

Children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders lag in emotional understanding

June 30 2017

A new study reveals that children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) show a striking developmental delay in their understanding of emotions. Even in those children with an average IQ, researchers found that their emotional understanding was lagging by two to five years behind their typically developing peers.

"Many [children](#) with FASD have considerable difficulty with managing and regulating their emotions and behavior, so it makes sense that they would have delays in emotional understanding," says Christie Petrenko, assistant professor at the University of Rochester's Mt. Hope Family Center and lead coordinator of the study.

Researchers from the University of Washington co-authored the study, which was funded by the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

For the study, which appeared in *Journal of Population Therapeutics and Clinical Pharmacology*, researchers assessed 56 children with FASD, ages 6 to 13, for their emotional understanding. As defined by psychologists, emotional understanding (EU) means knowing how emotional processes work both in one's self and in other people. This includes understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, as well as knowing how to regulate and cope with one's feelings.

The researchers asked questions such as, "How do you know when other people are feeling sad?" and "Can someone feel mad and sad at the same

time?" and scored children's responses using the Kusche Affective Inventory-Revised (KAI-R), a standard measure of evaluating children's emotional understanding. The study coordinators then compared the scores to existing published data from typically developing kids.

"Having well developed EU skills helps us navigate our emotional and social world more effectively," says Petrenko. "It increases our ability to get along with others and follow social norms."

fetal [alcohol spectrum disorders](#), which result from [prenatal alcohol exposure](#), are a group of developmental disorders that result in a range of impairments in the areas of impulse control, task planning, social skills, and [emotion regulation](#).

Poor or delayed emotional understanding leaves many children with FASD to face lifelong challenges.

"People with weaker EU may have poor awareness of how their emotions and behavior affect others, which can cause a lot of social problems," Petrenko explains. "Also, kids with FASD often experience more negative emotions than other kids their age. They may also feel bad about themselves, especially if they don't get supportive responses from adults in how to cope with strong emotions."

The researchers conclude that treatments for FASD should therefore focus on improving [emotional](#) understanding.

"When paired with skill building in emotion regulation and support from adults, such interventions could improve the adaptive functioning of kids with FASD," says Petrenko.

Petrenko has also published a study about the Families Moving Forward (FMF) program, which helps parents and caregivers of children with

FASD interpret, understand, and properly respond to their children's behavior.

More information: Emotional Understanding in School-Aged Children With Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: A Promising Target for Intervention. *Fetal Alcohol Research*. [DOI: 10.22374/1710-6222.24.2.5](https://doi.org/10.22374/1710-6222.24.2.5)

Provided by University of Rochester

Citation: Children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders lag in emotional understanding (2017, June 30) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-06-children-fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders.html>

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