

# FASD, attachment and trauma

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# Trigger warning

- Child maltreatment including neglect and abuse

# 'Ben'

- Birth mother alcoholic - drank heavily throughout pregnancy
- Suffered neglect as an infant, removed from mother's care at 18 months
- Difficult to care for - 3 foster placements, adopted age 3 ½
- At age 8:
  - Poor attention, impulsive, disruptive at school
  - Learning difficulties, poor academic performance
  - Problems with memory, abstract reasoning
  - Acts young for age
  - Communication difficulties, poor social relationships, no fear of strangers
  - Behavioural problems, meltdowns
- **What is the cause of Ben's difficulties, and how can he be helped?**

# Overview

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Attachment: styles and disorders

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Childhood trauma: maltreatment and ACEs

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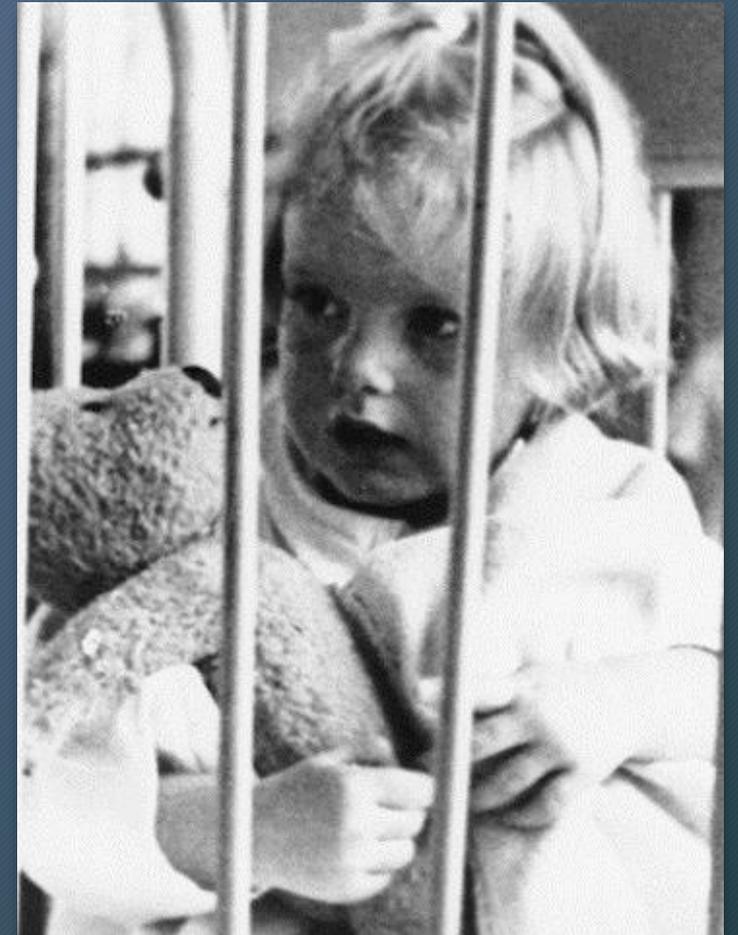
Attachment and FASD

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Childhood trauma and FASD

# Introduction to attachment theory

- John Bowlby - ‘first attachment theorist’
- 1950’s - observed separations between parents and children, including long hospital stays
- Previously thought children were resilient to separation
- In fact, the attachment relationship is crucial to social development and affects all future relationships
- Separation and loss can be traumatic, even in young children



# Attachment styles

## Secure attachment

- About 60% of children
- Feel confidence in their relationship with their caregiver
- Become distressed when separated from caregiver
- Easily soothed when upset
- Tend to feel secure in adult relationships - empathic and responsive

## Insecure avoidant

- About 15% of children
- Appear rejecting of caregiver
- Will explore environment without use of caregiver as base
- Can be distant, unaffectionate in adult relationships

## Insecure anxious/ambivalent

- About 15% of children
- Highly distressed at separation from caregiver
- Tend to be anxious, insecure or have tantrums
- Can be anxious or clingy in adult relationships

