

## What four questions should FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) researchers be asking?

### What you need to know:

Social and cultural forces influence diagnosis of developmental disorders like Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). However, most research on FASD focuses on the biological and medical aspects of the disorder. In their review of the literature, the researchers question whether stereotypes of alcohol use among Indigenous Peoples may be linked to misdiagnosing Indigenous children with FASD. Researchers also found that unclear practices in identifying FASD are getting in the way of supporting healthy families.

### What is this research about?

As of 2017, there were 37,800 reported cases of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in Canada. Most research focuses on the biological and medical aspects of FASD. Professionals in British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) seek research looking at the social context surrounding FASD. Understanding social context can help make policy supporting correct FASD diagnoses and care.

### What did the researchers do?

To guide future research on FASD, the researchers performed a literature review exploring the historical, social, and political contexts of FASD.

The researchers asked these questions:

- What considerations will support creating FASD-related policies in BC that include the social context of the disorder?
- What research questions may support culturally safe FASD practices in BC?

The researchers then came up with questions for future research:

1. What are best practices that address FASD-related stereotyping in Canada?
2. What are best practices for culturally safe FASD screening?
3. Has FASD research focused heavily on a specific minority?
4. Where is FASD research focused in Canada?



*Mott & Boychuk present their findings on incorporating social context in the study of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (Photo credit: UVic staff, with permission).*



## What did the researchers find?

The researchers found most information on FASD is medical in focus. There is a gap in understanding the social factors surrounding FASD. Properly diagnosing FASD is an area the researchers noted needs more study. The research highlighted that many FASD symptoms overlap with other developmental disorders.

The review also found that stereotypes of alcohol use among Indigenous Peoples may be linked to misdiagnosing Indigenous children with FASD. The review showed 58 out of 59 studies on developmental disorders in Indigenous communities focused on FASD. Indigenous women are also more likely to be screened for drugs while pregnant, though research shows more Indigenous people abstain from alcohol, particularly Indigenous women.

Since, FASD is typically only found when people seek a diagnosis, stereotyping and unreliable diagnoses could mean children and families are not getting the right support.

Based on their findings the researchers suggest more research on addressing FASD stereotypes and culturally safe diagnoses.

## How can you use this research?

This research is an excellent starting point for people who want to know about the social context of FASD.

Research questions and gaps in FASD knowledge found in this research show other researchers where more study is needed. By drawing attention to potential stereotyping and misdiagnosis the research encourages professionals to check for bias in their field.

Policy-writers can use this research to guide policies addressing gaps in knowledge and biases. Indigenous leaders may use this research in organizing culturally appropriate mental health initiatives. Organizations supporting people with FASD may draw on this research to plan programs and outreach.

## About the researchers

Jacquelyn Boychuk and Addison Mott are University of Victoria (UVic) graduate students. This project was completed as part of the [Graduate Studies \(GS\) 505](#) course. Facilitated by UVic [Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization](#), GS 505 is a partnership between MCFD and UVic. This project was prepared on behalf of MCFD.

## Keywords

FASD; fetal alcohol syndrome; fetal alcohol spectrum disorder; child and youth mental health; Indigenous child welfare

## Citation

Boychuk, J. and Mott, A. (2018). *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in Context*. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

---

Content for this Research Snapshot was co-created by [UVic's Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization unit](#), Jacquelyn Boychuk and Addison Mott.

## Territory acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

*We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.*