

COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

EFFECTS OF DRUG USE & SMOKING DURING PREGNANCY

Background

A child's development can be affected before they are born if the mother uses some legal or illegal drugs. However, we know little about this. We know more about how alcohol affects the unborn baby. Please see the specific FASD briefing pack for more information about how alcohol use during pregnancy affects the baby.

Finding out about the effects of drugs on a baby in the womb is difficult as other things may also affect it. These could be poverty, the effects of the mother using more than one drug, and how well the parents care for the child. This is especially a problem if they are still using drugs.

Smoking

- Smoking during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, and may affect the baby. Sometimes these babies are born much too early, and may weigh less than normal. Cigarettes reduce the oxygen supply to the baby in the womb, which can limit growth. This includes smoking shisha which has five times the levels of carbon monoxide as tobacco.
- The long-term effects of smoking on the baby in the womb are less clear. They may lead to conduct difficulties and hyperactivity-inattention.
- For a child showing hyperactivity or inattention, see the ADHD specific briefing packs for some ideas for management of the behaviours in the classroom.

Cocaine

- Cocaine drug use during pregnancy affects the baby's growth in the womb. It interferes with nervous system development, and increases the risk of premature birth.
- Cocaine may also cause babies to be born with smaller heads, which can be linked to learning difficulties. It may cause problems in the early stages of the child's life such as irritability, being easily startled and excessive crying. These may reduce after the first year.
- Some studies suggest that cocaine use may lead to learning and behavioural problems, including language delays and inattention.
- There may be more behavioural problems if cocaine is used alongside other drugs.
- Problems in sleeping for these children have also been reported. This may affect their ability to engage in learning.

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Heroin

- Babies of mothers who use heroin are at risk of premature birth and being born too small. This may be linked to learning difficulties when at school.
- Babies of addicted mothers can be born with withdrawal symptoms, including: irritability, trembling, floppy limbs, excessive crying, a constant need to eat, sucking and swallowing difficulties, regurgitation, and seizures.
- Exposure to heroin and/or cocaine before birth may also affect a child in their teenage years. They may have struggle with working memory and understanding. If this is the case, they might need more time to take things in, or to learn in a different way to their other children in their class (e.g. learning by seeing (visual) or doing (kinaesthetic)).
- For children known to have been exposed to heroin in the womb, the briefing pack on premature birth might be helpful to offer information and strategies to support the child in the classroom.

Cannabis

- When a mother smokes cannabis during pregnancy, her baby may be born early with a low birth weight.
- Some children between the ages of 4 and 9 years whose mothers used cannabis find it difficult to concentrate for a long time, to remember things, to think well and to organise themselves.
- Refer to the ADHD briefing pack for strategies for managing inattention in the classroom.

Implications for teaching and learning

As we do not know for sure about the long term effects of individual drugs, it is difficult to make suggestions for the classroom. However, if children do not have good support when they are young, they may develop other difficulties due to stress. This could include mental health, attachment, and behavioural problems, and learning difficulties. These are known as secondary disabilities. Some key points to consider are:

- The student's emotional needs: does the classroom provide a secure environment? Are there opportunities for counselling and listening sessions?
- Building in times for students to get some exercise – this can help to reduce anxiety and depression.



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- The student may need more time to think through instructions than their peers. Is there opportunity for them to catch up if they fall behind in lessons?
- Using a professional and sensitive judgement, if you feel any issues around the child's development could be related to possible alcohol use during pregnancy, look at the FASD briefing packs for some teaching and learning strategies.
- Early intervention is essential. Wherever possible, include the family within this approach to ensure support is consistent at home and at school.
- Ensure staff are aware of safeguarding procedures if parents persist in drug-using.