

Understanding Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs

A child with an FASD has a lifelong condition that happens when they are exposed to alcohol before they are born. Even small amounts of alcohol can change the size, shape, and functioning of the brain, which can affect how a person behaves and develops. It's important to know that a child exposed to alcohol before birth might not fully meet the criteria for an FASD diagnosis, but they can still have issues and might need the same help and services as someone with the diagnosis.

Characteristics of FASDs

Every person is different, and a child exposed to alcohol before birth might have some, all, or none of the effects listed below. This list doesn't include all possible effects of FASDs. Also, your child might show different traits as they grow. Remember, everyone's body handles alcohol differently, so even small amounts of alcohol might affect some babies more than others.

Understanding the challenges of FASDs can help you understand a child's behavior. FASDs affect a child's ability to understand actions and consequences, make decisions, and plan and organize. It might seem like your child is misbehaving or refusing to do something, but they might actually need more help to do it. This can be frustrating for parents and teachers.



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.

Infants and Young Children	School-Age Children and Teens
• Low birth weight	• Hyperactive behavior
• Issues with sleep and sucking	• Difficulty with attention; easily distracted
• Challenges with self-regulation	• Difficulty with impulse control
• Disorganized or unfocused play	• Difficulty following multi-step instructions
• Speech and language delays	• Poor reasoning and judgment skills
• Sensitivity to light, noise, and touch	• Challenges with regulating emotions
• Irritability	• Difficulty with social relationships
• Delays in early feeding skills, toileting, and bathing	• Memory difficulties (making the same mistakes)
• Increased likelihood of chronic ear infections	• Learning challenges (especially with math)
• Tantrums that are more frequent and intense than would be expected for chronological age	• Needs extra support to complete activities of daily living (hygiene and dressing)

Risks and Adversities

Children and teens with FASDs are at a higher risk to misuse substances, have problems at school, get involved with the legal system, and show inappropriate sexual behavior.¹ They are also more likely to have mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).² Identifying alcohol exposure before birth and diagnosing FASD before age 5, along with providing a stable and loving home and special education services, can greatly improve their outcomes.

Strategies for Addressing Common Challenges for Children and Youth with FASDs



Promote Healthier Sleep

Many children with FASDs experience trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, and keeping a regular sleep-wake cycle.³ This can affect your child's ability to function at home, school, and in social settings.

Information provided by Yasmin Senturias, MD, FAAP (Wake Forest University & Atrium Health-Levine Children's Hospital, Charlotte, NC)

■ **Establish a consistent sleep routine with regular bedtime and wake-up times each day.** This can help your child with an FASD feel secure and reduces anxiety around bedtime.

- **Create a calm sleep environment.** Use blackout curtains, white noise, and comfortable bedding to reduce sensory distractions. A cool, quiet, and comfortably dark bedroom can promote restful sleep.
- **Incorporate relaxation techniques.** Engage in calming activities leading up to bedtime. Things like reading, listening to soothing music, or practicing deep breathing exercises help children wind down. Try to limit screen time 1–2 hours before bed.
- **Use bedtime cues.** Provide picture schedules or bedtime alarms to signal bedtime transitions. These tools can support children with memory and sequencing difficulties that make transitions difficult for children with FASDs.



Put Safety Protections in Place

Children and youth with FASDs may be at an increased risk for safety concerns because they are often very interested in being social and can be suggestible (may be more willing to agree with the ideas of others).

Information provided by Heather Carmichael Olson, PhD, and Joanne Sparrow, PhD, based on the [Families Moving Forward Program](#)

- **Think younger.** Adjust your expectations for your child's behavior and put accommodations in place based on their developmental age, rather than their chronological age as children with FASDs can act younger.
- **Supervise your child carefully.** Much of the time, children and youth with FASDs function day-to-day in ways that are like those of a somewhat younger child. It can be hard to strike the right balance between supervising for protection and allowing a young person to learn independence. Routines and privileges can be changed or updated as your child grows and matures.
- **Praise asking for help.** To improve safety, one of the most important things that youth with FASDs can learn to do is to ask for help. Praise your child for asking for help and praise them for listening when help or advice is given, even if they do not follow it.

- **Monitor emotions and behavior closely.** Look for signs of mental or behavioral health challenges or major behavior changes. You know your child best. Seek help as early as possible.
- **Practice and plan for safety.** Work with your child to plan safety in practical terms and explain what makes a person trustworthy in important situations. Roleplay with your child (such as what to do when peers invite them to shoplift) and help them know when they need help and how best to communicate with others. Practice these roleplays over and over. Develop a [safety plan](#) for your family that outlines practical action steps to take in unsafe situations.



Support Learning Math Concepts

Children and youth with FASDs often experience challenges learning math concepts or skills due to issues related to working memory and visual spatial skills. They often need more time to learn information.

Information provided by Heather Carmichael Olson, PhD, and Joanne Sparrow, PhD, based on the [Families Moving Forward Program](#)

- **Provide hands-on learning experiences.** Children with FASDs can learn math concepts through seeing, touching, and using objects and pictures. This technique helps with issues related to working memory and visual spatial reasoning problems.
- **Help children learn to think about their thinking while they are learning.** Support your child in making a plan to solve a problem, following their plan, and reflecting on the steps they used in solving the problem to help them find things that worked and did not work. This also helps with building their memory skills to improve recall of steps performed.
- **Adapt learning materials based on your child's needs.** Using an up-and-down number line (a number line oriented vertically rather than horizontally) may be easier to understand. Learning to write using oversized graph paper can help with handwriting. This also helps with lining up numbers or letters. Using timers to limit teaching or work sessions can help reduce frustration.

- **Show math in everyday settings.** You can help foster your child's learning by showing math concepts in everyday settings when shopping, driving, or by counting things.



Provide Environmental Supports

You may need to change your child's environment to support their internal, brain-based challenges.

- **Remember, children with FASDs are trying.** Sometimes, your child's behavior can be misunderstood. Instead of focusing on the behavior, ask yourself what needs to change externally to help them succeed.
- **Consider what may be overwhelming or underwhelming their senses** (sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste) and adjust what you can to meet their needs (for example, turn off the lights).
- **Use memory aids.** Your child may receive help from memory aids such as pictures of the morning routine or made-up songs about different situations, such as what to do at a doctor's office. Visual supports (for example, pictures or other graphics that show the steps of an activity) can help if your child routinely does a sequence of tasks.⁴

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](#)
- [What Is FASD?](#) (Proof Alliance)
- [Understanding Behaviors of FASD](#) (Proof Alliance)
- [Parenting Children with FASD](#) (Proof Alliance)

Sources

¹ National Center on Substance Abuse in Child Welfare. *Understanding fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: Child welfare practice tips.*

<https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/files/fasd-tipsheet-cw.pdf>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, May). *FASDs and secondary conditions.* <https://www.cdc.gov/fasd/about/fasds-and-secondary-conditions.html>

³ Reid, N., & Brown, N. (2020). Sleep disturbances in children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: A review. *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 16(6), 943–953

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