

How Do I Talk With My Child About Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASD?

Talking to your child about alcohol exposure before birth and a possible FASD diagnosis can feel overwhelming. There's no single right way to have this conversation, but it can be an important first step in helping your child understand the effects of alcohol exposure and FASDs. This can lead to acceptance and growth.¹

Step 1: Prepare for the Conversation

- **Emotions:** Recognize and process your emotions, so you can be present for your child.
- **Expectations:** Try not to have expectations about your child's response. They may show little emotion or interest; feel a lot of relief; or experience grief, embarrassment, sadness, and/or anger.² They may not be able to accept that they have a brain-based condition.³ Give them space to process and understand, and you can normalize that what they think and feel may change from day to day.⁴
- **Structure and Support:** Choose a time for the conversation that doesn't throw off their routine or schedule. They will need time to process so it can be helpful to minimize responsibilities afterwards (for example, homework, chores, or an appointment).

Step 2: Talk It Out

- **Simple and Concrete Language:** Use simple and concrete language appropriate for your child's developmental age. Share that what we eat and drink may affect how we learn and develop, and that what people who are pregnant eat or drink can affect their unborn child.¹



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.

- **Normalize Differences:** Normalize your child's differences by sharing that everyone's brain is different, while also not minimizing their challenges.¹ You can say something like, "Your brain learns and thinks differently, which can lead to you behaving or reacting differently than others. You are not alone. Many other people's brains have strengths and challenges in the ways they think, learn, and behave."² Share recent examples from their life that show how the changes to their brain affect them.
- **Build on Strengths:** Highlight strategies that have helped your child manage issues they have experienced.¹ Remind your child that they are capable of learning and growing and that having an FASD is just one part of who they are.^{1, 5}
- **Love and Respect:** Tell your child that you love and respect them for who they are.² Prepare some simple reassuring things to say in response to negative reactions.
- **Find Supporters:** With your child, make a list of people that you and your child can talk to about the conversation and any feelings that came up. Think about peer support, friends, family members, teachers, therapists, and mentors.¹ Encourage your child to talk with these supports as they process information.

Step 3: Follow Up

- **Support Network:** Let identified supports know you've been having conversations, so they can:
1) answer your child's questions and offer support¹ and 2) reinforce messages about your child's strengths (for example, acceptance and emphasizing strengths alongside challenges).

Parents of a child who might be affected by alcohol exposure before birth can face shame, stigma, and judgment. Birth mothers may feel more shame and judgment because of assumptions about drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Remember, no mother drinks alcohol to harm her child. It can be hard for a birth mother to find accurate information about alcohol exposure without worrying about being judged.

Take time to understand alcohol use during pregnancy and its possible effects. Recognize the range of emotions you might feel—anger, guilt, confusion, frustration, sadness, relief, grief, and joy. Allow yourself to feel these emotions.

Remember, this is not about judgment or self-blame. It's about understanding what information is important to share with your child to help them succeed.

- **Access Support:** Consider connecting with other children and families affected by alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs through [online support groups](#). This connection can help to reduce isolation and help you and your child feel less alone.
- **Check In:** Find a quiet time to follow up with your child and ask them what they understood from your conversation. Give them space to ask questions.¹ Follow up when they have questions; this is a great opening for a conversation.

Often, children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs feel more confident when they learn about and understand their condition. This helps them accept themselves, which is something everyone needs.^{1, 4, 5}

Strategies for Talking With Older Youth With Alcohol Exposure Before Birth and FASDs

Continue Learning: [Give your child resources that explain FASD](#) in a way they can understand. This helps them keep learning and processing the information. It's even better if the resource matches your child's interests. For example, if your child loves science, show them a model of the brain to help them understand how it works.

Advocate: As your child learns more about their condition and how changes in their environment affect them, support them in asking for what they need to succeed at home, school, and work. Help them find ways to speak up for themselves. Understand that as they get older, they might want to keep their FASD diagnosis private and share it only when they feel comfortable.

Consent: As your child gets older and understands more about FASD, it's important to talk with them before telling others about their condition. Let them express what they are comfortable sharing or if they want to share the information themselves.⁵

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](#)
- [How to Talk With Your Child About Their FASD](#) (Proof Alliance)
- [Talking with Children, Adolescents and Adults About FASD / Other Brain-Based Conditions](#) (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Consultation Education and Training Services)

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, April). How to talk to your child about their FASD. <https://www.proofalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/How-to-Talk-with-Your-Child-About-Their-FASD.pdf>

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Addressing fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). Treatment improvement protocol (TIP) series 58*. [HHS Pub. No. (SMA) 13-4803.] Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma13-4803.pdf>

⁴ Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Consultation Education and Training Services (FASCETS). (2018). *Talking with children, adolescents, and adults about FASD / Other brain-based conditions*. <https://fascets.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Talking-about-FA-NB.pdf>

⁵ FASD Network of Saskatchewan. (2018). *Tips for parents and caregivers*. https://ac965253-06fe-4ffb-8eb5-c38685bfd030.filesusr.com/ugd/6eb9fe_6994664f622a423c879f889abff06b8c.pdf