## Disorganised attachment

- About 10% of children
- Apprehensive of caregivers
- Often children of abusive or mentally ill caregivers
- Emotionally unstable
- Adult relationships characterised by fear and anger

# Attachment disorders

- People with insecure, and especially disorganised attachment styles are more likely to be diagnosed with mental disorders including depression, anxiety, personality disorder, or an attachment disorder (Main, 1996)
- Children exposed to trauma and/or multiple placements more likely to develop an attachment disorder

## Reactive attachment disorder (RAD)

- Doesn't seek or respond to comfort when distressed
- Lack of enthusiasm for interaction with caregivers
- Poor emotional regulation with regular episodes of sadness or anger

## Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder

- Overly familiar with strangers
- Will interact with and follow strangers without concern for caregiver

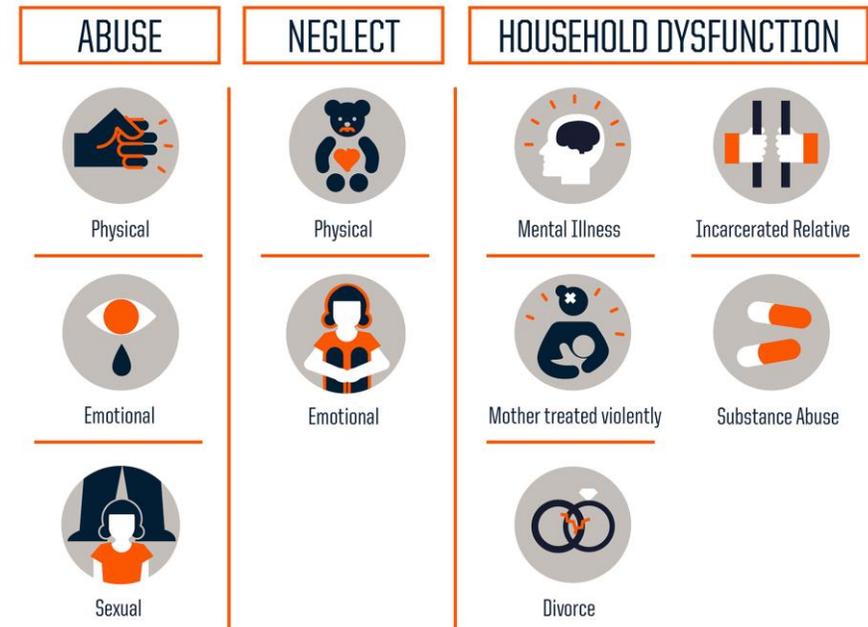
# Childhood trauma - maltreatment

- Childhood trauma can mean a lot of things
- ‘Maltreatment’ covers physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect
- Abuse in childhood strongly linked to emotional, social, behavioural problems
- Neglect in early childhood also linked to poor cognitive development

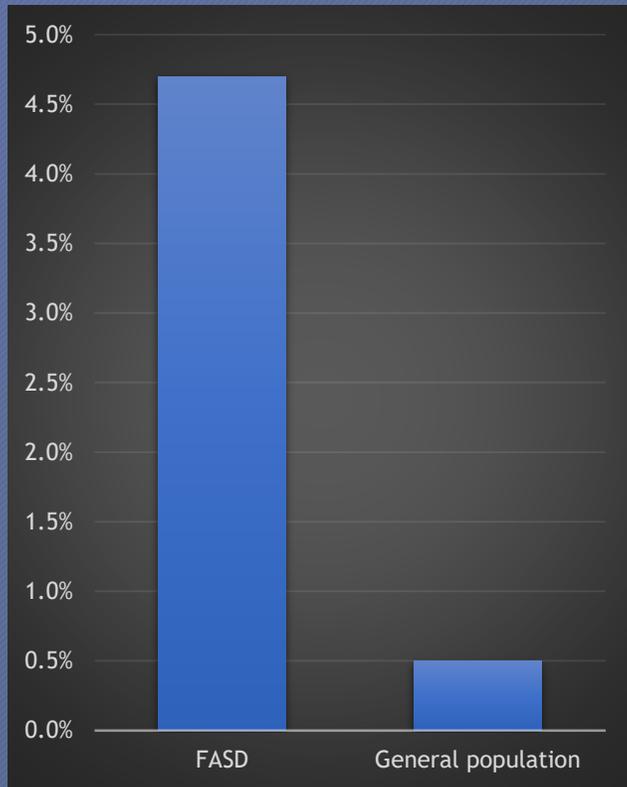
	Abuse	Neglect
Behavioural	✓	✓
Emotional	✓	✓
Social	✓	✓
Cognitive		✓

