Prenatal Drug and Alcohol Exposure and Reading Disabilities

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Purpose
The purpose of this book chapter is to synthesize research concerning prenatal exposure to licit (alcohol and cigarettes) and illicit drugs (cocaine, marijuana, and opiates) and discuss how to best support such children in the classroom.

The Article
Approximately one million children each year are prenatally exposed to licit and illicit drugs. Unfortunately, research studies concerning drug use during pregnancy frequently lack rigor. The research data is sometimes misleading for multiple reasons, including population bias, underreporting of use, and prenatal exposure to multiple drugs. These studies mislead teachers and the public to assume that prenatal drug exposure results in a whole host of educational issues, all negative, related to these children. Teachers are encouraged to remember that a child’s development is influenced by genetic predispositions and environment; children respond to insults in a variety of ways; infants demonstrate plasticity in development; and each child experiences numerous events that can influence development. Rigorous research thus concludes that there is no single prediction of the effects of drug or alcohol exposure, so there cannot be one recommendation for intervention. Therefore, as with all children, any intervention must be matched to individual student need and carried out systematically and intensively.

What This Means for the Field
This review of research concerning the educational effects of prenatal drug exposure points out myths concerning the prognosis for such children. The chapter cites multiple studies which show there is wide variability of effects presented in children prenatally exposed to licit and illicit drugs. In the future researchers need to provide comparison or control groups to document if lower performance can be isolated to prenatal drug or alcohol exposure or if it is muddied by the post birth environment of such children.

Citation

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