

Parenting Children and Youth With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs

Parenting is both rewarding and challenging. When parenting a child with an FASD, you will need information about the effects of alcohol exposure before birth as well as strategies to support and accommodate your child's individual brain differences. Remember that every child, parent, and family is unique and not every strategy will work for everyone. You will find that the best strategies are based on the relationship you build with your child by identifying as well as encouraging your child's strengths and abilities while providing daily supports.

Developmental Age and FASD

Your child is likely developmentally younger than their chronological age. For example, your child may be 13 years old but, in some ways, they may socially think and act like a 7-year-old. Developmental age can vary across abilities, such as living and social skills, emotional abilities, and language. For example, your child may be friendly and outgoing but have difficulty learning social rules and cues without direct teaching. In some ways, a child with an FASD can be ahead of their same-age peers and in other ways, they may be behind.

It is important to “think younger” when supporting a child with an FASD. Identify your child's developmental age (the younger age they are acting like) and change your expectations as if they were that age.¹ Your pediatrician, teachers, and others can help you recognize differences. It may take longer for a child with an FASD to mature.

Parenting Strategies and Tips

These concepts are from Evenson and Lutke's "Eight Magic Keys," which was created to help educators support students with FASDs. The provided tips have been adapted for caregivers. [Watch Eight Magic Keys for Developing Successful Interventions for Students with FASD](#) to learn more.



Understanding FASDs

[Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders \(FASDs\)](#) are a group of conditions that can happen to a person exposed to alcohol before birth. Even small amounts of alcohol can cause these issues, which are called “prenatal alcohol exposure.” People with FASDs can have challenges that last their whole lives, affecting how they behave, learn, and grow physically.



Focus on Strengths

FASD is a spectrum disorder, which means each person with FASD is unique and has their own special strengths, talents, and gifts. Begin by finding out what your child is good at and what they enjoy. Try to include these interests in their daily activities.



Support is Key

Children and teens with FASDs usually have average intelligence but might struggle with things like motor skills, health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotions, and social skills. You, along with your family and friends, can help your child by giving them the support they need to do their best.

1. Make it Concrete

Your child likely struggles to understand abstract language (jokes, sarcasm, metaphors) and abstract concepts (math, money, time, ideas, cleanliness, ownership).

- ✓ **Tip:** Avoid abstract language (for example, “That was a piece of cake”). Say exactly what you mean (for example, “That was easy to do!”).
- ✓ **Tip:** Make abstract concepts more concrete. For example, use paper money instead of a credit card or write your child’s name on objects that are theirs.
- ✓ **Tip:** Be literal and speak clearly. Refer to specific objects or events that they can see, touch, hear, feel, taste, or smell to increase understanding. For example, instead of saying, “Your room is a pigsty! It needs to be cleaned up!” Say, “Your room has stuff on the floor that needs to be put away. Put the blocks on the floor in their bin. Put clothes on the floor into the hamper.”

2. Be Specific and Simple

Your child’s brain may have trouble processing information and remembering what is said. It is easier for them to understand if you speak clearly, concisely, and slowly. Pause to give them time to process and then check for understanding.

- ✓ **Tip:** Share what they can do instead of what they *can’t* or *shouldn’t* do.²
- ✓ **Tip:** Say and show what you want your child to learn, know, and/or do many times to help them retain the information.
- ✓ **Tip:** Simplify your child’s environment and eliminate distractions.

3. Create Structure and Routine

Routine schedules make it easier for your child to complete necessary activities.

- ✓ **Tip:** Build structure for your child—with their schedule, living environment, and school day.
- ✓ Structure gives your child something to rely on, which allows their brain to not have to work so hard.

Task and Time Management Apps for Children and Youth With FASDs

- **Evernote:** A visual productivity tool to develop organizational skills.
- **Streaks:** A habit-promoting, goal-tracking app that challenges users to achieve a “streak” of daily actions by tracking the number of consecutive days completed.
- **Remember The Milk:** A task-organizing app that can help all children and youth who need visual reminders to remember daily tasks.
- **Lil Planner:** A photo-based list maker for nonreaders that uses your own photos and recordings to show daily tasks.
- **Habitica:** Turns habit-building, habit-breaking, and productivity into a gaming experience.

