In a paper published in Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, (1997) (1) Georgia researchers reported clear distinctions between two clinical groups diagnosed with FAS and ADHD, respectively. These results are important because the frequency with which ADHD has been diagnosed in children with FAS and other alcohol-related birth defects which has led to speculation that alcohol is an etiological factor in ADHD. Their research, while preliminary, uncovered patterns of deficits that may have implication for medication regimen and for education interventions with these children.

Children who were diagnosed with ADHD and showed specific problems with focusing and maintaining attention on stimuli were responsive to Ritalin, which help them to main attention appropriately. As a result they were able to perform relatively well on the encoding dimension—that is, on short-term memory and learning. In contrast, the children with FAS/FAE were able to focus and maintain their attention very well, but were not able to encode the information they attended to or to use new information meaningfully in problem solving. Thus, stimulant medication, while helping to focus attention, may not improve learning or problem solving. Similarly education intervention might be modified to provide children with strategies for encoding and problem solving.

The research team, led by Dr. Claire D. Coles, was a state-federal partnership, involving researchers from the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory University School of Medicine and staff of the Georgia Department of Children and Youth Services. Support for the research was receive through grants funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism of the National Institute of Health and The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).

Further information may be obtained by contacting Claire D. Coles, Ph.D., Human and Behavior Genetics Laboratory, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Atlanta, Georgia 30306 (phone 404/894-8288; FAX 404/894-8502).