Development of Aggression in Young Children of Alcoholic Parents

Children of alcoholic (sometimes called “COA” for short) parents often have been identified as having higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems. A recent article from the Research Institute on Addictions in Buffalo, New York, suggests that these behavior problems are seen in COAs as early as 18 to 48 months of age. This study, in which 226 volunteer families participated, looked at the development of aggressive and oppositional behavior among children whose fathers or both parents were alcoholics and compared them to children from families without substance abuse problems. Families volunteered for the study after reading a newspaper advertisement. The majority of the families were white, middle class and all children had both parents living at home. Children were seen four times over this early part of childhood, at 18, 24, 36 and 48 months old. Thinking that problems seen in children’s behavior might be associated with factors besides parental drinking, a number of other things about the family were studied also. These included: parents’ depression, parents’ antisocial behavior, problems in the marriage and father’s educational level. Characteristics of the children were also examined including children’s interactive styles when playing with other children, children’s temperament, and how many hours a week children spent in daycare rather than at home.

For children everywhere, it is common to find that levels of aggression against other children and oppositional behavior peak at around 24 to 36 months and are reduced as the children get older. In addition, girls almost always have lower levels of problem behavior than boys. The researchers in this study found the same patterns overall. Problem behaviors increased during the “terrible twos” period between 2 and 3 years and
then decreased from 3 to 4 years. However, they found that, if both parents were alcoholic, children’s aggression did not decline between 3 and 4 years of age like that of the children from families where substance use was not a problem. Boys from alcoholic families were most likely to show deviant behavior. In addition, the more additional problem factors that a child was exposed to (for instance, parental depression, antisocial behavior) the more likely it was that children would be described as having behavior problems. These findings are concerning because problem behaviors at this age often predict difficulties during school age and later in adolescence. For this reason, the authors suggest that the toddler and preschool period would be a good time to intervene with high risk families to prevent the development of behavior problems, particularly in boys.

For further information regarding this article please contact Claire D. Coles, Ph.D. at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

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Reference: