

Language Guidelines

Language is powerful, and the words that we use make a difference.

This document provides guidelines and alternatives to commonly used phrases that are outdated and, at times, offensive or harmful. Please note that language is fluid and ever-changing. Over time, this document will need to be updated as the alternatives offered become outdated themselves. Additionally, terminology may need to be adjusted depend on the audience that you are reaching. For example, if your audience is a group of health care providers, using a term like “embryo” or “fetus” would be appropriate. However, if you are talking to high school students, it might be more effective to use the term “baby.” No matter who your audience is, there are three things that are important to remember anytime you’re talking about alcohol-exposed pregnancies and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD):

Always use person-first language: Person-first language emphasizes the person first, not the disability. For example, “a child with an FASD” rather than “an FASD kid.”

Avoid language that shames people who drank alcohol during pregnancy: Prenatal alcohol exposure is a complex public health issue, and there are many things that may lead to an alcohol-exposed pregnancy. Birth mothers do not seek to harm their children, and we do not want to use language that perpetuates stigma and guilt.

Not everyone who can become pregnant identifies as a woman: We encourage you to use gender-neutral language as often as possible; for example, “a pregnant person” rather than a “pregnant woman.” However, much of the current research available refers only to “women” when discussing the ability to become pregnant. When referring to a specific study, Proof Alliance recommends using the same language as the study itself. Below is an example of a language disclaimer that we share on our PowerPoints.

A Note About Gender-Specific Language

Proof Alliance acknowledges that not every person who can become pregnant identifies as a woman. Although we try to use gender-neutral language as often as possible, much of the current research available currently refers only to “women” when discussing the ability to become pregnant. When citing this research, we refer to the language used in the study. In these cases, “woman” refers to someone who was assigned female at birth.



REPLACE	WITH	BECAUSE
<p>FASD kid, person suffering from FASD, person living with FASD</p> <p>"My neighbor is an FASD kid."</p>	<p>Person with an FASD</p> <p>"My neighbor has an FASD."</p>	<p>Person-first language</p>
<p>Brain damage, brain damaged</p> <p>"His mom drank during pregnancy and he was born with brain damage."</p>	<p>(Person with a) brain injury</p> <p>"He had prenatal alcohol exposure and was born with a brain injury."</p>	<p>Person-first language, less stigmatizing</p>
<p>Mentally disabled, mental retardation</p> <p>"People with FASD are mentally disabled."</p>	<p>(Person with a) cognitive disability</p> <p>"Some people with FASD may have cognitive disabilities."</p>	<p>Person-first language; retardation is an outdated and offensive term</p>
<p>"FASD is caused by a woman drinking alcohol while pregnant."</p>	<p>"FASD is caused by prenatal alcohol exposure."</p>	<p>Gender-neutral, less shaming, and focuses specifically on the cause: prenatal alcohol exposure</p>
<p>External brain</p> <p>"I help her with a lot of things; I'm basically her external brain."</p>	<p>Support person</p> <p>"I'm her support person; I help her with certain tasks."</p>	<p>Less stigmatizing, more accurate and neutral (people with FASD do not need an "extra brain")</p>

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REPLACE	WITH	BECAUSE
<p>Pregnant woman/women</p> <p>"Pregnant women shouldn't drink."</p>	<p>Pregnant person/people who are pregnant</p> <p>"It's the safest choice for people who are pregnant."</p>	<p>Not all people who can become pregnant identify as women</p>
<p>Moms-to-be</p> <p>"Moms-to-be should avoid alcohol."</p>	<p>Anyone who is/could become pregnant</p> <p>"It's the safest choice for anyone who is or may become pregnant."</p>	<p>Gender-neutral</p>
<p>Breastfeeding</p> <p>"Drinking alcohol while breastfeeding cannot cause an FASD."</p>	<p>Nursing</p> <p>"Drinking alcohol while nursing cannot cause an FASD."</p>	<p>Gender-neutral</p>
<p>Boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife</p> <p>"Husbands can show support to their wife by not drinking."</p>	<p>Partner</p> <p>"Partners play a role in alcohol-free pregnancies: they can be supportive by not drinking."</p>	<p>Gender-neutral</p>
<p>Unborn baby, developing baby</p> <p>"Drinking during pregnancy can hurt an unborn baby."</p>	<p>Embryo or fetus. The term baby may be best for some audiences.</p> <p>"It can impact the baby's development."</p>	<p>Medically and legally accurate; avoids political language - pro-life vs pro-choice. FASD is a non-partisan public health issue.</p>

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REPLACE	WITH	BECAUSE
<p>Non-alcoholic drink</p> <p>"She should have non-alcoholic drinks at her baby shower."</p>	<p>Alcohol-free drink, zero-proof drink</p> <p>"I found a great zero-proof drink recipe for her baby shower!"</p>	<p>Avoids the term "alcoholic" which can be stigmatizing and/or triggering</p>
<p>Admitted to alcohol use</p> <p>"The pregnant patient admitted to alcohol use during her check-up."</p>	<p>Confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure</p> <p>"The patient confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure."</p>	<p>The term "admitted" implies that this is a confession of wrongdoing and has a moral judgment overtone</p>
<p>Addict, alcoholic, substance abuser, struggling with addiction</p> <p>"Only alcoholics have children with FASD."</p>	<p>Person with an alcohol use disorder or substance use disorder</p> <p>"She has an alcohol use disorder."</p>	<p>Person-first language, less stigmatizing, more medically accurate</p>
<p>Substance abuse</p> <p>"She went to rehab for substance abuse."</p>	<p>Substance use or misuse</p> <p>"She received treatment for substance use."</p>	<p>Less stigmatizing</p>
<p>Relapse</p> <p>"Relapse is a part of recovery."</p>	<p>Recurrence of use or return to use</p> <p>"Recurrence of use may occur."</p>	<p>Less stigmatizing</p>

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REPLACE WITH BECAUSE

<p>Rehab</p> <p>"I think she needs rehab."</p>	<p>Treatment center</p> <p>"Has she considered a treatment center to get support?"</p>	<p>Less stigmatizing</p>
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<p>Clean</p> <p>"She's not using anymore; she's clean now."</p>	<p>Drug-free, alcohol-free, in recovery</p> <p>"She has been alcohol-free for 2 years."</p>	<p>Less stigmatizing</p>
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Sources:

1. Canada Northwest FASD Partnership. Language guide: Promoting dignity for those impacted by FASD. <https://canfasd.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2018/01/LAEO-Language-Guide.pdf>
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3. National Center on Disability and Journalism. NCDJ Style Guide (Revised 2018). <https://ncdj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NCDJ-styleguide-2018.pdf>
4. American with Disabilities Act National Network. Guidelines for writing about people with disabilities. <https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Communicating With and About People with Disabilities. https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf
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7. Broyles LM, Binswanger IA, Jenkins JA, et al. Confronting inadvertent stigma and pejorative language in addiction scholarship: a recognition and response. *Subst Abus.* 2014;35(3):217–221.