



*foundation for
alcohol related research*

UNDERSTANDING FASD IN SOUTH AFRICA



International FASD Awareness Day
Webinar



Dr Leana Olivier



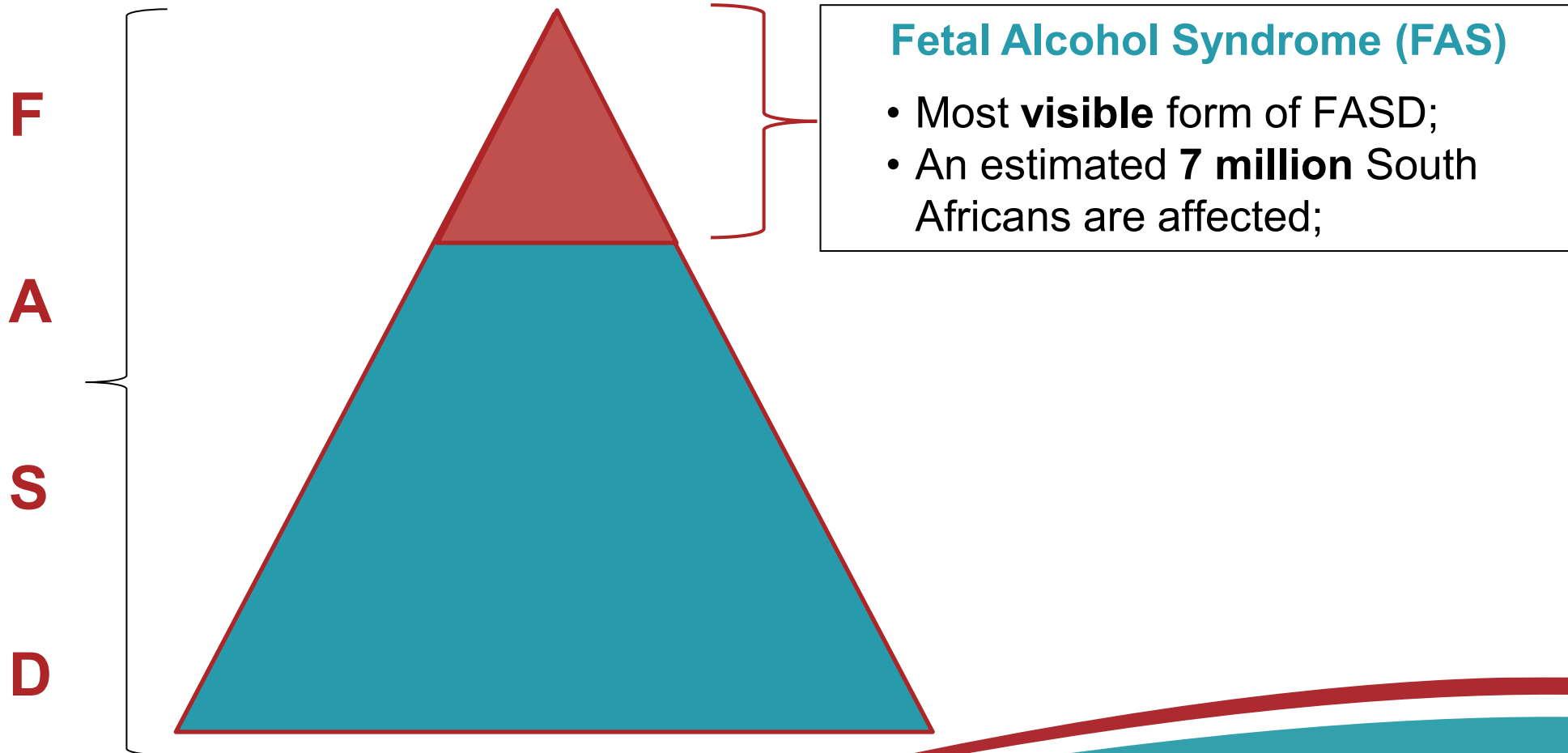
9 September 2026

So, let's take an eagle-eyed journey into the world of FASD:



- What exactly is **FASD**?
- Unpack the reality of FASD in South Africa and explore the latest **epidemiology**.
- Look beyond the diagnosis to understand the **primary and secondary disabilities** that shape the daily experiences of individuals living with FASD.
- Discover **evidence-based strategies** that can help prevent alcohol-exposed pregnancies and strengthen awareness efforts.
- Reflect on our **collective and individual roles** in raising awareness, supporting early identification, facilitating referral pathways, and improving management and outcomes.
- **And then... let's tackle one of the most debated statements in the FASD field: "FASD is 100% preventable."** Is it really that simple?

