

I DIDN'T KNOW... by Marceil Vadheim, MC, CCDCII

Sidney, my fifteen-year-old daughter, has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome because I drank alcohol heavily when I was pregnant with her. It doesn't seem to make much difference that I didn't know the alcohol I was drinking could harm her; that my doctor suggested an occasional cocktail might be good for me; that I had the "disease" of alcoholism and wasn't "responsible" for my behavior. My feelings of guilt, shame and grief have still been overwhelming.

Sidney was born two-and-a-half months early and weighed two pounds, eight ounces. She spent several weeks in an intensive care premie nursery. Her medical records included results of brain scans, a multitude of tests, procedures and comments about my visits and phone calls to the nursery. There was no mention of my drinking habits. Who would have asked a middle class professional woman who appeared to be successfully moving through the world, combining motherhood and a career as a Girl Scout Executive, if she had a drinking problem?

When Sidney was four years old, I was hospitalized with cirrhosis of the liver. A year later I was treated for alcoholism and have been abstinent since treatment. When I first heard about fetal alcohol syndrome, a cold, sick feeling lodged in the pit of my stomach. Sidney was six years old. However, I was able to convince myself that Sidney's small size, her immaturity (she was held back to do a second year in kindergarten), her difficulties with memory and her extremely short attention span were due to her prematurity..." she must be slow catching up"...and the stress of her dad's and my divorce.

When Sidney started the seventh grade, a teacher friend suggested she be tested for learning disabilities because of her ups and downs in school. Despite her erratic progress and difficulties in school, she was denied testing because, "she is not two years behind in her class-work". My quest for testing led us to the Pregnancy and Health Study Clinic at the University of Washington and Dr. Sterling Clarren at Children's Hospital and Medical Center, where she was diagnosed as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. My response to the diagnosis was horror. Sidney's response was, "what a relief".

That was two years ago. I told anyone who would listen that she was misdiagnosed. "She doesn't even look like an FAS kid...she is on the honor roll in school...she can play the piano!" At the same time I was reading everything I could find about FAS and trying to parent "as if" she had the problem. Sidney's tests at the University of Washington revealed her specific learning disabilities. Tests in hand, I went to her school counselor who has been very concerned and helpful, carefully

scheduling her classes with teachers most appropriate for her learning styles. He also indicated that her diagnosis of FAS would guarantee more in-depth help, should that become necessary. The diagnosis also means we, as a family, have been able to help Sidney because we understand now what she can and cannot do. I have been able to temper my expectations, which previously had been either too high or too low, depending on each conflicting report from her teachers. I am sure Sidney's many successes in junior high school have been the direct result of our family working hard with the school and now, finally accepting, coming to grips with, and coping with the realities of her Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. I think I began to truly accept her diagnosis about six months ago. Of course, with that acceptance came the necessity to deal with the shame, guilt, grief and pain that acceptance brought to the surface.

Since I accepted my alcoholism in 1980, a large part of my recovery has been focused on working through the shame, guilt, grief and pain that the acceptance that "I am an alcoholic" brought. A big part of working through these feelings has occurred through sharing my story with others and with reaching out to help others whenever I could. I returned to school, obtained a Masters in Counseling degree with a special emphasis on working with chemically dependent individuals. For seven years I have been lucky to be working as a counselor and therapist for people impaired by alcoholism, drug addiction or mental illness. For three and a half years I have been the far counselor at an in-patient drug and alcohol treatment center for women.

In my search for services for children with FAS and their families, I discovered that very little was available. Consequently, I opened a private practice in October, 1990 so I could begin to be of service to other mothers who have FAS children. I hope to be able to share my story and recovery with others; to work with FAS families to help them cope with the grief, with parenting issues, with advocacy in the schools and agencies. I have discovered that both natural and adoptive parents share many of the same issues and hope to assist in forming support groups for these parents.

I am willing and ready to speak, provide an inservice, workshop or training to any agency or group that would like to learn more about FAS/FAE.

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