Fetal alcohol syndrome [1]

Dear Alice,

I live with a girl who has FAS and I don't understand her because she functions differently than the rest of us. What can I do?

Confused Canadian #15

Answer

Dear Confused Canadian #15,

Despite good intentions, many people have a tough time getting along with their housemates. In your case, finding common ground seems to be even more difficult since your roomie has a condition known as fetal alcohol syndrome or FAS. As you hinted, learning more about your differences, and also things you have in common, may make it easier for everyone to live together and even improve your relationship.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause a variety of problems in the fetus, collectively known as fetal alcohol syndrome. Like other syndromes, FAS includes a set of symptoms and specific characteristics that may or may not appear in each individual affected. Some of the most common physical symptoms of fetal alcohol syndrome include:

- Distinct facial features, such as widely spaced eyes, a low or wide nose bridge, or a flat area between the nose and upper lip
- Small teeth and weak enamel
- Small head and brain size
- Deformed joints, arms, legs, or fingers
- Heart problems

People with FAS may also have mental disabilities, including:

- Slow intellectual development
- Short attention span and hyperactivity
- General anxiety and nervousness
- Difficulty controlling emotions

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, that alcohol reaches her developing fetus directly through the placenta. Because the fetus has a slower metabolism, the fetus will have a blood alcohol level much higher than the mother's. The alcohol present in the fetus' blood can impair
the development of tissues and organs as well as permanently damage brain cells. The danger exists throughout pregnancy, though alcohol intake is more likely to have negative physical effects earlier in the pregnancy, when most of the organs are forming. This is also the time when many women may not realize that they're pregnant, and they inadvertently consume alcohol that could damage their fetus. FAS has no cure, so your housemate with FAS will experience these symptoms throughout her life.

Many young people with FAS have behavioral issues, so you may have noticed some of the following in your roommate:

- Difficulty focusing or remembering
- Impaired learning and slow development
- Impulsiveness
- Poor social judgment (i.e. lack of understanding of social cues)
- Fearlessness and trusting towards strangers
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Bullying of others

For example, maybe it seems like the girl you live with says things that are "inappropriate" or doesn't act her age. This is normal for children and young people with FAS, as they develop more slowly and may demonstrate impaired reasoning and an inability to pick up on social cues. If you feel frustrated or hurt by this girl's actions, it may be helpful to remember that she just "functions differently" than you. She may not think through some of her actions the way you do, so she may not realize if something she does is out of place or that she said something to make you annoyed or angry.

Being aware of your housemate's limitations may help you interact with her and keep your cool if her behavior bothers you. For example, if she has trouble paying attention, you can help her by giving clear and simple explanations. Maintaining eye contact is another way to improve your communication with each other. Try not to ask her to do too many things at once, and be patient and willing to repeat things if she asks. If she does something that annoys you, you may want to talk with her about what happened and calmly explain why it upset you.

Taking time to get to know your roommate may also help you to appreciate positive aspects of her personality. Just like your other housemates, people with FAS can be fun and compassionate friends. In spite of some developmental disabilities, children with FAS tend to be highly verbal and may like to talk. By focusing on these good qualities, as well as her individual personality, it may be easier to understand the challenges posed by FAS. Even though she has FAS, the girl you live with has a range of interests, abilities, difficulties, hopes, and dreams.

A number of good resources for more information about FAS are available online. You can get more information from the following websites and perhaps share that information with the other members of your household and/or with the girl's teachers, classmates, and/or friends:

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome [2]
You might also consider contacting an organization like the March of Dimes’ Pregnancy and Newborn Health Education Center to talk with a health information specialist for more information.

Women who are pregnant, or hoping to become pregnant, may be wondering how much alcohol is considered safe. Unfortunately, no one has yet determined what level of alcohol consumption is harmful to a fetus. While FAS is most commonly found in children born to alcoholics, women who abuse alcohol can have normal children, and women who only consume alcoholic beverages moderately can have children born with impairments. This is why most health professionals recommend that women give up drinking alcohol altogether during pregnancy, though women may act differently based on their own personal and cultural beliefs.

Everyone with FAS is different, so taking time to get to know your housemate may be the best way to understand her better. Who knows, you might be surprised by what you have in common.
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Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/fetal-alcohol-syndrome#comment-0

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