FASD & Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)



What is FASD?

Umbrella term for the **range of conditions** (injuries / damage) that occur when an unborn baby (fetus) is **exposed to alcohol during pregnancy**.

<u>F</u>etal	=	Fetus Unborn baby
<u>A</u>lcohol	=	Any All types of alcohol
<u>S</u>pectrum	=	Range of damage caused
<u>D</u>isorders	=	Opposite of order (Disruption Not normal)

- If a **pregnant women uses alcohol**, her unborn baby is **at risk** of being damaged.
- Even **small amounts of alcohol** used during pregnancy can cause FASD.
- Damage to **brain & organs**:
 - **PERMANENT / LIFELONG / IRREVERSIBLE**
 - **physical / intellectual / behavioural / social challenges**

Requirements for diagnosis

(South African prevalence studies use Institute of Medicine (IOM) criteria)

1) Clinical / Medical (Anthropometric) examination:

- Professional exam: **Dysmorphologist / Paediatrician / Geneticist**
- Growth retardation, characteristic facial features + physical signs of FASD.

2) Neurodevelopmental Assessment:

- Professional assessment: **Psychologists / Psychometrist**
- Detect deficiencies that may impede child's ability to learn

3) Maternal Interview: **Trained interviewer**

- History of maternal drinking

Clinical diagnosis = No blood/laboratory test
All of the above required for diagnosis of FASD



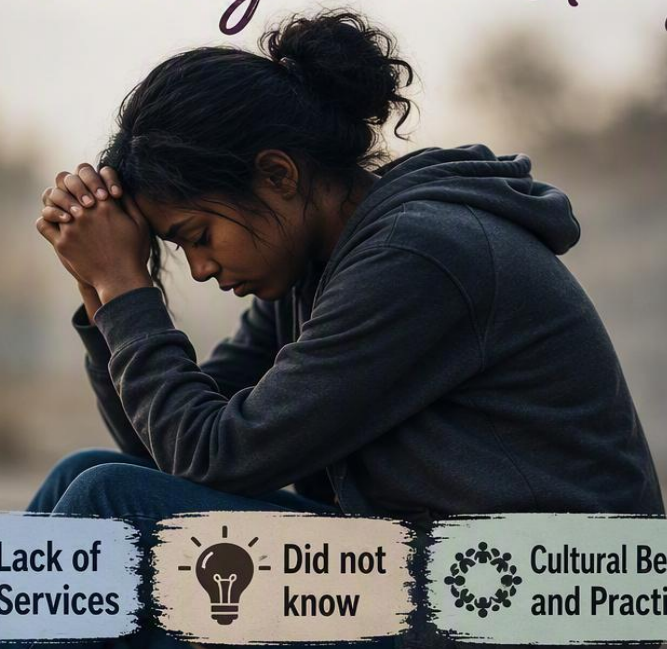
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Research findings: Why do women drink?



BEHIND EVERY CHOICE,
there may be a story 



-  Lack of Knowledge
-  Low Education
-  Lack of Support
-  Peer Pressure
-  Depression
-  Lack of Services
-  Did not know
-  Cultural Beliefs and Practices
-  Just wanted to Cope
-  Anxiety
-  Unplanned Pregnancy
-  Hunger
-  Loss of Hope

JUDGEMENT *doesn't help.* | **UNDERSTANDING** *can change everything.*

 Let's choose compassion, support, and empowerment.

Research findings: Why do women drink?



BEHIND EVERY CHOICE,
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Did not know I was pregnant!

-  Lack of Knowledge
-  Low Education
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Difference between alcohol **USE** and **ABUSE**

Alcohol is measured in units of Absolute Alcohol (AA)

15ml of AA = one drink

Beer: **300ml** = 1 drink

Wine: **125ml** = 1 drink

Spirits: **25 ml** = 1 drink

Safe levels of drinking:

Men: **30ml** AA/day = 2 drinks

Women: **15ml** AA/day = 1 drink

Liquor Industry: “3 alcohol-free days per week!”

Anything above this is ABUSE!

Why is alcohol so dangerous?

