# Study reveals urgent need to understand effects of opioid exposure in pregnancy on child development



A recent comprehensive study led by Dr Louise Marryat, an expert in infant health at the University of Dundee's School of Health Sciences, has highlighted urgent gaps in understanding the impact of opioid exposure during pregnancy on child development. The research underscores the necessity for expanded knowledge to better support affected children and their families.

Based on an umbrella review analysing 478 papers, Dr Marryat and her team sought to consolidate existing data on how substances such as fentanyl, heroin, and various prescription painkillers used during pregnancy influence the health and development of children from birth to preschool age. Their findings revealed potential associations between prenatal opioid exposure and specific physical impairments, including difficulties in visual development and motor skills. The study also identified increased risks of behavioural problems and language difficulties in children exposed to opioids in the womb.

Dr Marryat noted that approximately 1 in 100 children in Scotland are affected by opioid use during pregnancy—a prevalence comparable to the rate of autism among Scottish children according to NHS data. Despite this significant figure, there remains a scarcity of scientific research detailing the direct cognitive and physical effects of such exposure. The lack of long-term studies, in particular, hinders the ability to distinguish whether developmental challenges stem directly from opioid exposure or from other complex environmental factors.

In an interview with The Herald (Glasgow), Dr Marryat emphasised the importance of addressing this research gap, saying, “If you’re having behavioural difficulties with children, we do not know if that’s because they have been exposed to opioids in pregnancy which has made changes in the way their brain has developed, or whether it is because of the environment that they are living in and what has happened to them since birth." She pointed out that some developmental signs might simply be too early to measure in young children.

The study's findings motivate calls for larger, longer-term research tracking affected children beyond early childhood to provide reliable evidence that can inform medical practice and government policy. This would also enhance decision-making regarding the prescription of opioid medications such as methadone, commonly used during pregnancy, helping healthcare providers to better support mothers and anticipate potential outcomes for their children.

Dr Marryat further discussed challenges related to engaging vulnerable families with healthcare and social services. She explained, “For these families impacted by opioid use, it can be particularly tricky to engage in services. First, because they are often stigmatised by the services that are meant to help them, and the parents who have used drugs have experienced lots of stigma.” Fear of child removal can discourage mothers from seeking necessary care and support.

Highlighting the need for more adequate resourcing of universal services, including health visiting, Dr Marryat said: “There needs to be appropriate pathways providing services that work alongside parents to fully support children and families in challenges they might face, but that is not easy when many services are already stretched.” She advocated for providing families with clear information to make informed decisions, while simultaneously avoiding exacerbating stigma around substance use.

Women who use opioids during pregnancy, Dr Marryat noted, generally want the best outcomes for their children. “During pregnancy, the focus for mothers is very much on having a healthy baby. These are fundamental and understandable concerns but focus less on the long-term outcomes of the child, even when exposed to opioids,” she said.

The study calls attention to the complexity of opioid exposure in pregnancy and its potential developmental consequences while underscoring the vital need for expanded research, improved healthcare engagement, and better-informed support systems for affected children and families within Scotland and beyond.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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