

2/14/09 Kan. City Star A1
2009 WLNR 2902026

Kansas City Star (MO)

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February 14, 2009

Section: A

' Crack babies ' aren't severely damaged , researchers find

LAURA BAUER, The Kansas City Star

She'd look at her daughter and worry.

The eczema on her skin -- why was it so bad? And what about the way the toddler constantly stared at her hand -- was that a sign of something neurologically wrong?

She'd look at her daughter and pray: Don't let it be the drugs, please not because I smoked cocaine every day for the first months you were in my womb.

There's been no shortage of such prayers since the advent of the term "crack baby." And years of research indicate that many may have been answered.

"These drugs are noxious and not good for the baby," said Howard Kilbride, chief of the neonatology section at Children's Mercy Hospital, who helped conduct one study into prenatal cocaine exposure.

"But they seem to get by and tolerate it in most cases."

So that big fan of Elmo, the one who says everything is "MINE," is a healthy 2-year-old.

"That just lets me know I made a terrible mistake, but she's going to be OK," said the relieved Kansas City mother, who asked to be identified only by her last name, Williams, to protect her child from stigma. The research "takes away some of the worry that I had in the beginning."

It also takes more of the air out the "public hysteria" that surrounded the cocaine epidemic decades ago, said Oneta Templeton McMann, coordinator of TIES, or Team for Infants Endangered by Substance Abuse, at Children's Mercy Hospital.

"They were saying these children were going to have dysfunctional brains," she said.

Not to say no price is paid. There is a small reduction of IQ. There are more difficulty in cognitive areas, such as planning and organization. Some babies are harder to control at times. And there are more issues at birth.

"Are there actually drug effects? Yes," said Barry Lester, a professor of psychiatry at Brown University

who directs the large federally funded Maternal Lifestyle Study. "But they're small, not huge. ... These kids are not damaged in the way we first thought."

At Boston University, Deborah Frank agreed: "The differences are so subtle you can mainly only detect them in large groups, during a study. It's not like you can walk into a classroom and say that kid over there was exposed to such and such drug. But you can walk in and say that kid was exposed to alcohol and has fetal alcohol syndrome."

After monitoring these children into their teen years, researchers think cocaine exposure is less severe than alcohol and comparable to tobacco use during pregnancy.

Less damage may result from a chemical circulating in the mother than in the poverty or poor parenting resulting from drug addiction in the home.

Today, similar studies involve methamphetamine, a problem prevalent in the Midwest. Meth babies, too, are much more likely to be smaller at birth.

Early assessments of cocaine-exposed infants found that their limbs would be stiff. Or they'd have problems keeping formula down. Sometimes it would be Parkinson's-like trembling.

"But those things tended to resolve within nine months," McMann said.

In November, Lester said his analysis of a pool of studies involving more than 4,400 children found no significant effect on IQ or language development. The largest of the studies showed an average four-point reduction in IQ at age 7.

Lester is now looking at older children in their teens to see if exposure in the womb will make them more likely to abuse drugs themselves.

Yet people should also realize, Kilbride said, that these studies are done on surviving babies. Cocaine exposure in the womb increases the risk of complications, miscarriages and stillbirths.

At TIES, workers drill the consequences of drug use into the mothers-to-be.

"We're going to say, 'You made things harder for your baby,'" McMann said. "While we don't want to beat moms up, we do want to say this wasn't good for you, wasn't good for your baby, and you're going to need support and access to health care."

What doesn't help, advocates for pregnant women say, are the news headlines about pregnant drug users being jailed.

"What we know is every time there's an arrest, and it's publicized, some women stop coming in for any prenatal help," said Lynn Paltrow of National Advocates for Pregnant Women. "Every leading medical group says: Do not use the criminal justice system to respond to this issue."

But to Platte County Prosecutor Eric Zahnd, it's sometimes crucial to put an addicted mother-to-be behind bars. In recent years, he's pushed to revoke the probation of women who haven't stopped using to cut off the drugs while they're pregnant.

"While punishment is appropriate, punishment isn't our first goal," Zahnd said. "Our goal is protect the unborn child. The effects may not be as serious as once thought, but it does show that taking illegal drugs

does have detrimental effects."

But Lester of Brown University asks: "Are we going to take babies away from parents who smoke cigarettes?"

Williams, in her 30s, lost her first four children: three taken away by the state because of her addiction, one given up for adoption.

Smoking crack was a way of dealing with the pain. "When I was doing drugs, I didn't think about my kids."

Williams is in college now, studying to be a nurse. Clean for more than two years, she sees a treatment counselor monthly, determined to break the cycle. She says her own mother used crack when pregnant with her.

"I do believe because of that I was more successful at being an addict myself."

She changed, decided to be more, do more, and "I didn't want the state to have another of my children."

So she turned to TIES.

Some family members are reaching out to her again.

"I have a lot of people in my life who are proud of me. Because of that, I'm proud of myself," Williams said.

"I made some really bad decisions, and I'm determined to better myself and provide for my daughter."

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

COMPANY: BOSTON UNIVERSITY; MERCY HOSPITAL INC THE; AORANGI HOSPITAL;
BROWN
UNIVERSITY; MERCY HOSPITAL AND HEALTH SVCS; MERCY HOSPITAL; TIES; MERCY
HOSPITAL
INC

NEWS SUBJECT: (Health & Family (1HE30); Drug Addiction (1DR84))

INDUSTRY: (Healthcare Practice Specialties (1HE49); Science (1SC89); Science &
Engineering (1SC33); Healthcare (1HE06); Pediatrics (1PE85))

REGION: (North America (1NO39); Americas (1AM92); USA (1US73))

Language: EN

OTHER INDEXING: (Howard Kilbride; Barry Lester; Deborah Frank) (BOSTON UNIVERSITY; BROWN UNIVERSITY; IQ; MERCY HOSPITAL; NATIONAL ADVOCATES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN; PARKINSON; TIES; WILLIAMS) (Barry Lester; Clean; Crack; Deborah Frank; Eric Zahnd; Howard Kilbride; Kilbride; Lester; Lynn Paltrow; Maternal Lifestyle Study; McMann; Meth; Oneta Templeton McMann; Substance Abuse; Zahnd) (Kansas City; us; usa; na; us.mo; us.mo.kcity; us.mo.kancty)

KEYWORDS: (CT/hea); (NT/Health)

EDITION: 1

Word Count: 1151

2/14/09 KCSTAR A1

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