Alcohol is a



teratogen

/tɛˈrætədʒ(ə)n, ˈtɛrətədʒ(ə)n/

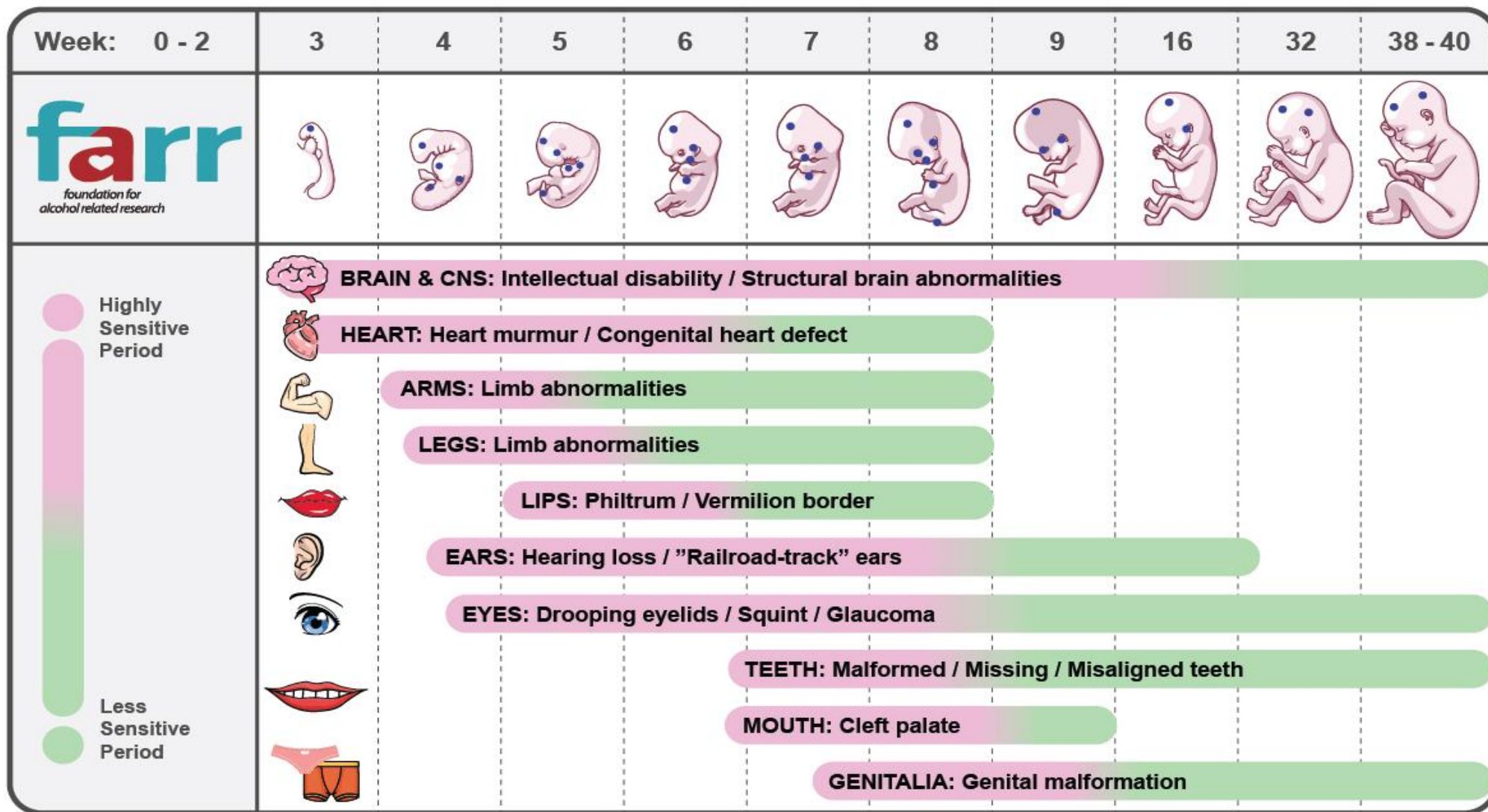
noun

an agent or factor which causes malformation of an embryo.

= **poison / toxin** that is dangerous to a developing fetus.

No Amount Of Alcohol Is Safe During Pregnancy!

FASD: Alcohol's effect on the fetus



FASD: Prevalence Rates (International vs SA)



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FASD Effects on the child

- **Growth retardation (10%)**
- **Microcephaly** (small head)
- **Characteristic facial features**
- **Brain damage** (permanent)
 - Structural - frontal lobe
- **Average IQ = 65**
 - Learning disabilities
 - Language problems
 - Social & emotional development
 - Abstract thinking & reasoning
- **Organ damage**
 - Heart, lungs, kidneys etc.

Living with FASD

Development & Beha

- Adolescents + Ad

- Hyperactive + eas

**Secondary
disabilities and the
co-morbidities**

- Struggle: distinguish
- Run-ins with the la
- Limited abstract th
- Naïve + immature
- Friendly, loving an
- Inappropriate soc

FASD is a whole body, lifelong disorder caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.