- ✓ **Tip:** Transitions, such as moving from one task to another, leaving one place to go to another, or having a new teacher or school, can be difficult for children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs. Structure can help reduce your child’s anxiety and challenges with [transitions](#). Sharing reminders that a transition will happen soon can help, such as “Five more minutes until we leave.”
- ✓ **Tip:** [Set up routines](#) (for example, what to do when they wake up or get home from school) and stick to them as much as possible. You can use [visual supports](#) (for example, pictures or other graphics that show the steps of an activity) with younger children or use technology—if available—for older children, such as a task management app that tracks daily activities or reminder features on smartphones.
- ✓ **Tip:** Be prepared for your child to struggle if a day doesn’t follow their typical routine. Teach them strategies to find calm when life feels chaotic or confusing.

4. Use Consistency and Repetition

It can be easier for your child's brain to understand and remember when language and strategies are familiar.

- ✓ **Tip:** As much as possible, use the same words to describe things and the same strategies to address behavior. For example, always refer to your child's school as the same thing. Pick "your school," "[name of school]," "the middle school," or a similar fitting descriptive and always use that one title to describe it. Suggest your child's support network use the same words.³
- ✓ **Tip:** Don't be alarmed if your child needs to be retaught something they appeared to have known and already mastered.¹ This is common and is not a reflection of intelligence. This can be frustrating for caregivers so be aware of your own reactions and practice patience techniques. Your child just may need additional support due to the changes to their brain resulting from alcohol exposure before birth.
- ✓ **Tip:** Sometimes children with FASDs do not understand the impact of their actions (even when they can tell you the rule and its consequences). They need to hear important information repeatedly.

5. Provide Close Supervision

It can be easier for your child's brain to understand and remember when language and strategies are familiar.

- ✓ **Tip:** Children and youth with FASDs will need supervision at home, school, and during free time. Look for support from your family and friend network, including grandparents, relatives, teachers, neighbors, family friends, support workers, and mentors.

- ✓ **Tip:** Remember, your child will likely always require some supervision and safeguards.

Reminders for Parents and Caregivers

- **Identify what is within your control** to help meet your child's needs and set them up for success. For example, you can control your home environment and your words, thoughts, and actions.
- **Share information** about the effects of alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs with your family's support network to enhance your child's success outside of your home.
- All children desire love and acceptance from their caregivers. **Accept your child for who they are** and meet them where they are each day.
- **Celebrate what makes your child special!** FASD is only one part of your child's story. Focus on your child as a whole person and appreciate their special strengths, talents, and gifts. Tell them what they do well.

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fasd/pubs/fasd_caregivers.pdf)
- [Resources and Support for Families](#) (FASD United)
- [Parenting Children with FASD](#) (Proof Alliance)
- [Strategies Parents Find Helpful In Raising Their Children Living With FASD](#) (St. Michael's Hospital Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Diagnostic Clinic)
- [Every Day is an Adventure: What Parents and Caregivers Need to Know About FASD](https://ac965253-06fe-4ffb-8eb5-c38685bfd030.filesusr.com/ugd/6eb9fe_6994664f622a423c879f889abff06b8c.pdf) (Healthy Child Manitoba)

Sources

¹ Healthy Child Manitoba. (2017). *Every day is an adventure: What parents and caregivers need to know about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)*. https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fasd/pubs/fasd_caregivers.pdf

² Proof Alliance. (2021, March). *Understanding behaviors of FASD*. <https://www.proofalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Understanding-Behaviors-of-FASD.pdf>

³ FASD Network of Saskatchewan. (2018). *Tips for parents and caregivers*. https://ac965253-06fe-4ffb-8eb5-c38685bfd030.filesusr.com/ugd/6eb9fe_6994664f622a423c879f889abff06b8c.pdf