# Childhood trauma - Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Felitti et al., 1990s, 2000's - series of large cohort studies
- Most people have ACE score of 0-1
- More ACEs = more risk
- People with 4+ ACEs at heightened risk of addictions, mental illness, suicide, sexually transmitted infections, obesity, heart disease, cancer, lung/liver diseases, broken bones
- ACEs one of the biggest risk factors for mental and physical health



# Attachment and FASD



- Review conducted by Miriam Bamidele, 2016 (unpublished)
- Higher rates of insecure and disorganised attachment in children with FASD
- Children with FASD 9 times as likely to develop an attachment disorder than children in the general population (4.7% compared with 0.5%)
- Is this due to environmental reasons, e.g. trauma, or does prenatal alcohol exposure impact the attachment process in some way?

# Attachment and FASD

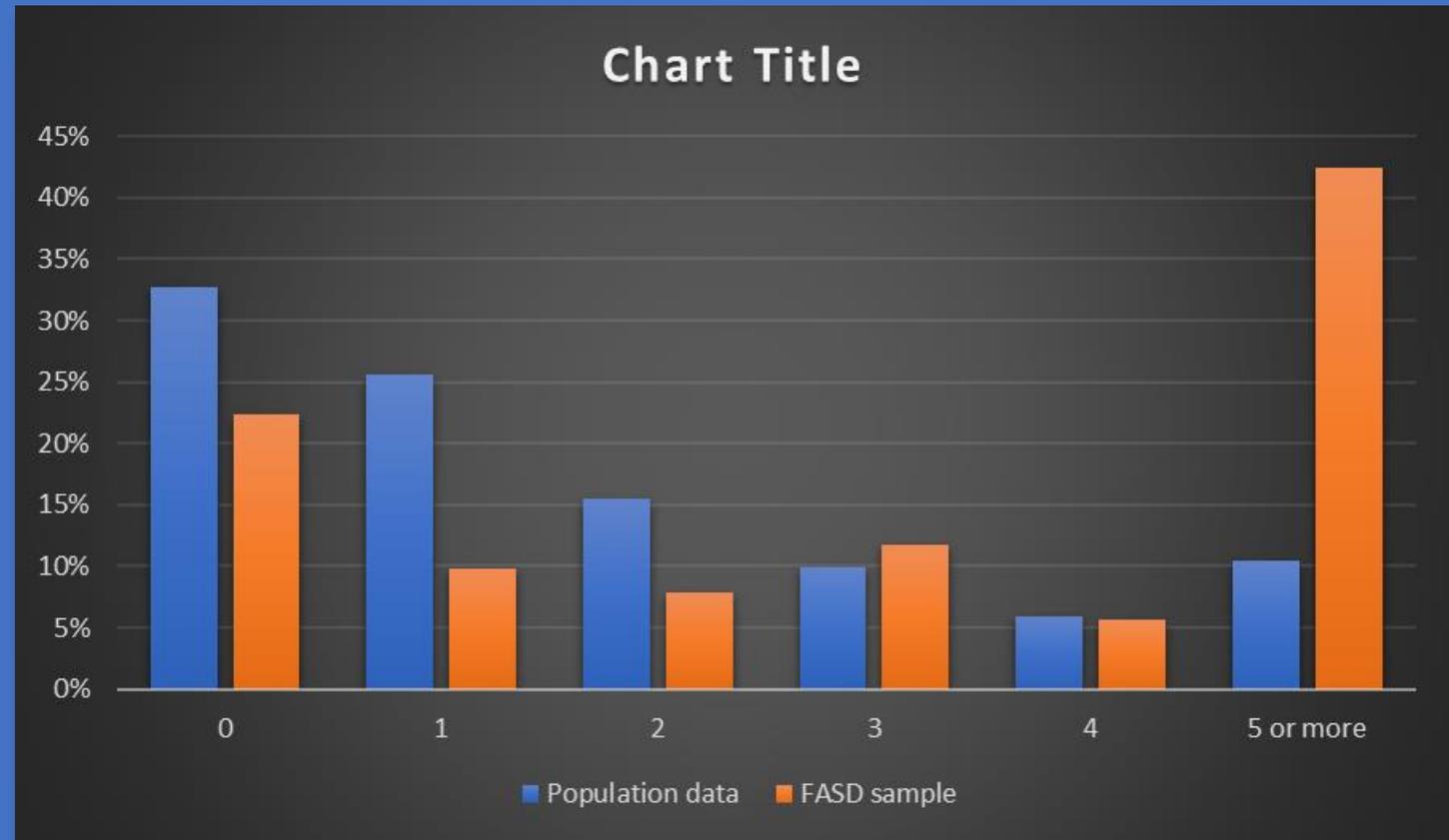
- Review (2016) found only 6 studies had been carried out into attachment in children with FASD
- Effects of PAE on attachment seem to be indirect
- Infants with FASD tend to be more irritable, have more socialising problems
- Higher occurrence of these difficulties can impact the attachment relationship