FASD is more prevalent than Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, and Down Syndrome combined.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health researchers identified 428 distinct co-occurring conditions with FASD.

90% of individuals with FASD have a mental health disorder. Depression and anxiety are most common.

Less than 10 per cent of individuals with FASD have any facial features.

@allaboutfasd

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Awareness: International FASD Day

WHY 9 SEPTEMBER?

The symbolism of 9 is very important, as a woman is ideally pregnant for approximately 9 months. The number 9 is therefore fully utilised (the 9th day of the 9th month at 09h00).

On International FASD Day, 9 September, the FASD knot is worn to remind society to support pregnant women not to drink alcohol during pregnancy.

The FASD knot symbolises:

The **umbilical cord (rope)** through which the fetus should receive nutritious food, not alcohol.

The **frayed ends of the knot** is a reminder of the damage that can be caused to the central nervous system (brain) and other organs if alcohol is used during pregnancy.

The **circle** represents the womb (uterus) of the pregnant woman which should provide a safe environment for the unborn baby free of alcohol.

The **knot** indicates the support that partners, family and friends should provide to the pregnant woman to help her to have an alcohol-free pregnancy.



Safe messaging: The make or break factor...

AVOID Unsafe/Harmful Messaging

Blaming mothers: *"Mothers who drink during pregnancy cause lifelong damage to their babies."*

Dehumanising Individuals with FASD: *"FASD children are damaged for life."*

Stereotyping Individuals with FASD: *"Children with FASD will never be able to live normal or productive lives."*

Socioeconomic and Cultural Stereotyping: *"FASD only affects poor communities or certain cultural groups."*

Threatening or Punitive Messaging: *"Women who drink while pregnant should be punished for harming their babies."*

Public Shaming: *"A good mother would never drink during pregnancy. Women who do are irresponsible."*

Loss of Custody as a Threat: *"If you drink during pregnancy, your baby should be taken away from you."*

SAFE Messaging

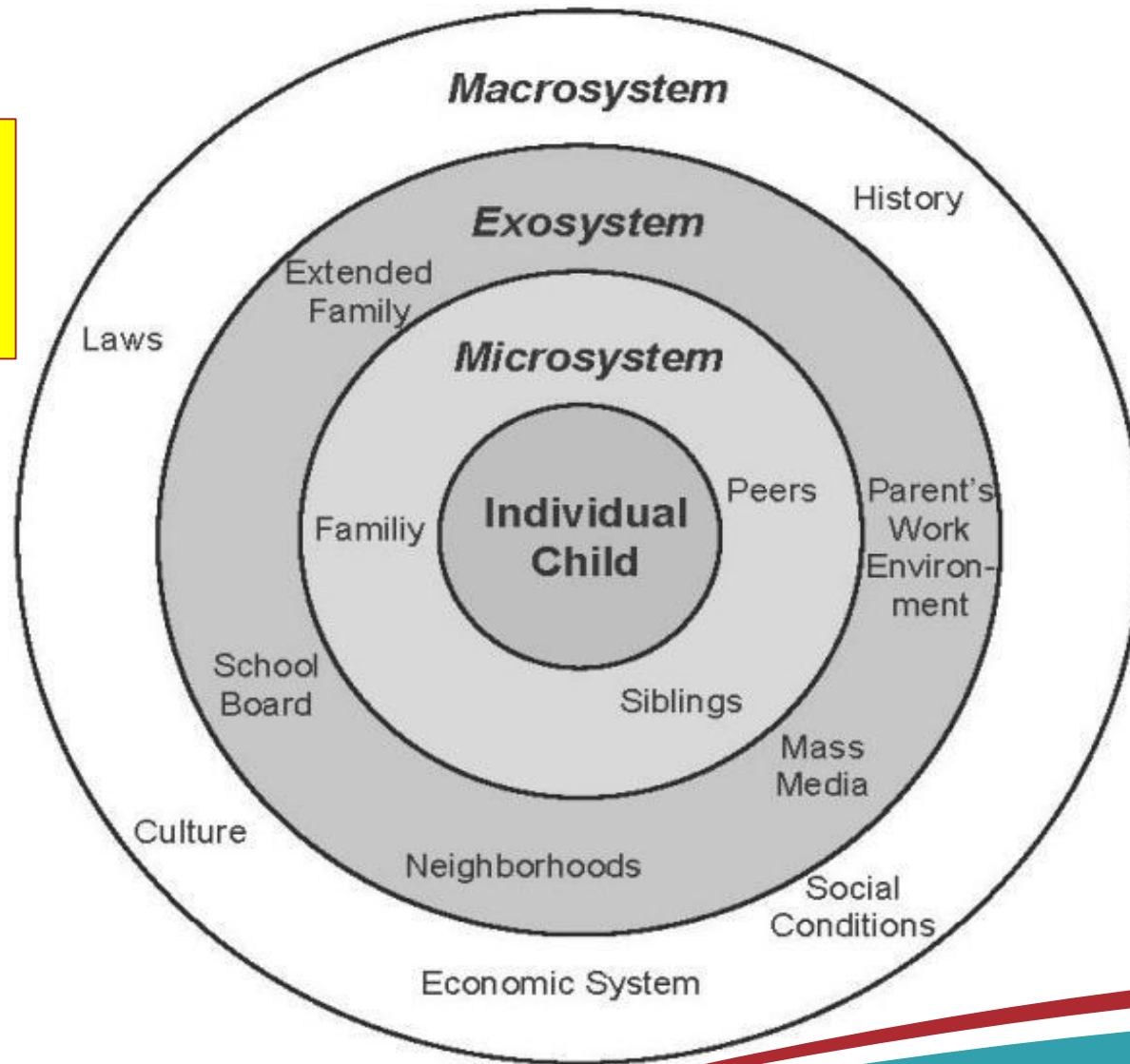
- Be clear and unambiguous.
- Be based on the latest and best available scientific evidence.
- Focus on positive and desired behaviours.
- Avoid scare tactics and sensationalised imagery.
- Refrain from singling out specific cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups.
- Consider the broader social context and do not focus solely on the mother and her behaviour.
- Include the male partners by focusing on the supportive role of the father of the child.

