



**Movement for the
Rights, Protection and
Development of the
Unborn Child**

Malta

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DVD/Video - WHEN YOUR UNBORN CHILD IS ON DRUGS, ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO - USA -13 minutes

Script

To have a family and bear a child could be an exciting and satisfying experience.

“Today I can feel the child kicking!”

There is a close affinity and intimacy as well as a great sensitiveness. However, this very sensitivity fizzles out fast if the child is not healthy or happy because it has been exposed to alcohol, to drugs, to smoking or to other substances the mother takes when she is pregnant.

Parent A “During my pregnancy I had made a decision to smoke cocaine and I took it for about eight months so the baby was born prematurely. Its digestive system had not developed as it was supposed to, it went through a period of withdrawal that one goes through when one stops taking drugs, it suffered from diarrhea in the first six months of her life which she spent in hospital.”

Parent B : “My wife was not a heavy smoker - just half a packet a day. When the child was born we really wondered whether it would ever be normal.”

Parent C: “I never realized that the amount of alcohol I drank would create any problems, but I never realized that the child might have some deformity or that it would not develop normally. I used to think that at most the baby would be born small or that it would cry a lot but I never realized the full extent of the gravity of the situation.”

During pregnancy, inside your womb there develops a fertilised egg; this swims in what can be described as an envelope that contains a fluid substance that is called the embryonic case. Later on the embryo begins to be called a fetus. As soon as the fetus begins to develop into a baby it receives all its food from the mother by means of an organ called the placenta. All that enters your blood system will be passed on to the baby through the placenta. This includes any food eaten, as well as chemical substances from cigarettes, beer, wine, hard alcohol as well as, naturally, drugs and medicines. When you are under the influence of drugs, the baby is under the influence as well and when you get out of the habit, the baby does as well.

“I kept on smoking till the day of delivery, till the very day of my childbirth; my baby spent whole weeks in an incubator.”

Smoking during pregnancy increases the possibility of the baby being born small or underweight and babies born weighing under 5 lbs and a half normally do not have enough fat so that their bodies can retain the correct temperature, and they have a greater probability of developing breathing problems and conditions that can cause brain damage.

“I would indeed like to have a baby that is strong but I am already three months pregnant and I think it is already too late to stop smoking, right?”

“No, actually that is not true. If you were to stop smoking now, the probability of having a healthy child is just as good as if you had never smoked at all. Do you think you can stop smoking?”

“For the child’s sake, I want to try to stop!”

Monique was born to a mother who used to drink excessively during her pregnancy: she has serious radical problems; she had to be operated more than once; she had problems with her hearing, her nose. The local Community Council decided that Monique should be taken away from her mother because the latter could not possibly care for her child. Monique is about two years behind her contemporaries and ever since her eighth month she had to follow a special study programme because of her learning disability.

The ‘alcohol in the fetus syndrome’ shows the defects connected with the birth of a child whose mother has been drinking during pregnancy. These defects include the small size of the baby, a deformed face, organs that do not develop the way they should or that do not function the way they should, uncoordinated body movements or that do not function the way they should, body movements that are not coordinated, a brain that does not reason the normal way, overexcitement and difficulties in learning.

Even a drink just once or twice a week can harm the baby in the womb. When you drink nearly all the alcohol goes directly to the fetus but because the baby is much younger than you it can get drunk much faster than you and since the baby’s liver is still growing it cannot develop completely, the alcohol takes longer to be absorbed into the system and it remains in the system for much longer.

“Isn’t it better not to drink?”

“O come on! I don’t drink all that much. A drink here and there during a party but nothing too drastic. And then all I drink is beer. Surely nothing is going to happen to the child.’

“Beer does not do any harm.”

Actually this is far from the truth. Unfortunately, when one drinks a great volume of alcohol once in a while in a way that he is suddenly filled with high levels of alcohol all of a sudden, this can be as harmful as drinking liquor on a regular basis. Beer, strong alcoholic drinks, a glass of wine, a cocktail made of wine and soda or mixed wine – all have the same amount of alcohol and so beer and wine are not less dangerous than strong alcoholic liquor. The father is also under obligation to do everything possible to make sure that the child is born healthy. It has been proved that alcohol damages the sperm of the father and this results in a baby that is subnormal in weight. If you had a lady friend who used to drink and who gave birth to a normal child this does not mean that if you drink the child will have no problems. The effects of alcohol on the baby vary from woman to woman. We can say that in the first three months alcohol can severely damage the nervous system of the baby as well as other internal organs. Drinking in the fourth or fifth or sixth month of pregnancy is associated with a greater risk of miscarriages. Drink in the last three months of pregnancy will bring about lack of development of the baby. So even if you are not certain whether you are pregnant or you suspect that you are pregnant, behave as if you are pregnant. Once you are pregnant, there is no period during pregnancy when it is not dangerous to drink.