# Childhood trauma and FASD

- Childhood trauma, especially neglect, has similar long-term effects to PAE on cognitive and behavioural functioning
- PAE often not considered as cause of difficulties, especially where child has history of trauma
- So children with PAE and trauma tend to be given interventions designed for trauma/attachment issues
- PhD thesis: Combined effects of PAE and ACEs

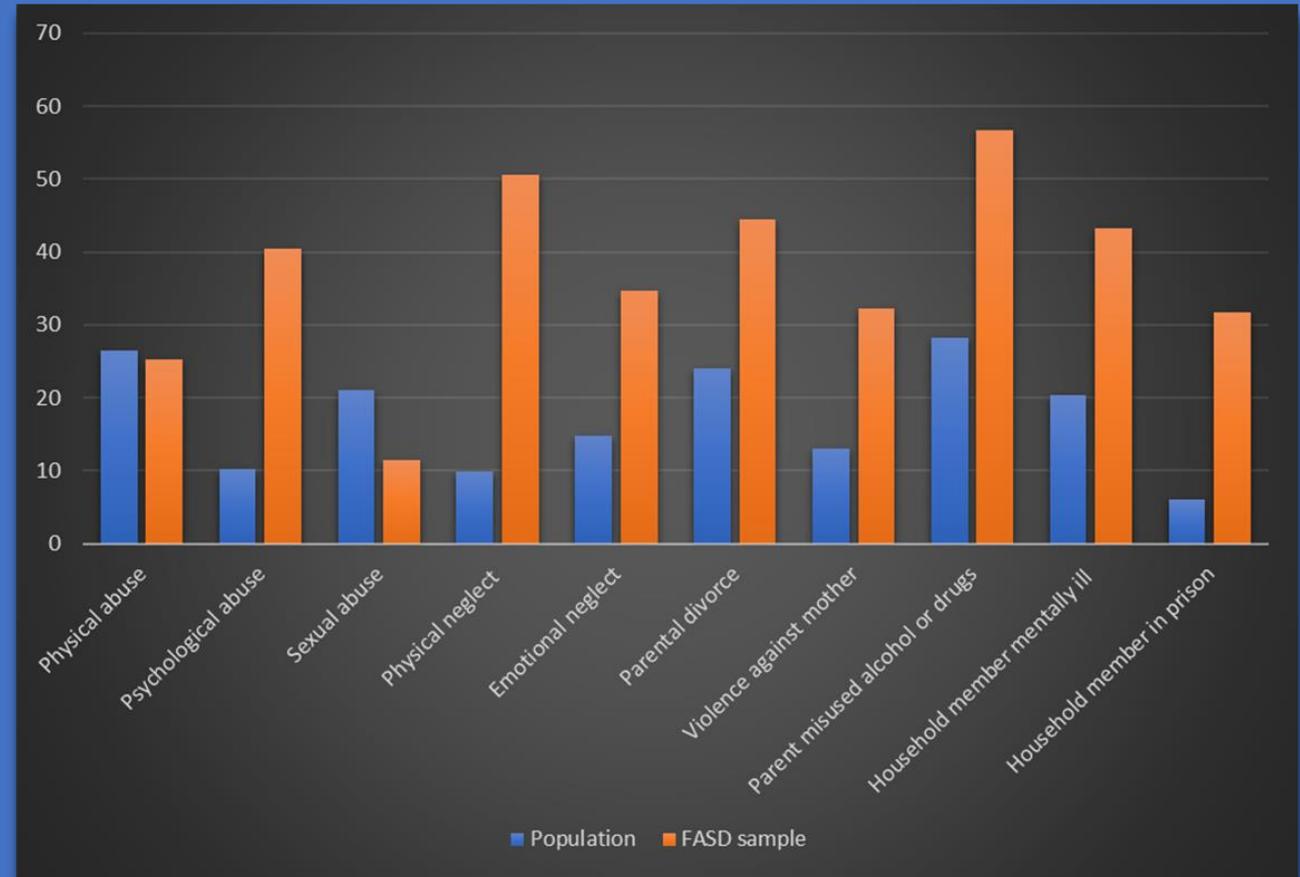
## Childhood trauma and FASD

- First data on ACEs in children with FASD (orange)
- Compared to general population data (blue)
- FASD data based on parent-report
- Population data based on self-report
- Higher levels of ACEs in FASD sample compared to population data



