

Ontario Researcher Wins National Award for Work on FASD in the Legal System

Guelph, ON – July 18, 2025 The Canada Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Research Network (CanFASD) is proud to announce that University of Guelph graduate, Dr. Chantel Ritter, has been awarded the prestigious Dr. Sterling Clarren FASD Research Award, one of Canada's highest honours in the field of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) research.

Dr. Ritter is being recognized for her innovative and compassionate research on youth with FASD involved in the criminal legal system. Her work brings a much-needed strengths-based perspective to an often-overlooked and underserved population.

Youth with FASD are disproportionately represented in the criminal legal system. While FASD is estimated to affect approximately 4% of the Canadian population, the prevalence rates in criminal legal system settings in Canada are estimated to be as high as 23% among youth with FASD, according to a [CanFASD summary of relevant research](#). Dr. Ritter's work underscores the urgent need to change how we support youth with FASD in the criminal legal system.

“Rather than focusing only on what's ‘wrong,’ my research highlights what helps youth with FASD thrive,” said Dr. Ritter. “By listening to caregivers and focusing on strengths, we can advocate for policies and interventions that reduce recidivism and truly support these young people.”

Dr. Ritter's research shifts the conversation from deficits to resilience, exploring how individual strengths, supportive relationships, and systemic resources can foster better outcomes. Using caregiver perspectives, her research has identified protective factors and resilience pathways for youth with FASD. The findings call for inclusive, trauma-informed practices and community-based alternatives to legal punishment - offering hope and direction for families, service providers, and policymakers.

Quotes:

“Chantel Ritter is an exceptional researcher whose work is making a real difference in improving outcomes for individuals with FASD and their families. The implications of this work are far-reaching. For families, it affirms what they often know intuitively but rarely see reflected in services or policy, that their children have strengths worth recognizing and

building upon. For clinicians, educators, and legal professionals, it provides evidence to support more holistic, stigma-reducing, and compassionate approaches.” - Kathy Unsworth, Executive Director, CanFASD

“I’m incredibly proud to see Chantel Ritter recognized with the Dr. Sterling Clarren FASD Research Award. This well-deserved honour highlights her important work bringing a strength-focused lens to understanding the experiences of youth with FASD involved in the criminal legal system.” - Kaitlyn McLachlan, Ph.D., C. Psych. Associate Professor, Interim Chair, Psychology, University of Guelph

About the award recipient

Dr. Ritter recently completed her Ph.D. in [Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology](#) at the University of Guelph. She currently works as a Psychologist in Supervised Practice at Kinark Child and Family Services, where she supports children, youth, and families with complex mental health challenges.

Dr. Sterling Clarren FASD Research Award

Awarded annually by the Canada FASD Research Network, the Dr. Sterling Clarren FASD Research Award recognizes researchers who make a significant contribution to the field of FASD. This national prize honours Dr. Sterling Clarren, a pioneer in the field. Its goal is to celebrate and encourage students and early career researchers who are contributing to the future of FASD research.

About FASD:

FASD stands for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It is a lifelong disability that affects the brain and body of people who were exposed to alcohol in the womb. Each person with FASD has both strengths and challenges, and will need special supports to help them succeed with many different parts of their daily lives. Find out more about the disability on the [CanFASD website](#).

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