“Hi, doc, I am having trouble sleeping. Do you think you can prescribe me some sleeping pills?”

During pregnancy you should always check with your doctor before taking any medication or pills that you buy at the pharmacy even aspirins or its substitutes or medicine against allergy, decongestants, cough medication, sleeping pills and even medication with prescription.

“I was afraid he was going to die: when he was born I was afraid to look at him because I thought worrying in what state I would see that creature because of the medication I was taking and till he was four months old I used to fear that he would die during the night and anytime he made a noise, I would wake up to see that happened, whatever the noise would be – I was really, really afraid.”

You may know what effects drugs can leave on you but do you know what harm they can do to the baby? Do you know how they may effect the baby later on in life?

“My little daughter did not seem to have any ill effects when she was young but now she has problems with hearing: the doctors are not sure whether it is due to the drugs but I do think so. She also has behaviour problems, it is not possible to get along with her, and they say this is the effect of drugs.”

“We are foster parents. We had Wayne from the time he was a small baby. He was born of a mother who used to take drugs during pregnancy. The Court took the child away from his mother because she was incapable of taking care of him. From the time he was born we have had a lot of problems like he used to cry a lot, make a fuss about nothing at all, he had problems with his bowel movements, there were days when he wanted to be held and other days when he did not, he had problems with sleeping during the night and now that he has started school he has learning problems, finds it hard to concentrate on anything he is doing because he feels so worked up and he has to take medication. Children born of mothers on drugs at times find it difficult to control themselves.”

As to drugs, there are those that have a stimulating effect (uppers) and those that have a depressive effect (downers) : speed that is amphetamine drugs, cocaine, marijuana, angel dust. Drugs add to the risk of losing your baby. Babies who are exposed to drugs when they are inside the womb can suffer heart attacks that will cause irreversible damage in the brain, damage to the lungs, and can be the cause of organs not developing as they should or that they be deformed. Drugs can cause a mis-delivery, the separation of the placenta from the uterus which can lead to an excessive loss of blood, which in turn can be a threat to both the mother and the baby. All drugs can cause the child to be still-born. It doesn't make any difference whether you just sniff drugs or inject it, or you swallow it or smoke it. All the drugs penetrate into the placenta and thereby enter into the baby.

“At first glance she looked like a normal five-yr-old girl, but there were many things in her insides that one cannot see at first, as for example the level of verbal communication that was not that of a five-yr-old but of a 3-yr-old. Her behaviour was not definitely one of the five-yr-old: one cannot see how she will manage in kindergarten. She still wets her bed and at times she does it during the day-time – in her pants sometimes as many as five times. She has no control and this is simply the effect of heroin.”

“At time of birth they did not know whether I was taking heroin or another drug which I was taking called methadone; in point of fact they just didn't know and so they did not let me keep the baby and when, later I took the baby home, she used to turn a violet colour, she used to feel cold a lot, she would shake and cry. I used to cradle her all the time and tell her not to cry. I used to try to talk to her but she simply wouldn't want to listen and kept on crying. Till one day I took her to the doctor and he told me the reason she was behaving that way.

Babies born of mothers who are on cocaine, amphetamines or heroin can be born in a condition that they cannot live without these drugs and they go through the process that any person on drugs who wants to stop them has to go through, namely 'withdrawal'. Babies born of women who are on drugs are usually very nervous, and are startled anytime somebody touches them or even at the least sound they hear. According to a study, results show that one out of every six babies born of mothers who were on cocaine during pregnancy dies due to the syndrome known as death during sleep, sometimes known as 'crib death'.

“We would like to have a healthy child that we can love and take care of.”

The health of your child depends on you and from the support given by the father. You can do physical exercises and eat nutritious food. During pregnancy you can get all the advice and help you can and thereby you will be increasing the probability of having a healthy and smart child or else you can increase the risk of having a baby with physical as well as emotional problems or learning problems – all of which can last throughout the child's life-time. The choice is yours. What kind of child do you want to have? □□