

MODULE TEN

FASD and the Media

Conflicting Messages in the Media

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Messages about alcohol can be found almost anywhere; on television and the radio, in movies, on billboards and the internet, and even on people's clothing. The messages vary in content, but all have the same intent ... to inform, educate, and influence the public's thoughts and behaviours.

For the most part, advertisers portray drinking alcohol as something fun, glamorous, without consequence, cool, and the 'normal' way to celebrate any occasion. It is within the advertisers' best interest to create excitement about their products in order to sell more, and they can do this by 'normalizing' the drinking experience.

It is important to think about these influences when speaking to clients, students, and the public as these create the social context in which individuals live.

One challenge when providing FASD education is the presence of conflicting messages about the impact of maternal alcohol use. For example, it is not unusual to talk to people who have read or heard that drinking alcohol during pregnancy is not that harmful. Frequently, this results from misinformation from others or the media. It is the messages put forth by the media that are especially problematic. This is because: a) the media is viewed as a source of "credible" information; and b) the media frequently misinterprets or overextends research findings.

A good example of this is the controversy that occurred when an article entitled "Light Drinking in Pregnancy, a Risk for Behavioural Problems and Cognitive Deficits at 3 Years of Age?" (Kelly et al., 2008) was published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*. The conclusions provided by the London (UK) researchers in this study suggested that light alcohol consumption during pregnancy could result in positive cognitive and behavioural outcomes for these children later in life (age three). Although the study itself suffered a number of serious methodological issues (for a full critique, see Gijsen, Fulga, Garcia-Bournissen & Koren, 2008), "these results were rapidly quoted by the media, leading to a of flurry of print and internet articles discussing the potential benefits of light alcohol exposure during pregnancy" (pp 782).

Gijsen et al. (2008) list some statements made in the media about these results, clearly demonstrating how the results of one study can be interpreted (or misinterpreted) in many ways. For example, it was reported that the study:

- Failed to find negative effects of light drinking
 - From: *Bupa News* (2008): “Light Drinking in Pregnancy not Linked with Behaviour Problems”
- Found that light drinking may lead to calmer babies
 - “Light Drinking when Pregnant may Lead to Calm Babies, Says Study” (Connor, 2008)
- Found that light drinking may be good for babies
 - From: the *Guardian*: “Light Drinking in Pregnancy May be Good for Baby Boys, Says Study: Researchers Find Fewer Behavioural Problems and Higher Test Scores at Age 3” (Boseley, 2008).

Part of the problem with conflicting messages has to do with the amount of alcohol consumed. For example, there is a lot of research about the negative impact of high levels of drinking throughout pregnancy and binge drinking (Chudley et al., 2005). Consequently, it is very rare to hear messages about how it is okay to do either of these things during pregnancy. In contrast, the effect of light or moderate drinking does not have this level of empirical evidence (Gijsen et al., 2008). The media tends to focus on this element, often changing “lack of evidence about this type of drinking” into “it is acceptable to drink.”

What should the response be to an argument that “there is not enough evidence that light drinking during pregnancy can damage the fetus?” A responsible statement is that **it is safest to avoid alcohol during pregnancy**. It has been widely established that: a) alcohol is a teratogen; b) alcohol can damage the fetus; and c) FASD is only caused by prenatal alcohol exposure (Stratton et al., 1996). Even if it has not yet been established that light drinking will definitely harm the fetus, it has also not yet been established that it does *not* harm the fetus. In other words, it is better to be safe than sorry.

References

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