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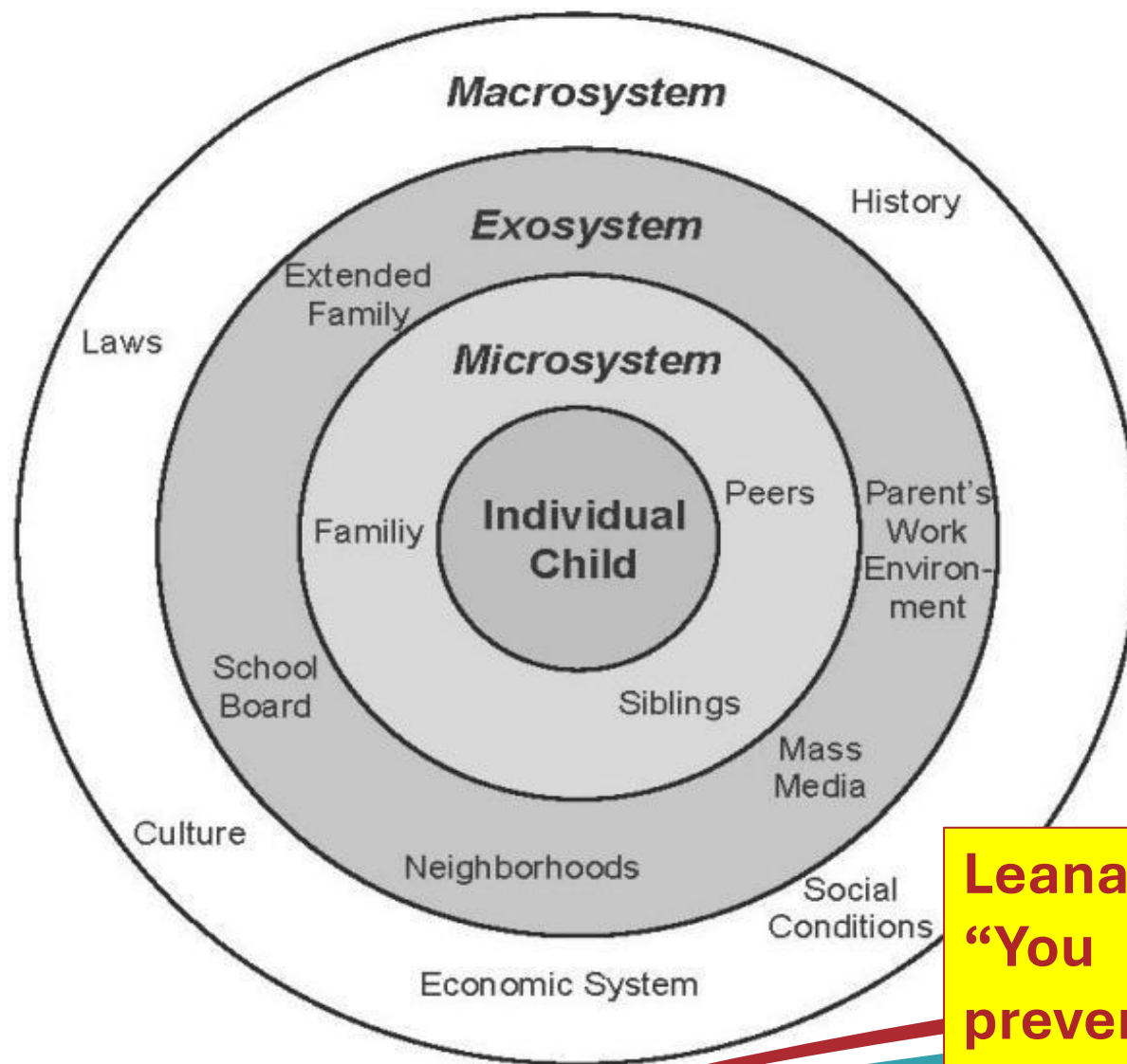
The village and the team!