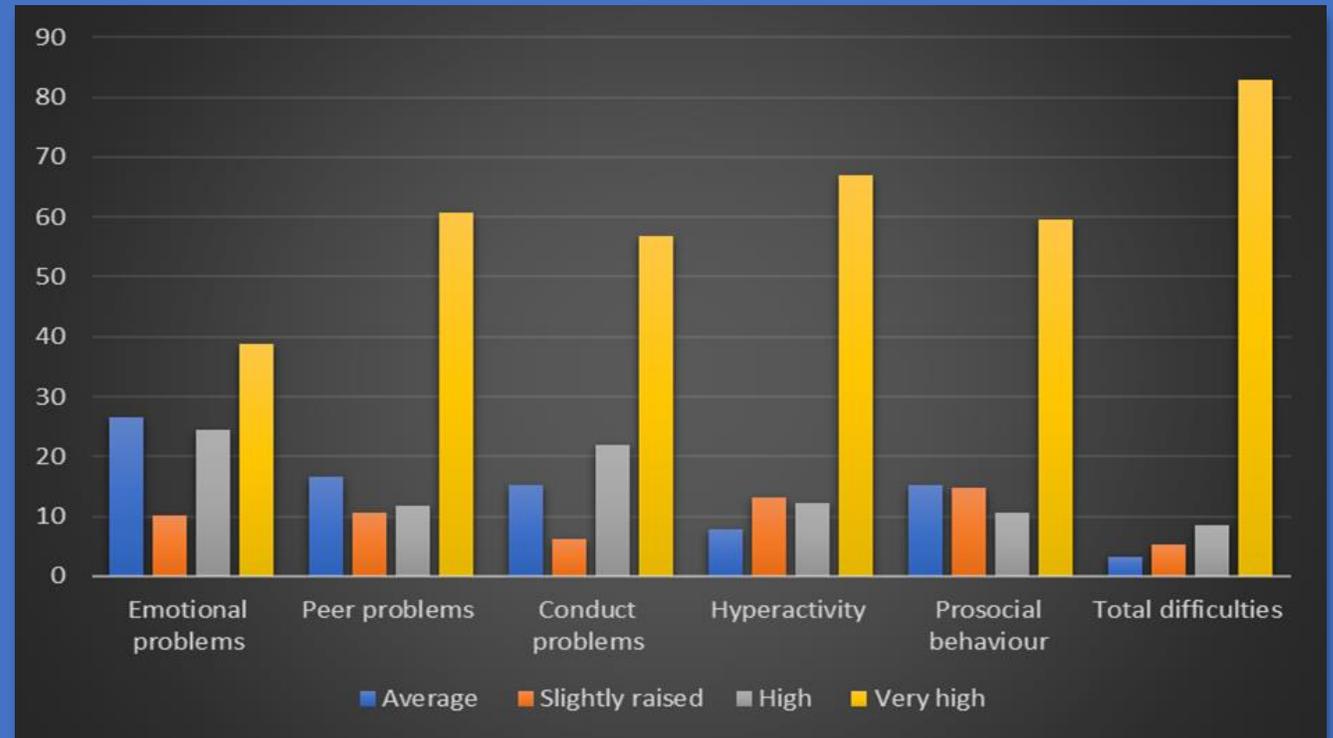
## Childhood trauma and FASD

- FASD sample significantly higher than population data on all scales except physical and sexual abuse
- No difference between FASD and population on physical abuse
- Higher levels of sexual abuse in population data, but many respondents were unsure



## Childhood trauma and FASD

- Children with FASD had considerably poorer scores on empathy than population data (~ 3sd < mean)
- Very high levels of behavioural difficulties across all four measures in FASD sample
- Intelligence and executive functioning in normal range (small sub-sample)



