

Fact Sheet

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is a medical condition describing the mental and physical birth defects in children whose mothers drank when they were pregnant.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effect (FAE) are terms that are also used to describe problems caused by alcohol in unborn babies. Physical defects of FAS can include small widely spaced eyes, flat mid-face, short, upturned nose, smooth, wide space between the nose and the upper lip, thin upper lip and underdeveloped jaw. The most serious characteristics of FAS are those associated with damage to the brain. These symptoms include intellectual impairment and learning and behaviour disorders.

Some babies are born with some but not all of the usual symptoms associated with FAS. These symptoms are sometimes called Fetal Alcohol Effects or FAE. A person with FAE may not have any physical symptoms, but learning and behaviour difficulties can be just as severe as they are with FAS. The term, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is now commonly used to describe the range of problems associated with both FAS and FAE. FASD is a medical condition that must be diagnosed by a doctor.

What causes FASD?

FASD is caused by the mother drinking alcohol while she is pregnant. Damage to the unborn baby caused by alcohol is permanent. There is no cure for FASD. There is no way to fix the brain damage.

Possible FASD symptoms related to learning:

The abilities of learners with FASD can vary greatly. Many people with FASD have graduated from high school with little additional support. Other people require a lot of extra support and adaptations to a curriculum.

Strategies for short attention span, distractibility and hyperactivity:

- Keep visual and auditory distractions to a minimum.
- Make a quiet working area within the classroom like a carrel or an office.
- Avoid harsh lighting; use full spectrum lighting.
- Have a consistent, predictable schedule of activities.
- Teach the learner to use “self-talk” to help stay focused (e.g., “The first thing I have to do is ...”) and to curb impulsive behaviour (e.g. “Stop and think”). Model this behaviour in order to encourage the learner to do this.
- Teach the learner to curb impulsive behaviour by knowing how to initiate action, when to initiate action, and how to inhibit behaviours until things are thought through.
- Some learners are calmed by quiet background music.
- A learner who needs the stimulation of movement could do some activities, such as reading, in a rocking chair.
- Try meeting the need for physical stimulation by allowing the learner to use a squeezing ball.
- Arrange a quiet area to use when distractions are too great.
- Do not expect too little, but do not demand too much — that is the challenge. Set reasonable learning expectations based on the learner’s abilities and learning goals.

Strategies for poor motor skills and/or coordination:

- Reduce the amount of copying required (e.g., from the blackboard), provide a photocopy for the learners to use at their desks.
- Allow extra time for writing, but recognize the learner’s difficulty in sustaining the motor activity of writing, even if more time is available.
- Notice whether spelling improves when you ask the learner to spell out loud rather than in written form. If this is the case, it might be because the motor skills involved in writing are not fully automatic.

- Provide extra practice in handwriting.
- Watch to see if the learner grips the pencil too tightly, which is tiring; use soft, slide-on grippers.
- Encourage the early development of keyboarding skills for word-processing.
- Encourage participation in physical activities to improve coordination.

Strategies for language difficulties

- Record stories so the learner can listen and read along.
- Use a picture dictionary to aid in vocabulary development.
- Do not use figures of speech, euphemisms, sarcasm. Be concrete in communicating with the learner.
- Avoid “why” questions and essay type questions.
- Give instructions one step at a time, repeat information as needed. Check for understanding by asking the learner to repeat directions in his/her own words, or by checking understanding with a partner.
- Develop a peer tutor to work with the learner for reading practice, reviewing lessons, studying for tests, editing procedures, proofreading.
- Provide a photocopy or audio recording of important information.
- Use cut-up sentence strips to assist with word identification and story understanding.
- Use multi-modal strategies (visual, auditory, touch, active/kinesthetic).
- Use art projects to make abstract concepts more concrete.
- Consider alternative demonstrations of knowledge, such as videotaping, audio recording, computer graphics applications.
- Teach and encourage the use of electronic spell-checkers, audio recorders, word processing
- Allow learners to write about their own experiences to help them organize their thoughts.
- Provide practice in sequencing events, such as creating a photo story.
- Speak face-to-face with the learner; use the learner’s name.

- Keep the number of instructions and the explanations short.
- Stop at key points to check for comprehension: be alert to “losing the learner” (that glazed-over look).
- Make sure the learner understands what to do. Having a learner repeat back the instructions in his or her own words.
- Give instructions in more than one way: verbal and visual.
- Speak slowly and wait for the learner to process and organize a response.
- Use visual aids to accompany language messages.
- Help the learner feel comfortable asking questions (and asking again, if necessary) when he or she does not understand.
- Use repetitive teaching strategies which build on the prior knowledge base of the learner.

General strategies to use in all learning situations:

- Alternate activities the learner enjoys most with activities that are more difficult for the learner.
- Learners may be aware of their own strengths and needs. Assist learners to develop strategies that have worked for them in the past.
- Use language that is familiar to the learner.
- Observe which part of the day is most productive for the learner. Use this time for activities that require more focus.
- Provide the external structure that the learners need while helping them to develop and depend on their own inner resources: “I can do this!”
- Give feedback to learners so that they can get some insight into their behaviour and how it affects themselves and other learners.
- Assist the learner to organize work in one binder rather than in several separate notebooks and colour code the materials.
- Help the learner to learn a skill by teaching it in the environment in which the learner is expected to perform the skill.
- Use lists, such as a checklist for daily routine or a checklist for daily work.