African Proverb:
“You need a village
to raise a child.”



The village and the team!

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Leana's adapted version:
“You need a village to
prevent a child from being
born with FASD.”

Role of Health Professional other than diagnosis

- **Eliminate Myths:**

- It's OK to drink alcohol after the first trimester;
- The placenta filters out harmful substances;
- Drinking beer will increase milk production;
- Only women who are alcoholics have children with FASD;

- **Eliminate Stigma:**

- **Mothers:**

- Disease of addiction (medical diagnosis);
 - Often experience physical and/or sexual abuse (self-medicate)
 - Didn't know of pregnancy; or
 - Didn't know the risks of alcohol to baby.

- **Families:**

- Criticize parenting styles & interaction with person with FASD

- **Individual with FASD:**

- Labelling & "Child will not amount to much"

Role of Health Professional other than diagnosis

Protective Factors:

Early diagnosis (before 6 years of age)
Receiving development intervention
Stable & nurturing home
Not having frequent changes of household
Not being a victim of violence
Structure & routine
Consistency

What is the reality in
your communities?



Role of Health Professional other than diagnosis

Children with FASD are **not** a lost cause!

Strengths of Persons With an FASD

- Friendly
- Likeable
- Verbal
- Helpful
- Caring
- Hard worker



- Determined
- Have points of insight
- Good with younger children*
- Not malicious
- Every day is a new day

See child as hurt - not “bad”

Role of Health Professional other than diagnosis

Referrals and Resources

- **Route to follow: referrals for diagnosis:**
 - Primary Health Care Clinic: Professional to write referral to District / Regional Hospital
 - Parents **MUST** be involved
 - Insist: must be seen by a trained medical doctor/paediatrician
 - Mom must keep contact
- Substance abuse **treatment centres:**
 - Ensure access to prenatal care and adequate support system;
- Know the **physical resources** in area
 - Education / Medical / NGO's etc.
- Make use of **electronic resources** for information: **NOFAS** (www.nofas.org)
 - increase **own knowledge & understanding** = better support

Encourage healthy pregnancies



Role of the man when his partner is pregnant?



- Plan your baby
- Help your partner have an **alcohol-free pregnancy**.
- Show **solidarity** – also give up alcohol for 9 months.
- To **respect her wish** when she decides not to drink.
- Celebrate **special occasions** without alcohol.
- Encourage her to **go for help** if she cannot stop drinking.

Where do I go for help?

If you need help to control your alcohol intake, drug misuse and smoking then speak to:



