Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and Mental Health

Mental health and behavioral problems have been related to prenatal alcohol exposure in several previous studies. In the community sample studied by the Emory Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development (MSACD) Project, however, we did not find support for the idea that individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol have severe mental health problems. This difference in results may have occurred because the MSACD sample was drawn from the community rather than from a clinic where individuals have already been referred for treatment.

The MSACD sample has been followed since birth with contact points at middle childhood, adolescence, and in young adulthood. Both individuals whose mothers used alcohol during pregnancy and those whose mothers did not were included in this predominantly African-American, low-income sample. At each follow-up point, ratings of behavior problems were completed. Two types of behavior problems were rated: 1) Externalizing, which focuses on how the individual behaves in relation to other people and includes items on aggressive or disruptive behaviors, and 2) Internalizing, which focuses more on feelings, such as anxiety or sadness.

At middle childhood, teacher ratings showed that children whose mothers continued to drink throughout the pregnancy showed more externalizing behaviors than children whose mothers did not drink or who stopped drinking during the pregnancy. While the average score for the “Continued Drinking” group was higher than the scores of the other two groups, it did not suggest severe mental health problems.

At adolescence, a second contrast group of students enrolled in special education classes joined the study. This group was similar in background to the original sample. Both teens and parents or caregivers completed behavior ratings. For the teens, the most severely affected,
alcohol-exposed participants reported the most mental health problems; for the caregivers, those with teens in the Special Education group reported the most problems. Again, the average scores for these groups did not indicate severe mental health problems. When the adults came back for evaluation and rated their own behavior, those in the non-exposed group scored significantly lower than those in the Special Education group for externalizing, internalizing, and total problems. The alcohol-exposed adults generally scored between these two groups. None of the average scores indicated severe mental health problems.

In summary, in this community sample, there was no evidence showing that prenatal alcohol exposure was related to high levels of behavior or mental health problems. Conclusions based on studies of alcohol-exposed individuals already in clinical treatment may overestimate the relationship between prenatal alcohol exposure and mental health problems.

References:


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