

Dorris, M. (1989, August). The Broken Cord. Ladies Home Journal, p. 104.

## OVERVIEW

This article is an excerpt from the book, *The Broken Cord*, (1989, Harper & Row) by Dorris. The author's only and adopted son experienced multiple school and social problems that were eventually traced to his birth mother's drinking problem.

## FACTS

- \* Lifelong physical and behavioral problems may beset children of mothers who drink while pregnant.

- \* This newly diagnosed condition, known as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, (FAS) was identified in the mid-1970s.

- \* Even in 1974, a standard medical text maintained that "alcohol gains free access to fetal circulation, but does not seem to harm the fetus."

- \* Soon after the printing of the 1974 medical text, the Surgeon General of the United States was criticized by some for warning that it is not safe for a pregnant or nursing mother to drink.

- \* The aforementioned medical text revised its opinion in 1980 following the Surgeon General's advice.

- \* Physical traits of FAS include malformations of bones, heart, and major organs; vision and hearing impediments; and poor coordination.

- \* Behavioral problems stemming from brain impairment include learning disabilities—especially regarding telling time and counting money.

- \* FAS victims are more susceptible to substance abuse.

## CASE STUDY

The author of this book and article is a single parent. Having spent some time as an anthropology professor among Alaskan Indians, he decided to adopt a child. The child adopted, Adam, was believed mentally retarded due to premature birth. His stunted size was mistaken as a characteristic of his race.

The article and book describe the crises, the diagnosis, and special care Adam received from a loving and increasingly well informed father. In human terms we share the difficulties and limited progress that may be expected for such children.

The following is a poignant incident in the author's experience:

After all I'd learned about FAS, it was very hard to keep it to myself. Typical was an encounter I had in the restaurant of an airport. A woman, certainly well into her second trimester, sat at the table next to mine and ordered a martini.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'but it's really not safe to drink when your pregnant. I'm working on a book, and...'

'Mind your own business,' she snapped back, then turned to her friend and loudly complained about how typical it was for a man to think he knew more than she did about her own body. When her drink arrived, she caught my eye and held up the glass in my direction.

'Cheers,' she said, and took her first sip.

There was a part of me that wanted to whip out my wallet, show her Adam's picture, tell her his story. There was a part of me that wanted to make a citizen's arrest or to plead for her baby's brain cells. There was a part of me that wanted to ask her if she intended to fill a formula bottle with gin, to feed to that child when it was born—since there would probably be less harm done at that stage than what she was doing today. But I kept silent, turned away in embarrassment, hoped that she was young and well-nourished enough to minimize the poison she was sending with every self-satisfied swallow to her growing fetus. It was no pleasure to be right.

On Adam's 21st birthday the author arrived at his adopted son's apartment to learn he had just suffered a minor seizure. In the car he asked his son, "So, Adam...what's good about being 21?" Grinning, Adam replied, "Well, now the guys at work say I'm old enough to drink."

My mind played back all the statistics about FAS victims and their particular susceptibility to substance abuse.

He did not take death seriously, never had. It was an abstract concept out of his reach and therefore was of no interest to him. Death was no good reason to refuse his first drink.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Unfortunately, the drinking of mothers influences the fetus more than that of the father. Both, however, have responsibility for the future life and potential of the person they are bringing into the world.

2. Many items, such as nutrition, alcohol, and drugs, should concern anyone involved in nurturing another life. When use of those items puts another at a disadvantage in life then it should be considered with great gravity and strong measures need to be taken to protect the rights of that person.

3. In many cases the damage has already been done. The ones paying the price are the abused—not the abuser. We need to be compassionate and not stereotypical in our handling of such individuals.

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