Alcohol and Drug Use Among Adolescents

Prenatally-Exposed Adolescents' Risk for Substance Abuse

In 1997, according to the Monitoring the Future study, 54 percent of 8th graders, 72 percent of 10th graders, and 82 percent of 12th graders reported any lifetime use of alcohol. Adolescent substance use is a public health concern that is particularly urgent when there is a family history of alcoholism or drug use. Some recent studies have suggested that the risk for substance abuse is higher among prenatally exposed youth and those with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Because such individuals are already vulnerable, this is a significant concern.

The Teen Assessment Project, a research study at Emory University, investigated this issue in a project examining development in alcohol-exposed adolescents. Alcohol and drug use data were collected from 270 predominantly African-American, low SES adolescents through self-report and blood (GGTP) and urine toxicology screens. 186 adolescents (M Age = 14.75) were drawn from a longitudinal cohort prenatally exposed due to maternal alcohol use during pregnancy and 84 were recruited as a Special Education contrast group.

Overall, rates of lifetime use for this group were lower than those reported in National Samples (see related article) and there was considerable consistency between youth self-report and urine and blood tests. As a group, alcohol-affected youth were not more likely than other teens to use alcohol and other drugs at this age. Despite indications that children of substance abusers are at higher risk due to genetic or familial factors (or both), groups of individuals with FAS and those who were exposed and not dysmorphic had similar rates of use as children of nondrinkers. Further, adolescents in this sample of low income, predominantly African-American youth reported a lower rate of alcohol and drug use than did those in a national sample of 10th graders (see...
News Briefs
One in Four Children Exposed to Family Alcohol Abuse

According to the American Journal of Public Health (Volume 90, Number 1), one in four U.S. children is exposed to "familial alcohol dependence, alcohol abuse, or both."

Data from the 1992 National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiological Survey (NLAES) reveals that "approximately 15 percent of children under age 18 (about 10 million children) were exposed to familial alcohol abuse or dependence in 1992." The survey also determined that "43 percent of children under 18 (more than 28 million children) lived with one or more adults who at some time during their lives had experienced alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence."

These alcohol-exposed adolescents were still young at the time this study was done. Further research is necessary to monitor the impact of maternal prenatal substance use as well as that of the postnatal environment on their use and abuse of both alcohol and other drugs. This study will be followed with the continued assistance of study sponsors, the GDHR and NIAAA.

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The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is dedicated to the study and prevention of the effects of maternal substance abuse. Since 1978, the project has studied the development of children exposed to alcohol and other drugs prenatally and their caregivers and provided training for Prevention statewide. For additional information call (404) 712-9800.