

Social and Emotional Needs of Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs

Children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs have social and emotional needs like all children, but they might need extra help to understand relationships. You can help your child develop social skills and learn ways to make positive connections with peers so they can stay safe and happy in social situations. You can also help your child learn to manage their emotions in healthy ways.

Developmental Age and FASD

Your child is likely developmentally younger than their chronological age. For example, your child might be 13 years old but may socially think and act like an 8-year-old. Developmental age can vary in different areas, like living and social skills, emotional abilities, and language. In some ways, a child with FASDs can be ahead of their peers, and in other ways, they might be behind.

It is important to “think younger” when supporting a child with an FASD. You can talk with your child’s pediatrician and teachers to help identify their developmental age (the younger age they act like). Adjust your expectations to match that age. Remember, it may take longer for a child with an FASD to mature socially and emotionally.

Social Skills and Emotion Regulation

Your child may desire friendships and other social relationships but may experience challenges making and keeping friends. Alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs can affect a person’s social skills and ability to control and manage their emotions (also known as emotion regulation).



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.

Effects of Alcohol Exposure Before Birth and FASDs on Social Skills and Emotion Regulation¹

Social Skills	Emotion Regulation
✓ Often kind and friendly as well as very interested in social relationships	✓ May have difficulty understanding and controlling emotions
✓ May not understand boundaries in relationships	✓ May struggle to calm down from intense emotions
✓ May experience difficulty understanding social cues	✓ May become angry when emotional needs are not met
✓ May be socially susceptible to being bullied or taken advantage of, even possibly doing dangerous things at others' suggestion	✓ May experience anxiety, depression, and mood swings
✓ May experience difficulty seeing things from another's perspective	✓ May have difficulty learning to recognize emotions that come from being hungry, tired, or frustrated
✓ Has difficulty learning social rules through his or her own experiences	-

Strategies and Tips To Support Your Child's Social and Emotional Needs

1. Provide Consistent Structure and Supervision

Providing consistent structure and supervision will help your child handle social interactions in different places (at school, at home, and in public) while they learn to manage their emotions. As the caregiver, you can create an environment that keeps your child and others safe.

- ✓ **Avoid assuming that your child is safe to spend unsupervised time with peers** or babysit younger children alone. When unsupervised, your child may unintentionally cause harm to themselves or others.² Learning independence will take additional time, small steps, and supports from family and service providers.

- ✓ Instead of going over to a friend's house, **consider having the friend over to your home** where your child will be most familiar with their environment, and you can maintain some of their typical structure and routine.
- ✓ **Experiment first with shorter, more structured playdates** before opting for longer interactions.
- ✓ **Avoid large parties and sleepovers** since these can be over-stimulating and social cues can often be confusing.²
- ✓ When planning activities, **continue to think younger based on your child's developmental age**. They may not be interested in or able to participate in activities in which peers of their same chronological age are interested.² Set your child up for success by structuring activities around their developmental age.

- ✓ **Supervise your child's screen time** and use of the internet to help keep them safe online.³ They may be more trusting than they should be of individuals online.

2. Practice and Develop Social Skill

Understanding social skills like body language, social etiquette, emotions, and how to handle social transitions can be hard for children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs. They don't learn these skills from experience. Practice is essential and can help your child in future situations by reducing their processing time and increasing their ability to control their emotions.^{2, 3}

- ✓ Help your child to **learn their triggers** and how best to avoid them. Teach **calming techniques** and **give them space** to use them.
- ✓ **Create structured or social stories** that use pictures for common social interactions and outline the activity step by step.⁴
- ✓ **Practice common social situations** (perhaps by role-playing) such as asking to play, communicating needs, handling frustration, problem solving, identifying appropriate body contact, navigating personal space, and respecting other people's things.^{3, 4}
- ✓ **Explain that people talk in different ways.** Look at [pictures of people](#) and discuss what they may be thinking or feeling based on their body language and facial expressions.^{2, 4} Use [feeling charts](#) to help children express their feelings using words instead of challenging behavior.³
- ✓ **Consider involving your child in safe, structured group activities** such as sports or clubs.^{2, 4}
- ✓ **Practice and reteach boundaries and rules** repeatedly.²

- ✓ **Create safety plans with your child** as appropriate. For example, develop a plan for what they can do when they feel overwhelmed and unsafe.³
- ✓ **Develop standard phrases and scripts for common social situations** (for example, greetings, responses to teasing, or phrases to leave a situation) that your child can memorize and have readily available.
- ✓ **Consider finding a mentor for your child** within your support network.
- ✓ **Praise your child's social successes**, both big and small.³

3. Keep Lines of Communication Open and Transparent

Because they want to be liked, children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs can be easily influenced by peer pressure. They might be talked into doing things they don't want to do or don't understand are wrong.⁴

- ✓ **Regularly provide opportunities for your child to tell you about their peer connections** and be prepared that you may have to intervene if a relationship is unhealthy or unsafe for your child.
- ✓ **Maintain regular communication with your child's teachers, neighbors, and others in your support network** about your child's social activities and needs.³ Ask them to try to include your child in activities and groups, and when they do, show your appreciation. Your gratitude may encourage them to keep trying.²
- ✓ Proactively and regularly **talk about and set firm boundaries around consent, sex, drugs, alcohol, taking things, and other potential risk behaviors**.^{2, 3} If your child talks with you about these topics, try to stay curious and nonjudgmental.³

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](#)
- [Resources and Support for Families](#) (FASD United)
- [Understanding Behaviors of FASD](#) (Proof Alliance))
- [Every Day is an Adventure: What Parents and Caregivers Need to Know About FASD](#) (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 Cognitive Supports (2017, September 15). *5 unhelpful responses we have to escalated kids and adults* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7NgvDH_w28

³ Lutherwood. (n.d.). *FASD tip sheet for parents and caregivers: Making and keeping friends*. FASD Waterloo Region.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Addressing fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). Treatment improvement protocol (TIP) series 58*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4803. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK344239/>