost to the nation for FAS alone is about \$6 billion a year. In

addition, costs to provide special education services, mental health services, substance abuse services, incarceration and treatment for individuals with FASD are likely to push this figure even higher if steps are not taken to address this problem. A survey conducted by the NYS Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services in 2004 revealed that professionals generally lacked knowledge and information about FASD and how to recognize a potential FASD. To address this need, the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council awarded a grant to the Learning Disabilities Association of New York State to provide statewide training on FASDs to professionals in a variety of fields. LDANYS is now mid-way through the first year of the training program and will conduct the training for a second year beginning in 2011. For more information on the FASD training program and a list of training dates and locations, please visit our website at www.ldanys.org.