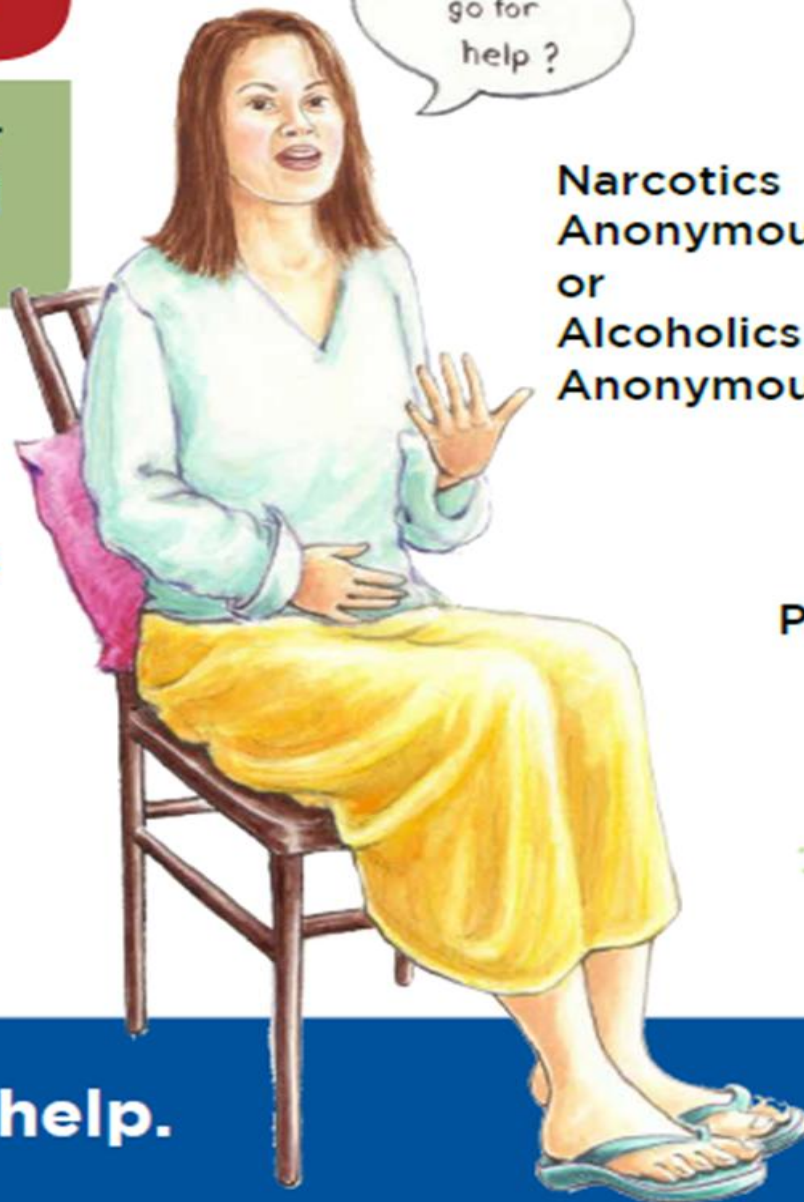
Local community structures

eg women's groups



Social worker
Mental health nurse

Don't go it alone. Seek help.



Narcotics
Anonymous
or
Alcoholics
Anonymous



Places of worship



Religious
leader

Awareness Tools:





foundation for alcohol related research



A child WITH FASD

needs

- Routine
- Structure
- Patience
- Understanding
- Love

has

- Potential
- Hopes
- Dreams
- Love to give!

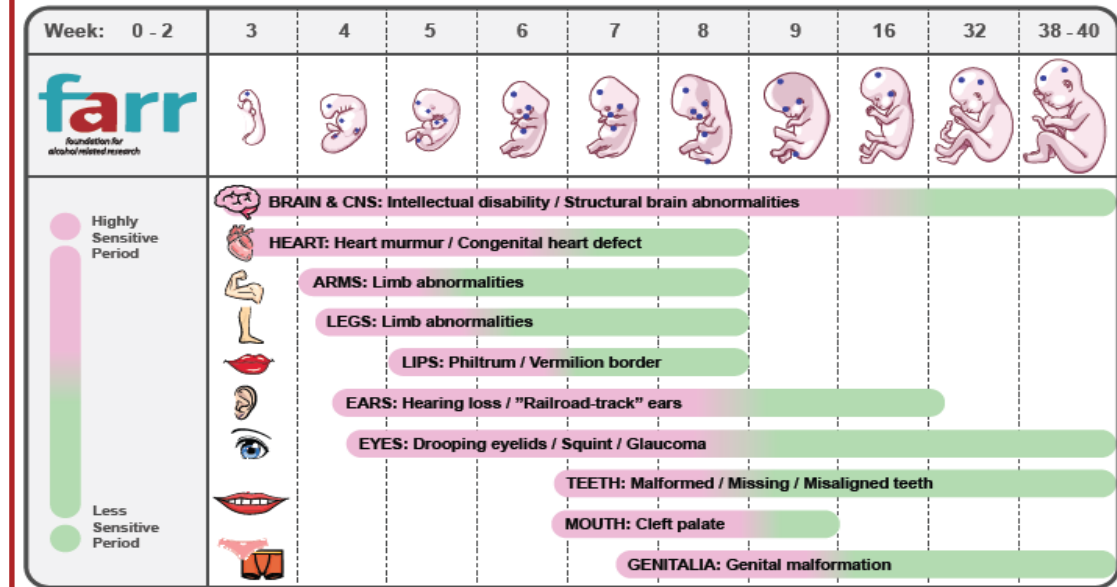
For more information **contact us**

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www.farrsa.org.za

EFFECT OF ALCOHOL ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FETUS



Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, she puts her unborn baby at risk

Awareness: International FASD Day:

WHY 9 SEPTEMBER?

