

# PREVENTING FASD

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## By Providing Addictions Treatment And Related Support For First Nations And Inuit Women In Canada

### Research to Inform Practice and Policy

The goal of this study was to inform the federal government about opportunities for improving substance use treatment and support for First Nations and Inuit women who are at risk of having a child with FASD.

### New Methods

The study found that little formal Canadian or international literature exists on substance use treatment or FASD prevention for First Nations and Inuit women. Given this, a unique 'virtual focus group' approach was taken to gather current research, policy and practice wisdom.

- Seven virtual focus groups took place in January and February 2008.
- Participants included Aboriginal women's health and addictions researchers, service providers and health system planners.<sup>1</sup>
- Six provinces and three territories were represented.

<sup>1</sup> Input from First Nations and Inuit women who have faced alcohol problems was planned for but not possible, due to insufficient time to ethically engage their participation.

### Foundations

Three considerations guided the research approach:

- 1 Integrating gender and cultural sensitivity, and recognizing difference.
- 2 Taking a holistic, community-based approach to prevention and treatment.
- 3 Providing women-centred health care within community.

### Barriers to Treatment and Prevention

Overwhelming barriers to treatment and prevention for First Nations and Inuit girls and women were identified in the focus groups and literature:

- Personal and interpersonal barriers
- Community or social barriers
- Structural or program barriers
- Systemic barriers

These barriers are fully described in the project report available at [www.coalescing-vc.org](http://www.coalescing-vc.org)

### Key Themes

While the barriers to treatment were found to be even greater than expected, study participants conceptualized a comprehensive approach to moving forward – providing many promising recommendations to government for action.

Two core themes pertinent to successfully preventing and treating substance abuse and FASD emerged:

- 1 Attending to the real life context of women – family, community, children, safety – and recognizing that it influences women's capacity to access, complete and maintain treatment.
- 2 Understanding that a continuum of care is vital to successful prevention & treatment.

### A Continuum of Care Model

Four key service components were identified in a continuum of care for women with substance use concerns. These are grounded in two foundational practices – awareness-building/stigma reduction and ongoing community-wide change and support.



### Promising Practices

Study participants shared what they have learned from programs offered for First Nations and Inuit women, across a continuum of care.

#### 1 Discussion and brief intervention

Promoting awareness is a key step in FASD prevention.

- Community service providers must be comfortable and proactive in discussing the impact of alcohol use on fetal development and girls' & women's health.
- These conversations need to be paced, safe and culturally relevant.

#### 2 Outreach and engagement

There is no generic First Nations or Inuit woman, or 'one-size-fits-all' service that engages women in treatment.

- Messages need to be tailored to make support/treatment welcoming and accessible to women of diverse ages, cultures and rural/urban settings.

#### 3 Specialized holistic support

Holistic services help prevent FASD through ongoing support for the changes women are ready to make now and in the future.

- A non-judgmental, harm-reduction service approach has been shown to help reduce barriers to care.

#### 4 Structured treatment

Treatment is needed for women at the community level and beyond, that:

- Includes cultural components.
- Addresses trauma/violence and mental health concerns with addictions.
- Links the support of mothers with that of their children in a community context.

### Next Steps

This study is but one step in bringing together current wisdom on substance use by First Nations and Inuit women, with best practices in outreach and treatment, and FASD prevention. Many more voices need to be heard.

Key study recommendations urge governments to:

- Involve Aboriginal women, treatment service providers, researchers and policy makers in joint learning and planning processes.
- Review policies that prevent or discourage women from accessing treatment.
- Explore virtual methods (such as those used in this study), to increase the involvement of those most directly affected, in program and policy development & research.

There is a critical need for action on this important issue to support improvement in the health of First Nations and Inuit women, and to prevent disabilities such as FASD in generations to come.

