

Don't Judge Pregnant Drug-Using Women Based on Junk Science

If what you want to do is judge pregnant, drug-using women, then you probably should not keep reading. But, if you actually care about pregnant women and babies you might want to continue reading and find out what the experts have to say.

What you will find out is that scientific and medical research does not always conform to popular beliefs. Sometimes it does not even match what the media told us were “expert” views. This is especially true when it comes to pregnant drug-using women.

For nearly two decades popular media claimed that any illegal drugs used by pregnant women would inevitably and significantly damage their babies. The actual scientific research contradicts this assumption.

Carefully constructed, unbiased scientific research has *not* found that prenatal exposure to any of the illegal drugs causes unique or even inevitable harm. This research is so clear that courts and leading federal agencies have concluded that what most people have heard about prenatal exposure to cocaine, in particular, was “essentially a myth.” As the National Institute for Drug Abuse explains, “babies born to mothers who used crack cocaine while pregnant, were at one time written off by many as a lost generation. . . . It was later found that this was a gross exaggeration.”

Leading researchers, publishing in the most highly regarded, peer-reviewed journals, warned, early on, about rushing to judgments about pregnant drug-using women. The careful research that was done, found that the harmful effects of illegal drugs, if any were identified, were subtle, less severe than those of alcohol and comparable to those of tobacco: two legal substances used much more often by pregnant women than any illegal drug.

Media hype and misinformation about the relative harms of illegal drugs distracts attention from far greater risks to maternal, fetal, and child health including poverty and lack of health insurance. False claims about the effects of illegal drugs have also contributed to hundreds of unjustified arrests of pregnant women and thousands of families undermined by punitive and unauthorized civil child welfare interventions. Low-income women and women of color have been disproportionately targeted for these punitive interventions and are among those with the least access to drug treatment and other health services.

Sometimes it is hard to sort out whether what you are hearing is true or just another example of media hype and alarmist misinformation about drugs. Yes, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine are illegal, but not because our legislators determined that these drugs pose unique risks to fetuses.

Fortunately, some of the actual science is making a difference. For example the South Carolina Supreme Court relied on real science when it unanimously overturned the Regina McKnight’s conviction for homicide by child abuse. Ms. McKnight suffered a stillbirth and was charged with homicide based on the non-scientific claim that her use of cocaine caused the stillbirth. The judges agreed that the research the prosecutor relied on was “outdated” and that her conviction had to be overturned because her counsel failed to call experts who would have testified about “recent studies showing that cocaine is no more harmful to a fetus than nicotine use, poor nutrition, lack of prenatal care, or other conditions commonly associated with the urban poor.”

Even the popular press is finally reporting some of the truth about pregnant drug-using women and the children they give birth to and love. For example, the *Kansas City Star* reported that “[a]fter monitoring these children into their teen years, researchers think cocaine exposure is less severe than alcohol and comparable to tobacco use during pregnancy.”¹ The *Oklahoman* reported that “[d]eeper research shows babies who are exposed to cocaine or methamphetamine in the womb fare similarly to other babies as they age.”² And the *New York Times* ran a story entitled: *The Epidemic That Wasn’t* finally reporting that the fears of harm from prenatal exposure to cocaine that the NY Times itself had promoted have not been substantiated by actual scientific research.³

Every leading medical group to take a position on the issue of drug use and pregnant women has concluded that punitive responses will undermine, rather than further, maternal, fetal, and child health. This is one reason why no state legislature has actually passed a law making it a crime for a woman to continue her pregnancy to term in spite of a drug problem.

Ignoring current scientific research about drug use and pregnancy can be dangerous to children. The assumption that every child prenatally exposed to a drug is damaged has led to kids being labeled and teased⁴ and to schools assuming such children cannot learn⁵ when in fact they may be high achievers.⁶ Such assumptions have even been used to distract attention from real instances of child abuse. For example, when New Jersey community members noticed that four adopted boys in a large family looked undernourished, the parents told them that “the four brothers had been born addicted to crack cocaine and had an eating disorder.”⁷ That was enough to stop the inquiries until the boys were near death because their adoptive parents were starving them.

Before you judge pregnant women who use drugs please look at the research. If you see or hear a comment about this subject that sounds like it is based on an assumption, demand, for the sake of pregnant women and children, that the presenter or author provides support for the claim. Speak out for pregnant women and children. They deserve the truth – not junk science.

Recommended Resources:

Prenatal Drug Exposure: Award-Winning Pediatrician Discusses What The Science Tells Us <http://vimeo.com/3916613>
This short video will help you sort out what is evidence-based research and what is junk science.

Deborah A. Frank et al., *Growth, Development, and Behavior in Early Childhood Following Prenatal Cocaine Exposure: A Systematic Review*, 285 JAMA 1613 (2001). This article is an excellent example of what real science looks like.

Mike Gray, *Drug Crazy: How we got into this mess and how we can get out*. This book explains why some drugs are regulated by the FDA and others by the police.

¹ Lara Bauer, ‘Crack Babies’ Aren’t Severely Damaged, Researchers Find, *Kansas City Star* (Feb. 14, 2009).

² Jeff Raymond, Effects of Drugs Challenged, *NEWSOK*, Nov. 15, 2007.

³ Susan Okie, *The Epidemic That Wasn’t*, *The New York Times* (Jan. 26, 2009).

⁴ Antwaun Garcia, They Called Me a ‘Crack Baby,’ <http://www.youthcomm.org/story/id/FCYU-2004-03-10a.html>.

⁵ Theresa Vargas, Once written off, ‘crack babies’ have grown into success stories, *Washington Post* (April 18, 2010).

⁶ Mary Barr, Challenging The Myths: Pregnant Women, Crack, & Healthy Children who Succeed, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Efwk-pZSszU>.

⁷ Lydia Polgreen, Uneven Care Not Unusual In Families, Experts Say, *New York Times* (Oct. 26, 2003).