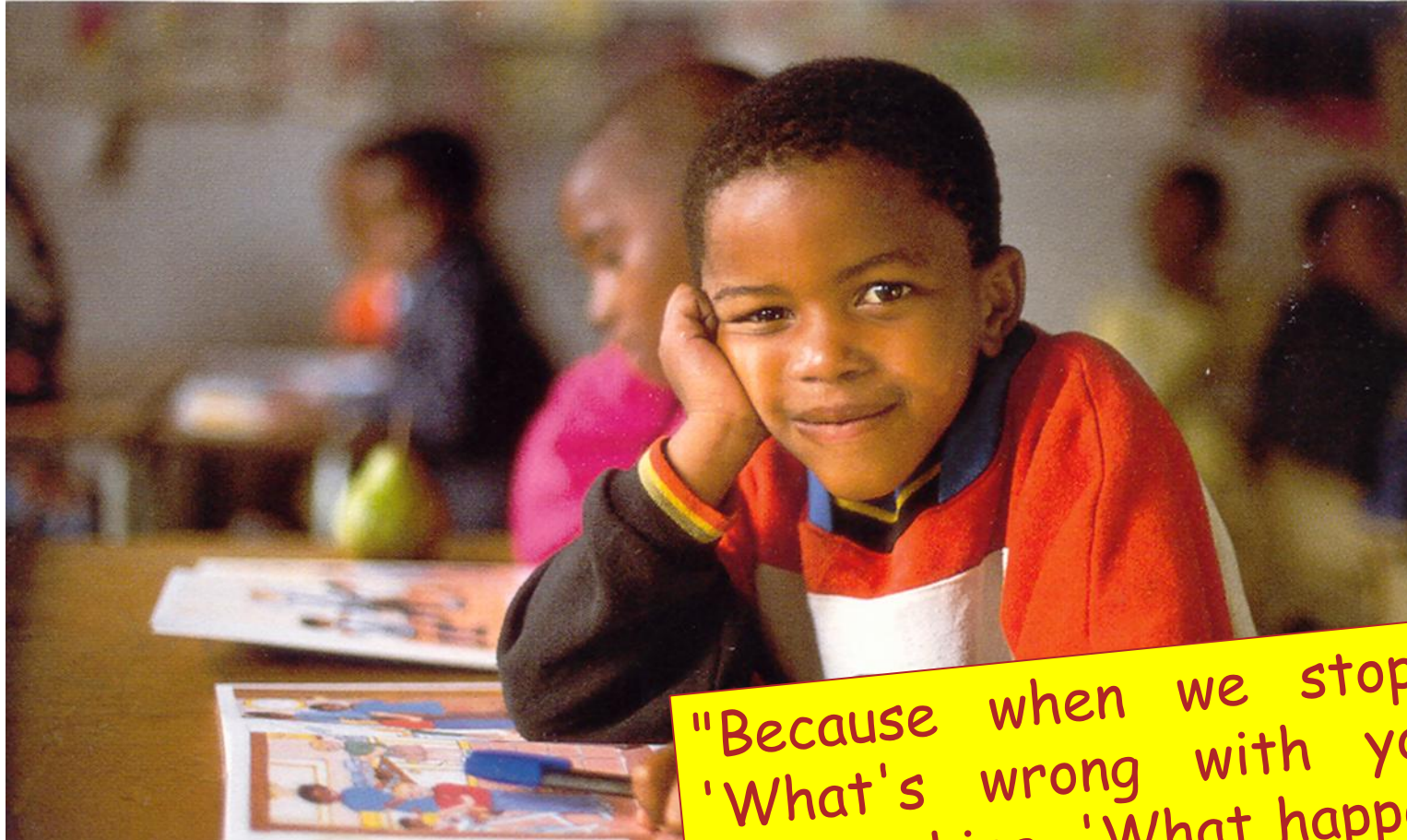
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It is International FASD Day today and the day is still young!

Grab the opportunity by telling 9 colleagues, friends, clients, patients, or family members how they can help prevent a child from being born with FASD!



Ethics and Human Rights



"Because when we stop asking, 'What's wrong with you?' and start asking, 'What happened, and how can we help?' everything changes."



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FARR (Foundation for Alcohol Related Research)

