

Provincial Campaign Promotes Alcohol-free Pregnancies

(Toronto, Ontario – March 25, 2004) -- Most people know that excessive alcohol use during pregnancy can cause harm to an unborn baby. But what they don't realize is that a woman doesn't have to be a heavy drinker to have long term affects on her baby, such as brain damage and birth defects.

In Canada, it is estimated that about one out of every 100 babies is born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). That's approximately 3,000 Canadian children each year.

What is FASD?

FASD is the umbrella term used to describe the range of defects and disabilities that are caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause permanent birth defects and brain damage to a baby. Prenatal exposure to alcohol can also cause:

- Vision and hearing difficulties
- Bones, limbs and fingers that are not properly formed
- Damage to heart, kidney, liver and other organs
- Slow growth

Brain damage caused as a result of prenatal exposure to alcohol can result in learning disabilities, hyperactivity, difficulty paying attention, difficulty remembering, inability to manage anger, poor judgment and difficulties with problem solving.

But Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder doesn't only affect the baby and the baby's immediate family. It is a lifelong problem that affects all of us, everyday. FASD occurs in all cultures and levels of society.

"Whether you are a parent raising a child with FASD, a teacher struggling with trying to reach a young student who is struggling with simple concepts, or a social services worker trying to offer assistance, we all have a price to pay for this costly and completely preventable condition," says Burgoyne.

In fact, a recent study by Dr. Brenda Stade, R.N. of St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, estimates that the cost of FASD annually to Canada of those 1 to 21 years old, is \$344,208,000. "That dollar figure does not account for the emotional and psychological cost that the victims of FASD and their families have to pay every day," says Dr. Stade.

Just ask Bonnie Buxton and her husband Brian Philcox about 'quality of life'. Bonnie and Brian adopted their daughter Colette when she was three. They didn't know anything about FASD at the time. Colette was a bright and lovable little girl. By the age of 10, she was stealing and lying. By 14 years old, she was in an adolescent treatment centre and by 17 she was living on the streets. It was only after watching a program on children affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol, that Bonnie understood what was wrong with Colette. She suffers from FASD.

"When Colette was finally diagnosed, the news was both devastating and a relief," says Buxton. "We finally knew what was going on and we were able to help her."

Over the past 18 years, Bonnie has learned a great deal about the effects of alcohol use during pregnancy and has become a strong voice for prevention. She recently completed a book about her experiences, "Damaged Angels", which is now available in bookstores across Canada. As founders of FASworld Canada, Bonnie and Brian share their personal experience publicly and offer support to other families living with FASD.

Colette is now 24 years old and a mother of two. "I wouldn't wish my life on anyone. It's been difficult – for me and for my family," says Colette. "But as soon as I found out I was pregnant, I quit drinking. I wanted to make sure I gave my children the best possible start in life. It's that simple." As a result, her 4 year old son and 2 ½ year old daughter are healthy, happy – albeit busy children.

FASD lasts a lifetime

Children with FASD do not grow out of their problems. In fact many will need a lifetime of extra health care, education and social services. When they get older, children with FASD often have difficulty paying attention and learning at school. They have trouble getting along with others. They may have difficulty remembering and thinking things through. They struggle with depression and may have drug and alcohol problems. They often have trouble holding a job and living independently and may get into trouble with the law.

Alcohol damage doesn't always show up before the child goes to school. That was the case with Colette. "When Colette started school, our bright, inquisitive daughter was unable to learn to read," says Buxton. "We went through an endless series of hurdles to get extra help for Colette. Then her learning problems resulted in severe acting-out behaviour that took us on a journey to countless psychiatrists and social workers, through the court system, and she eventually spent two years in a residential treatment centre for emotionally disturbed adolescents."

"The good news is that FASD can be prevented," says Burgoyne. "The surest way to prevent FASD is to avoid alcohol completely when pregnant or when planning a pregnancy."

No safe amount

Based on current research, there is no known "safe" level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. All alcohol - beer, wine, coolers, or spirits have the same negative effects during pregnancy - all alcoholic drinks can affect the growing baby.

Because there is no determined "safe" level of drinking during pregnancy, Health Canada's message to Canadians is, "If you are pregnant or wish to become pregnant: don't drink any alcohol."

No safe time

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, it rapidly crosses the placenta to the fetus. Unlike the mother, the fetus cannot process alcohol at the same rate, and it remains in the baby's body longer than in the mother's.

The brain and central nervous system of the unborn child continues to develop throughout the pregnancy and therefore can be damaged by exposure to alcohol at any time during pregnancy. Alcohol can damage a growing baby's brain, organs and body, affecting how it thinks, acts, looks and learns as a child and as an adult.

How can others help?

It's important for partners, families and friends of pregnant women, to support them and help them avoid drinking alcohol. Here are some tips to encourage an alcohol-free pregnancy:

- Don't drink alcohol around pregnant women.
- Have non-alcoholic drinks available at parties.
- Get together in people's homes or at coffee shops rather than in bars.
- Don't ever suggest that "just one little drink" will do no harm.

It's a fact that if a woman drinks alcohol when pregnant she's at risk of causing serious damage to her baby. To be completely safe, women should never drink when they are pregnant, planning to get pregnant, or if they think there's a chance they might be pregnant.

“We are providing community health groups and health care providers with the tools they need to get this important message out to the public,” says Burgoyne. “With their support we hope to encourage all women to be safe and have an alcohol-free pregnancy.”

For more information on drinking and pregnancy, talk to your health care provider, or visit www.alcoholfreepregnancy.ca.

About Best Start

Best Start: Ontario's Maternal, Newborn and Early Child Development Resource Centre supports community service providers across the province of Ontario working on health promotion initiatives to enhance the health of expectant and new parents, newborns and young children. Best Start is launching a provincial public awareness campaign on alcohol use and pregnancy this Spring with advertising, posters, pamphlets and with the support of communities and health care professionals across Ontario.