



Media statement to public about FASD issues: 5 minutes of air time

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Teresa Kellerman is the Director of the FAS Community Resource Center in Tucson and co-founder of FASworld, an international coalition that raises awareness around the world about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy.

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy is the leading cause of mental retardation. Twice as many children are born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome than with Down Syndrome, but most kids with FAS have an IQ in the normal range.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is just the tip of the iceberg. For every child with full FAS, there are 5 children with Fetal Alcohol Effects – or FAE - who may have normal intelligence and no identifying physical features, but the same degree of neurological dysfunction as kids with full FAS. Together, FAS and FAE make up what we call Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders – or FASD.

According to government reports, alcohol causes more damage to the developing baby's brain than any other substance, including tobacco, cocaine, marijuana, and heroin.

It is estimated that one in every 100 babies is born with significant effects from prenatal alcohol exposure. It could be a heart defect, or mental retardation or developmental delays. Or it could be more subtle, like learning disabilities, attention deficits, hyperactivity, or serious behavior problems that show up later in the school years. At least a third of kids with a diagnosis of ADHD are actually suffering from the effects of alcohol. But it's more than just ADHD, it's a combination of inability to control impulses, inability to remember rules and consequences, and an inability to make wise decisions, because they can't think things out like typical kids.

These are the kid who have trouble in school, are labeled "behavior problems" and end up abusing alcohol and other drugs, getting in trouble with the law, and generally have a hard time with life. They make the same mistakes over and over, and their behavior is misunderstood as willful misbehavior, but they really cannot help it. They want to be good, they try to be good, but they just can't.

It is estimated that between 25% and 50% of our prison population has alcohol effects. I'm sure a great number of the homeless do as well.

It's not enough to just tell pregnant women not to drink. Half the women of childbearing age admit to drinking regularly. About half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Birth control fails all the time. About 20% - 25% of women who know they are pregnant continue to drink. The more the mother drinks, the higher the risk to the baby. But even light drinking can cause damage to the developing brain. The sooner the pregnant woman quits drinking, the better for the baby. But the time to stop drinking is before she gets pregnant. And it helps if Dad quits drinking too. Studies indicate that his drinking before conception may affect the health of his future children. Most importantly, every woman who is sexually active and not sterile should take care to avoid all alcohol. It's just not worth taking the risk. The buzz you get from that drink lasts less than an hour. But the damage to the baby lasts a lifetime.

To find information on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, go to this web site: **www.fasstar.com**

Five-Minute Interview about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Teresa Kellerman is the Director of the FAS Community Resource Center in Tucson, Arizona, and co-founder of FASworld, an international coalition that raises awareness around the world about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. Teresa, I read here that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or FAS, is the leading cause of mental retardation, is that correct?

Yes, twice as many children are born with FAS than with Down Syndrome, but most kids with FAS have an IQ in the normal range. And Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is just the tip of the iceberg. For every child with full FAS, there are 5 children with Fetal Alcohol Effects – or FAE - who may have normal intelligence and no identifying physical features, but the same degree of neurological dysfunction as kids with full FAS. Together, FAS and FAE make up what we call Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders – or FASD.

I know that smoking and drugs are not healthy during pregnancy. How does alcohol compare to other drugs?

According to government reports, alcohol causes more damage to the developing baby's brain than any other substance, including tobacco, cocaine, marijuana, and heroin.

How bad is this problem? How many kids are affected by FASD?

It is estimated that one in every 100 babies is born with significant effects from prenatal alcohol exposure. It could be a heart defect, or mental retardation or developmental delays. Or it could be more subtle, like learning disabilities, attention deficits, hyperactivity, or serious behavior problems that show up later in the school years. At least a third of kids with a diagnosis of ADHD are actually suffering from the effects of alcohol. But it's more than just ADHD, it's a combination of inability to control impulses, inability to remember rules and consequences, and an inability to make wise decisions, because they can't think things out like typical kids.

I would imagine that these kids have a tough time in school?

These kids have lots of trouble in school, and it becomes more obvious around age 10 or so. They are labeled as "behavior problems" and end up abusing alcohol and

other drugs, getting in trouble with the law, and generally have a hard time with life. They make the same mistakes over and over, and their behavior is misunderstood as willful misbehavior, but they really cannot help it. They want to be good, they try to be good, but they just can't.

So they are basically good kids that can't stay out of trouble. What happens when they grow up?

It is estimated that between 25% and 50% of our prison population has alcohol effects. I'm sure a great number of the homeless do as well. But if they are recognized and diagnosed, and can get the intervention and support services they need, they have a good chance at a happy life.

What is your message? Simply to tell women who are pregnant to stop drinking?

It's not enough to just tell pregnant women not to drink. Half the women of childbearing age admit to drinking regularly. About half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Birth control fails all the time. About 20% - 25% of women who know they are pregnant continue to drink.

And what is the risk to the baby?

We can't predict which babies will be affected and which will not. The more the mother drinks, the higher the risk to the baby. But even light drinking can cause damage to the developing brain. The sooner the pregnant woman quits drinking, the better for the baby. But the time to stop drinking is before she gets pregnant.

What about Dads? Are men off the hook when it comes to fetal alcohol disorders?

FASD can only be caused by alcohol consumed by the mother, but it is easier for her to quit, if Dad quits with her. Besides, recent studies indicate that Dad's drinking before conception may affect the health of his future children. We're not sure how that happens, but we do know that alcohol during pregnancy has the potential to do serious damage. Most importantly, every woman who is sexually active and not sterile should take care to avoid all alcohol. It's just not worth taking the risk. The buzz you get from that drink lasts less than an hour. But the damage to the baby lasts a lifetime.

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