Experts: No amount of alcohol safe during pregnancy

By Allison Lauria, News contributor

By the time Lauren Mitchell was pregnant with daughter Karli, no one knew that drinking alcohol could cause serious disorders that impact the baby — and the entire family — for the rest of their lives. "I was like a Woodstock kid," she said. "When I got pregnant, I stopped doing drugs. Everyone knew that could be bad for the baby. I drank wine. I didn't even know.

It wasn't until 1973, the year Karli was born, that research first stated alcohol was causing birth defects, Mitchell said. She didn't know about it until right away, though, and by then, Karli had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

The National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or NOFAS, then [Karli] was about 13 or 14, I was on the road to recovery and was taking classes to become a counselor when I stumbled on fetal alcohol syndrome information," Mitchell said. "Not finding the correct diagnosis is more common than not. Doctors aren't asking the questions about fetal alcohol awareness.

Most of the time, it is parents who figure it out.

The NASW-Texas member and past president of NASW's Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or FASD, awareness month, and the goal is to get the word out that alcohol is a risk factor for a broad spectrum of disorders — a range of lifelong disabilities — are completely preventable. The key to addressing this simple: No alcohol is safe during pregnancy. It's important because prenatal alcohol exposure can damage a developing brain at every stage of pregnancy.

While prenatal prevention is the foremost public health concern, there are long-term lifelong implications for the affected persons and their families — for the rest of their lives.

The NASW-Texas member and past president of NASW's Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or FASD, Awareness Month was started in September 2015 as a national call to action to raise awareness of the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy and the need for changes to reduce the number of FASDs. In 2014, the CDC launched a strategic cross-disciplinary partnership with NASW, the American Academy of Pediatrics, other leading medical organizations, and several universities to help prevent FASDs:

The national social work discipline team, led by NASW-Texas member and clinical social worker Sandra Gonzalez, an instructor at Pan American University, NOFAS, then became a staff member at the Texas Center for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in 1990 by Patti Mitchell, a NASW-Texas member and past president of NASW's Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or FASD, awareness month, and was taking classes to become a counselor when she stumbled on fetal alcohol syndrome information. "Some people have normal IQs," Davies said. "There are no cure. They have the words to explain what's going on.

People with FASD "vary enormously" from person to person, and their IQ range from low to near normal to high, she said, adding that "social workers can do an excellent job to help people with FASD because they understand their loved one be understood by others.

"Having FASD is tough," Davies said. "If they're young, educational services and support are recommended. Many schools across the country have great services so these children can thrive and learn." Those a bit older can be helped through employment support services where "sometimes just a small adjustment is needed," Davies said. Family services can be similar, and support services for them, like a caring or support group are always recommended.

"Beyond that it's a really important component — advocacy," she said. "The invisibility of FASD is compounded. A person with FASD often has an appearance that does not signify any special need, and some believe they just want to act that way. Unfortunately, it's a common experience. A family has to explain to the world over and over what their loved one is experiencing, and they can do an excellent job to help their loved one be understood by the community," Davies said. Long-term impacts are often misunderstood, she said. "While intervention and assistance and help can modify their experiences in life, people with FASD have a life-long impact. They're going to need support from families and the community."

By law, schools are required to provide support to those who learn differently. Davies said a specific condition for youths with FASD "varies, but a huge support and understanding place" is where, she said, and it can be a challenge for students and families. "Being open and aware of what is available is the key to help, and we're going to provide support. It comes down to how much time a family has to go to the school and explain, and do they have the words to explain what's needed, and does the school have it available?"

Social work can play a huge role because" we are made for this work," she said. "We are governed by the Code of Ethics, they know what approaches will work, they see people with a focused lens and have a duty to take stock of a person's strengths and abilities.

"Social workers can serve in a preventative and advocacy role, we can be excellent advocates and leaders," Davies said. "In so many prevention and advocacy, social workers can help fight stigma, support families and employers, identify treatable conditions. They also can work toward a cross-disciplinary approach which is "absolutely necessary for success," she said. And, they can push for curriculum adding alcohol use to school curriculums.

It's a strength and a weakness for us, she said. "Those who work to tackle all things that make people's lives -- alcohol-related, when it re-lates to social justice," Davies said. "If we are social workers are more informed, we will be better at doing just that." Help for Moms

Mitchell earned an MHS and LMSW and used to public speaking and conducting FASD trainings when she was asked to speak at a conference where she caught the attention of then-U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle, D-S.D., who worked on a 1998 federal bill that resulted in Congress calling for the creation of a national task force on fetal alcohol syndrome in 1998. Mitchell volunteered at NOFAS, then became a staff member, a board member and worked as a treatment counselor. She was a member of the national task force. But something kept bothering her. Then she realized what the missing piece was. Mitchell started Circle of Hope, a mentoring network for birth mothers, in 2004.

I started the Circle of Hope because I realized that women don't get a chance to stay sober because of their remorse, their guilt, and the judgment of others," she said. "They've been made a scape-goat even by their own famil-ies.

Through Circle of Hope, birth mothers are assigned a special treatment, like a 12-step program or a treatment center. A social worker works on the program is recommended.

"If someone calls, we're going to help and we're going to provide a mentor for them," Mitchell said. "Having a child with a condition like FASD — it's like a scarlet let-ter. Everyone in the world will know. The stigma is huge.\n
September is FASD Awareness Month

What social workers can do to help prevent FASDs:
- Screen for alcohol use, perform brief interventions, and treat or make referrals for treatment of problem drinking.
- Screen sexually active teens for alcohol use and provide evidence-based interventions to reduce the risk of alcohol-exposed pregnancy.
- Use nonjudgmental language when advising pregnant women to stop drinking alcohol, and offer help if needed.
- Clear misconceptions about alcohol use while pregnant: There is no safe amount, no safe type.
- Communicate a consistent message: Alcohol and pregnancy don't mix.