Premature Development and Drug Exposure

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Premature birth is associated with a wide range of difficulties and challenges for infants and their parents. Some preemies develop with little or no difficulty, while others have multiple (and sometimes long-lasting) problems. Early in development premature infants often fight medical problems. The immaturity of underdeveloped organs can cause difficulties with lungs and breathing, vision (particularly retinal development), and digestion. Immature brain tissue can bleed (intraventricular hemorrhage), and this can be associated with longer-term developmental challenges. Some preemies will be diagnosed with a variety of neuro-motor conditions such as cerebral palsy in infancy. Learning disabilities and behavioral problems are also common among children born too early.

Parents also face challenges with their premature infants. Early in development, premature infants are easily over-stimulated. When handling prematures, parents often follow their instincts to cuddle, rock, coo and sing only to be confused by an infant who reacts by becoming distressed or shutting out the world. This is because the infant’s body and nervous system are designed to be inside the safe and muted environment of mother’s womb, and not a world filled with loud noises, bright lights, and handling, however gentle it may be. Later in development, parents sometimes have to continue to actively support their children as they cope with learning, behavioral, or neurological problems.

Infants prenatally exposed to drugs/alcohol are sometimes born prematurely. At birth these infants can face the double task of recovering from prematurity and (depending upon the drug) withdrawal or other problems. Some drugs, including alcohol,
are associated with long-term developmental consequences, which also have to be actively supported. Sometimes the effects of prematurity can be mistaken for the effects of prenatal drug/alcohol exposure and vice versa. Drug-using parents often have difficulty with the tasks of providing an emotionally and physically stable environment for their newborns. They face the challenge of wanting to stop drug use and this takes time and energy away from the baby and family. Caring for a premature infant just adds to the many challenges, and makes life all the more complicated for these already stressed parents.

Needless to say, new parents and their premature infants need lots of help and support from their families and communities. Just knowing about what is typical development for premature infants and/or drug and alcohol exposed infants is often is quite helpful. And there are resources parents can turn to for help. Regarding prematurity and development there are many books and websites to read and visit. One excellent book is *Born Too Soon* by Elizabeth Mehren. In it she describes the incredible journey she and her daughter take from Neonatal Intensive Care Unit to home. An excellent website describing development in and parenting of premature children is www.emory.edu/PEDS/NEONATOLOGY/DCP. In this website the professional staff of the Neonatology Department at Grady Hospital outline development, typical problems and resources for families with a premature child. There are many websites about drug/alcohol exposed children including our own at www.emory.edu/MSACD.

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