

# **THE SOCIAL TATTOO**

## **Let's Really Talk About FASD**

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*A brief history of the word stigma<sup>1</sup>: In ancient Greece and Rome, runaway slaves and criminals were branded with a hot iron or needle as a sign of disgrace. The brand was called, in Greek, stigma, a derivative of the verb stizein, which meant "to tattoo".*

It is interesting to note that the word stigma, at that time in history, was in no way associated with, and never meant "shame" or "discredit". It only referred to *disgrace for criminal behaviour* (keeping in mind that slaves were seen as property, not people). It was only in the very late 16<sup>th</sup> century that the word came to mean a "mark of shame or discredit", the way in which the term is still used today. Interestingly, the "tattoo" allowed people to immediately know who they were dealing with, *not* to shame or discredit, but in order that society might take the *appropriate measures for the time*, something individuals with FASD and their families would benefit from now..

Tattoos make personal or social statements and can tell us a lot about a person. Most tattoos are visible to the naked eye, but what about those that are not? What about behaviours, attitude, body posture, language? Negative attitudes have long been directed at persons deemed somehow morally deficient in character. How do we *judge* they are morally lacking? We decide on the basis of how we perceive and interact with their behaviour – the *invisible tattoo*. Negative tattoo equals negative treatment for women, individuals with FASD, families and systems. How do we change that?

Firstly, we need to know that meaning is not a static thing. It changes from place to person to time and is continuously modified through the manner in which we interpret and make sense of things. As human beings, our interaction with one another depends on what meaning the things we encounter have for us, *at that time*. The only way in which that meaning can change is through direct interaction and the experience of social communication.

Secondly, we accept that social communication can be used as a powerful *tattoo* for positive change, if the people involved are open to that change.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster's Deluxe Dictionary; 10<sup>th</sup> Collegiate Edition (1998)

How do we begin? Where do we begin? With whom do we begin? What are the rules? *What if we talk and nothing happens?*

Thirdly, we begin by understanding that FASD is not something to be ashamed of. Nor is it something that must be overcome through some particular set of actions. Nor will it be. It happened. It is. It is no one's "fault".

Blame serves no useful purpose and is hurtful. Those with FASD, their families and those who work with them want understanding, acceptance, treatment, support, services and the ability to take their rightful place in society. We are not asking for something outside the rights accorded to every other citizen. How do we get people to understand this?

Social communication – talking, telling our stories, bearing our souls – is a powerfully effective but equally frightening thing to do.

The risk is great for each of us, affected adults, birth parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, support workers, systems people; but no greater than the risk of doing nothing.

Shame, fear, guilt, anger and embarrassment are the *negative black-ink tattoos* of FASD we *all* wear, regardless of our parenting status, our personal status, our professional status or our societal status. These tattoos do not help us. We cannot hide them. They pop up in the worst places. This is what creates the stigma. They set us apart because we have not tattooed *over top* of them with the multi-coloured story art tattoos of pride, courage, acceptance, peace, dignity, honour and respect. These are cherished accomplishments in the face of the great odds that are so uniquely FASD.

Only by talking – *really* talking – and listening – *really* listening – can we begin to know each other. Only by knowing each other can we learn to value each other's experience and understand the road each has traveled. Acceptance does not come in the absence of experience. Experience does not come in the absence of exposure. Exposure does not come in the absence of social communication.

*And change cannot occur in a vacuum.*