

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Study Finds No Convincing Evidence of “Crack Baby” Phenomenon

A study recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found no substantial evidence that *in utero* cocaine exposure negatively affects young children differently than other risk factors children were exposed to. Three researchers separately examined 36 methodologically rigorous studies on *in utero* cocaine exposure on children six and under. The review indicated the following:

- Prenatal cocaine exposure did not have a negative effect on a child's postnatal physical growth (weight, length, and head circumference) after controlling for concurrent alcohol or tobacco exposure.
- The literature on prenatal cocaine exposure has not shown consistent negative effects on standardized developmental and IQ tests after control for other exposures.
- No association could be found between prenatal cocaine exposure and language skills.
- Previously reported effects of cocaine exposure on motor development before age seven months may, in fact, reflect heavy prenatal tobacco exposure.
- Prenatal cocaine exposure may be associated with decreased emotional expressivity.

According to the authors, “Findings once thought to be specific effects of *in utero* cocaine exposure can be explained in whole or in part by other factors, including prenatal exposure to tobacco, marijuana, or alcohol and the quality of the child's environment” (p. 1624). However, although this study found few effects on children under six, the authors conclude that the cognitive and social demands of school and puberty may reveal effects of prenatal cocaine exposure not previously identified. The authors also stress the need for treatment of families affected by substance abuse as well as the need for ongoing research on prenatal drug exposure.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Frank D.A., Augustyn M., Knight W.G., Pell T., Zuckerman B., “Growth, Development, and Behavior in Early Childhood Following Prenatal Cocaine Exposure: A Systematic Review,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285(12):1613-1625. For more information, please contact Deborah A. Frank at dafrank@bu.edu.