Delinquency and FAS in Adolescence

By Mary Ellen Lynch, Ph.D.

Harassing other students, neighborhood vandalism, fighting at school, stealing, truancy – these are examples of behaviors reported by some parents or caregivers of adolescents with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and other alcohol-related disorders. In her study of alcohol-affected adolescents and adults, Streissguth reported a high incidence of “trouble with the law,” alcohol and drug use, and disrupted school experience in her sample. Other studies of parent ratings of alcohol-affected youth show high scores on measures of aggression and/or delinquent behavior.

Families report that they have an especially difficult time at adolescence in dealing with young people with FAS. It is difficult for these adolescents to meet expectations for increased independence in a responsible way. In addition, several writers have suggested that behavioral problems are related to poor social skills and difficulties with social judgment—interpreting social situations and the intent of others in inaccurate ways. If alcohol-affected adolescents do have difficulty interpreting social cues, this, in combination with impaired attentional and intellectual capacities, may be related to occurrence of delinquent behavior.

Results of studies suggesting high levels of delinquent behavior may not be typical of most adolescents with FAS. Many of these studies have been completed based on samples of teens who already have been referred to professional services because of behavioral problems. These teens are probably the most severely affected, and not representative of the broader spectrum of alcohol-affected adolescents; conclusions based on these studies may be unduly pessimistic.
A recent report from the Emory Teen Assessment Project is based on a comparison of alcohol-affected teens followed since birth to a group of non-affected teens (also followed since birth) from similar backgrounds. The results of this comparison showed no difference due to alcohol exposure group on delinquency variables, but, boys were more likely to report delinquent behavior than girls (this is consistent with studies of delinquency in general). When predictors were examined, externalizing behavior, self-reported substance use, a higher number of bad life events, and lack of supervision and inconsistent discipline provided by caregivers were significantly related to occurrence of delinquent behavior.

This study suggests that delinquent behavior is more strongly related to current environmental factors such as stressful life events and parental characteristics and behavior than to prenatal alcohol exposure. In the future, it will be important to examine current family, peer, and community influences in addition to exposure status when studying the behavior of alcohol-affected adolescents; these factors may be crucial in their social development.

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