

Building a Support Network for Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs

You can create a support network for your child with FASD or alcohol exposure before birth. This network can include your extended family, service providers, and the larger community, including other families with children who have FASDs or other brain-based conditions.

Finding Support Within Your Family and Friend Network

Members of your family network, including relatives and close family friends, can be a key source of support. Help them to understand the needs and strengths of your child.

- **Explain the Effects:** Help your family understand the effects of alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs. They might think a child is being disobedient (a child “won’t”) when it’s really because of the brain-based effects of alcohol exposure (a child “can’t”). Encourage family members to ask, “*How can I support this child?*” This can help them find ways to remove barriers and offer support, making them feel involved in caring for and mentoring your child.
- **Encourage Strengths:** Help your family see your child’s strengths—the things that make them laugh, what they enjoy doing, their passions, talents, and skills.¹ When they notice these things, encourage them to share praise or gratitude with your child.
- **Supervision and Boundaries:** Help your family understand the need for appropriate supervision and boundaries for your child’s developmental age (which is usually younger than their actual age). This includes how much supervision they need and their typical routine and schedule.



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.

■ **Communication Strategies:** Share your strategies for communicating and engaging with your child. For example, keep instructions simple, short, and clear.¹ It's normal for your child to need information repeated multiple times before they remember and understand.

■ **Daily Schedule:** Be clear about the daily schedule and routine so family members can join in or step back as needed.

■ **Coping Skills:** Understand that family members might get frustrated or discouraged. Remind them that your child's behavior or learning challenges are due to a brain-based condition, not willful misbehavior or lack of trying. Discuss coping skills they can use when they feel this way, like [taking deep breaths](#), talking with a trusted friend, or writing in a journal.¹

Finding Support for Siblings

Sibling relationships can be an important part of your child's life. Encourage siblings to recognize each other's strengths and talents.

■ **Recognize Feelings:** Siblings of a child with alcohol exposure before birth or FASD might have complex feelings. They may feel sad about being different from other families, angry about their sibling's disorder, embarrassed by their sibling's behavior or learning difficulties, or jealous and resentful of the attention their sibling receives. It's important to normalize these feelings.

■ **Keep the Conversation Open:** Let your other children know that you are always available to talk about how they are feeling or to answer any questions they may have.

■ **Quality Time with Friends:** Your child might feel uncomfortable inviting a friend over because of the unpredictability at home or their own embarrassment. Use respite care for your child with alcohol exposure before birth so their sibling feels comfortable having a friend over to play.²

Tip: Find activities that everyone in your family can enjoy together. Choose activities that avoid competition, are low-pressure (like going for a walk or reading together), and don't have many rules, which can help avoid frustration for everyone.¹

■ **One-on-One Time:** Regularly set aside one-on-one time with each child. Give each child your undivided attention.² It doesn't have to be anything big to make a difference (e.g., reading a favorite story or coloring together).

■ **Avoid Caretaking Roles:** Avoid having your other child take care of or parent their sibling. Even if your child is helpful and mature, it's important for them to be a kid. This helps prevent unnecessary resentment and helps them understand that adults are responsible for their sibling.²

Finding Support Within Your Community

Support for your child and family can also come from your larger community, which may include teachers, neighbors, coaches, mentors, religious community members, and others.

■ Share that your child's brain-based condition affects their ability to learn, pay attention, get along with others, remember, and learn new skills. This may require them to have a different set of rules and responses from trusted adults.

■ Explain the "won't" versus "can't without support" differences that underly your child's behavior and challenges.

- Connect with an [FASD peer support network](#) to identify people who understand what your family life is like. Support from a counselor or therapist to help process challenging family situations can also be helpful.

Many adults with siblings with special needs have expressed that they learned a lot from their sibling and felt the experience made them more patient, mature, responsible, self-confident, independent, and caring.¹

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](#)
- [Every Day is an Adventure: What Parents and Caregivers Need to Know About FASD](#) (Healthy Child Manitoba)
- [What do I do? Helping Your Kids Understand Their Sibling's Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Sources

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2006). *What do I do? Helping your kids understand their sibling's fetal alcohol spectrum disorder* [HHS Pub. No.(SMA) 06-4246]. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.prevention.org/Resources/6DF490FA-9805-4574-9BE6-500550091FBB/FASD_HelpingYourKidsUnderstandTheirSiblingsFASD.pdf

² FASD Network of Southern California. (n.d.). *FASD and the family*. <https://fasdsocalnetwork.org/family/>