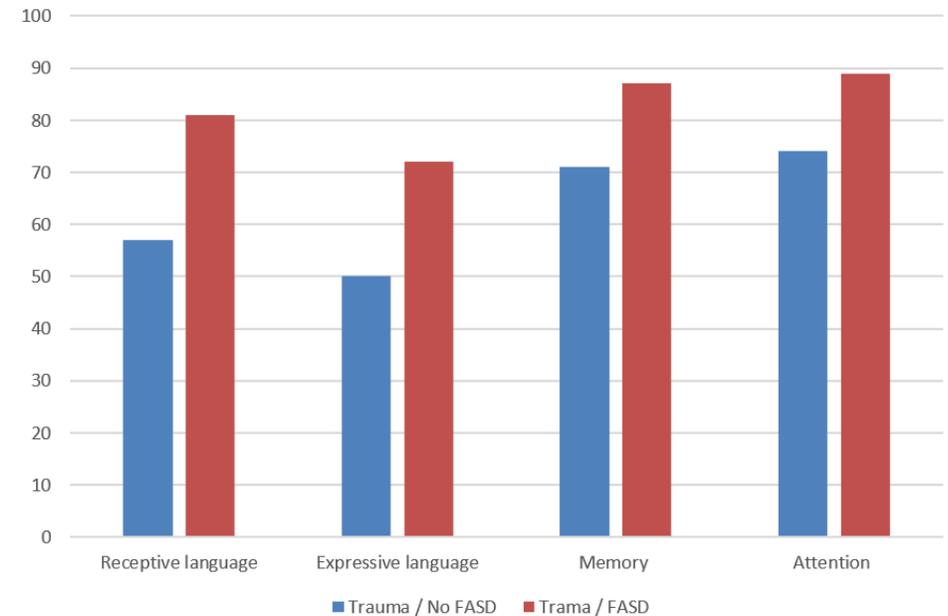
# Childhood trauma and FASD

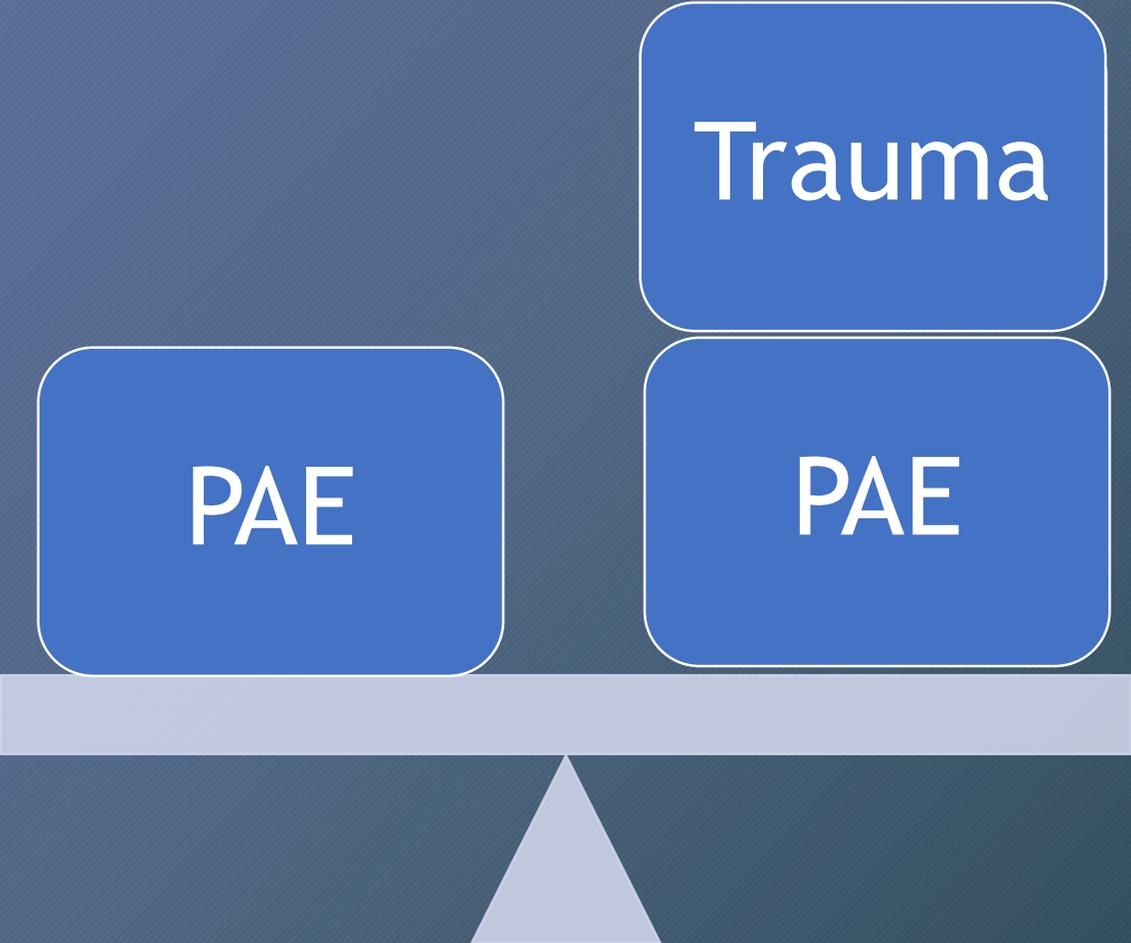
- Expected to see that children in FASD sample with higher numbers of ACEs would have more severe behavioural/cognitive difficulties
- In fact, on most measures, no relationship was found
- Children with higher ACE scores had a slight tendency to have more severe conduct problems than children with lower ACE scores
- On all other measures, no relationships were found between ACE score and cognitive and behavioural difficulties
- So - trauma did not tend to make functioning any worse

