



# **Fetal Alcohol Exposure: Time to Know, Time to Act**

Ontario's Provincial Conference  
April 10-11, 2003

## **Breaking the Cycle**

Margaret Leslie  
Director, Early Intervention Programs  
Mothercraft Program Manager,  
**Breaking the Cycle**

## **Margaret Leslie**

Program Manager  
Breaking the Cycle  
761 Queen Street West, Suite 107  
Toronto, ON M6J 1G1  
Telephone: 416-364-7373 ext. 204 Fax: 416-364- 8008

Margaret Leslie (Dip.C.S., C.Psych.Assoc.) is Director of Early Intervention Programs at Mothercraft, and Program Manager of Breaking the Cycle. Ms. Leslie's clinical experience has been in the areas of prevention and early intervention services for families and young children living in conditions of risk. She was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Breaking the Cycle program, which serves pregnant and/or parenting women who are experiencing problems of substance use, and who have children under the age of 6 years. Ms. Leslie has been involved in a number of FAS activities, which have resulted in the development of resources, including: *"Enhancing Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)related Intervention at the Prenatal and Early Childhood Stages in Canada"*, a FAS Train the Trainer Manual, and two FAS training videos (*"Different Directions: Understanding FAS"* and *"Different Directions:Community Prevention"*). Ms. Leslie is the co-author of the training manual: *The SMART Guide: Motivational Approaches Within the Stages of Change for Pregnant Women Who Use Alcohol*

Breaking the Cycle is a unique early identification and prevention program serving women who are pregnant and/or parenting and also experiencing substance use problems, and their infants and young children. Through the efforts of seven partner organizations, and with funding from Health Canada's Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) and Canada Prenatal Nutrition Project (CPNP), a single access model has operated since 1995 to integrate addiction, parenting, health, medical, child welfare and early intervention services at one site located in downtown Toronto.

## Background

In 1992, the Infant Mental Health Promotion Project of Toronto collaborated with the Metro Toronto Addiction Treatment Services (MTATS) to sponsor a conference entitled Addressing Addiction Together: Focus on Infants, Parents and Professions. The conference goals were:

1. To establish a network among those working with parents with addictions and those working with the young children of these parents.
2. To develop a mutual understanding of addiction and its effects on infants and young children.
3. To make recommendations needed in the system of services to reduce substance use and promote optimal child development.

A key recommendation that emerged from the conference was for improved coordination and communication among agencies that provide services to parents who are substance-involved and those that provide services to their young children. It was recommended that links be developed between adult services and child and family services in order to better address the complex issues involved. Breaking the Cycle (BTC) was developed as a response to this recommendation.

## The Model

The six key features of the BTC model are:

1. A Collaborative, Community-based Response
2. A Comprehensive, Integrated, Cross-Sectoral System Response
3. Prevention through Early Identification
4. Improved Parenting Skills and Prevention of Child Abuse
5. "Single Access" Model
6. Rigorous Evaluation

## The Partnership

Breaking the Cycle operates through the efforts of the following partner agencies whose commitment is outlined in a formal service agreement:

- Mothercraft
- The Jean Tweed Centre
- The Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- The Catholic Children's Aid Society
- Toronto Public Health
- The Hospital for Sick Children Motherisk Program
- St. Joseph's Health Centre

## The Participants

Breaking the Cycle serves women:

- 1) Who are pregnant and/or parenting at least one child under the age of 6 years *and*
- 2) Who are experiencing problems of substance use or recovery
- 3) Who desire support around their substance use or recovery

## The Programs and Services

At the Breaking the Cycle site, women and children may access addiction, prenatal/parenting, health, medical, child welfare, child care, mental health, early intervention and basic needs supports. Breaking the Cycle uses a harm reduction approach and relational models of counselling to support women and their children to achieve a range of goals towards enhanced health, development and well-being.

## The Evaluation

An external evaluation of the program has been ongoing since 1995, and a report of evaluation findings covering the period 1995-2000, and based on a sample of almost 200 families, has been completed. The evaluation uses quantitative as well as qualitative measures to assess the impact of the programs on addiction, parenting, and child development outcomes. The evaluation further assesses the efficacy of the model to engage this vulnerable and marginalized population of women in services.

The evaluation confirms that BTC is achieving its objective of reaching and engaging pregnant women and mothers with young children who are struggling with substance use. Early identification of pregnant women using substances has resulted in the following outcomes for their children:

- Fewer prenatal risk factors
- Reduced prenatal substance exposure
- Higher birth weight
- Fewer birth complications
- Better postnatal health
- Reduced length of hospital stay
- Decreased mother-infant separations

The evaluation further confirms that the single access, integrated model works: it helps to engage a high-risk population and makes a wide range of necessary mother and child services far more accessible to these families in a warm, supportive atmosphere in which families can safely disclose their health worries and parenting concerns. The model has had synergistic benefits beyond those initially envisioned.

*“Addicts sometimes have a hard time getting their act together and controlling their lives. BTC is a one-stop shop. A lot of places will help you with one thing, but you have to go across town to get something else you need. Here, they deal with you, your children, parenting, and emotions all under one roof.”* A BTC Mother