

Understanding Behaviors of FASD

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) include brain injury and disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.^{1,2} Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause changes to brain size, structure and functioning.³ This type of brain injury can lead to issues with behavior.⁴

Without an understanding of the challenges faced by people with FASD, typical behaviors may be seen as purposefully misbehaving or acting out; however, it is often just the opposite. When it seems like a child won't do something, it might be that they can't do it – at least not without support.⁵

Remember that everyone with an FASD has the ability to succeed.

Strategies, support and interventions can help improve outcomes, behavior and overall well-being for people with FASD.⁶

Challenges and Strategies

It is important to note that each person with FASD is unique and has different strengths and challenges. Not every person with FASD will demonstrate all of the effects below. More so, this is not a complete list of all the possible behavioral effects of FASD.

Due to brain injury, people with FASD may have difficulty with:

Abstract reasoning: If the frontal lobe has been affected by alcohol exposure, people with FASD may find it difficult to understand relationships and ideas. This is because the meaning of these abstract concepts can change depending on the situation. For example, concepts such as respect, responsibility, cause and effect (consequences), and time management can be hard for someone with FASD to understand.

- Strategy: Use concrete language and speak in literal terms.
- Strategy: Say what they are allowed to do rather than what they should not be doing.

Generalization: If someone with an FASD understands and learns something in one setting, they might not automatically be able to apply that in a different setting or situation. For example, if you were teaching a child with FASD to wash their hands in the bathroom, you shouldn't assume they can apply that skill in the kitchen before dinner. If you change one part of the person's routine, you have created an entirely new routine, and this can require some adjustments.

- Strategy: Re-teach in all new environments and situations.
- Strategy: Use the same language when re-teaching.

Information processing: People with FASD often have slower verbal receptive language skills, meaning it takes longer to process information and respond. Someone with an FASD may only hear and comprehend every fourth or fifth word you are saying.

- Strategy: Slow down your speech.
- Strategy: Allow them time to process and organize their thoughts before the discussion, such as "You can give me your answer at the end of class" or "after we're done with this activity, I want to hear how work went for you today."

Sensory processing: They may have over- or under-sensitivity to sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. For example, bright lights can hurt a person's eyes or loud noises can agitate and distract.

- Strategy: Decrease distractions to create a calming environment. For example, paint walls a neutral color versus a bright color, close windows to block traffic sounds, avoid scented candles, use carrel desk as visual boundary, etc.
- Strategy: Pick your battles, avoid places that may trigger them.

Executive functioning: Executive functioning is the ability to plan and understand steps needed to effectively complete a goal. Someone with an FASD may not be able to comprehend all the different steps or know the order the steps need to be accomplished in to achieve an overall goal.

- Strategy: Provide an outline and give one concrete step at a time. It may help to verbally say the steps, write them down, and demonstrate them.
- Strategy: Recognize that the person has a brain injury and remain patient.

Memory: Individuals with FASD often have challenges storing and recalling information. For example, a person with an FASD may understand something learned Monday but can't recall that information on Tuesday. Due to this, confabulation (unintentionally giving inaccurate information) may occur to make up for memory impairment.

- Strategy: Allow extra time to process and use visual prompts, lists or role play linear timelines.
- Strategy: Check for understanding to ensure memory they are recalling is accurate.

Emotional regulation: Having trouble regulating emotions is a common concern for people with FASD. This can look like an "overreaction," taking longer to calm, hair-trigger rage, low moods or irritability.

- Strategy: Be proactive, know their triggers and teach calming techniques such as deep breathing.
- Strategy: Give them space and time. Keep yourself calm, don't escalate the behavior with questions or suggestions.



Attention: This can include difficulty staying focused, being easily distracted, and having issues self-regulating when they are overstimulated or tired.

- Strategy: Allow frequent breaks and let them stand or walk around.
- Strategy: Switch things up: provide a range of opportunities to complete tasks (visual, kinesthetic, auditory).

Impulse control: Poor impulse control is another common symptom of FASD. This can be difficulty or inability to resist a temptation or an urge. An example is someone with an FASD shoplifting even though they know stealing is wrong.

- Strategy: Ask them to pause and have a discussion about the situation.
- Strategy: Encourage positive influences and create a network of support. Be aware of high-risk situations such as social media and unsupervised events.

Social skills: People with FASD may be overly friendly, have difficulty understanding boundaries, struggle to understand social cues, and be very shy or have social anxiety.

- Strategy: Use concrete language and avoid sarcasm and idioms.
- Strategy: Teach healthy boundaries and role model appropriate behavior.

Secondary Conditions

Secondary conditions are a response to not receiving the appropriate support needed. Secondary characteristics can include:

- Fatigue and frustration
- Anxiety
- Anger and aggression
- Withdrawing and isolation
- Poor self-esteem
- Co-occurring mental illness

Caregivers and professionals can help prevent and reduce these secondary conditions. By understanding the challenges associated with brain injury and FASD, we can plan strategies and interventions that can most effectively support both the individual and their families.

Sources:

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