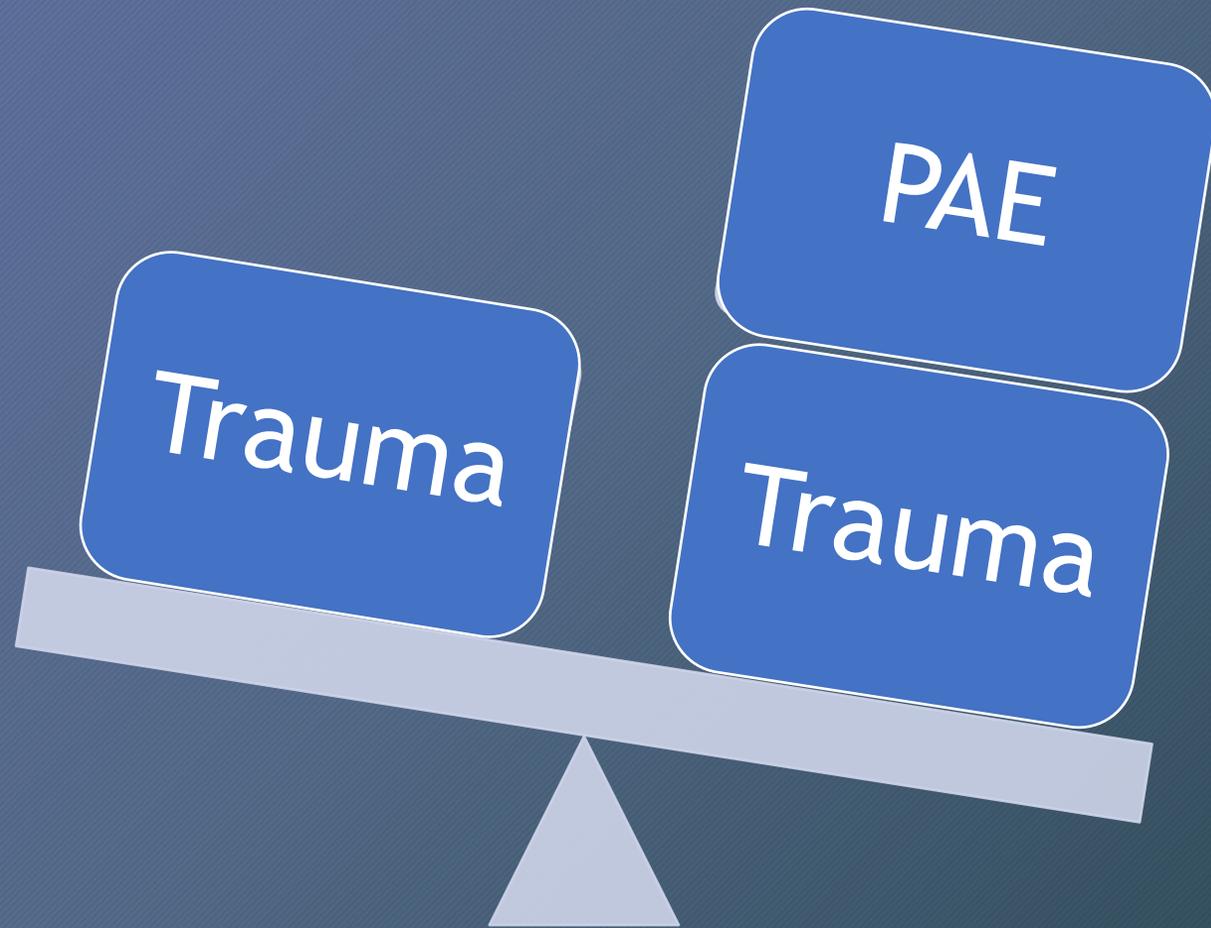
# Childhood trauma and FASD

- Henry et al (2007) took opposite perspective
- Looked at children with trauma, some also had FASD
- Children with both exposures had more severe difficulties with language, memory, attention and behaviour compared to children with just trauma

Percentage of children with moderate to major delays on the PEEEX-2 / PEERAMID-2 (Henry et al. 2007)







# Summary and conclusions

- A child's attachment relationship to their caregiver is central to social development, and separation can be traumatic, potentially leading to an attachment disorder
- Other traumatic childhood experiences including household dysfunction, but especially abuse and neglect, can have a major impact on cognitive and behavioural functioning and long-term health outcomes

# Summary and conclusions

- Prenatal alcohol exposure may not lead directly to attachment problems, but children with FASD may be more difficult to attach with due to irritability and emotional difficulties
- High level of comorbidity between PAE and trauma
- In children with both PAE and trauma, PAE may be the main driving force behind their difficulties
- Trauma should not be overlooked, but interventions that take PAE into account may be more effective than those designed for trauma

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# Thankyou - any questions?

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