

Supporting Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Out-of-Home Care

When a child is placed in your care, you can work with your caseworker, pediatrician, and the family to find solutions that meet the child's developmental, emotional, and social needs. If the child was exposed to alcohol before birth or has an FASD diagnosis, you might wonder how to make sure they have the resources and support they need to learn, grow, and thrive.

What Can You Do to Support Children and Youth With Alcohol Exposure Before Birth or FASDs in Out-of-Home Care?

Practice Understanding and Patience

Understand that exposing a child to alcohol before birth does not mean a parent is or was negligent—assume a parent has their child's best interest in mind.

■ **Avoid Judging:** Don't judge families or make assumptions. Remember, no mother intentionally harms her child, and the child may need reassurance from the caseworker or you. There are many reasons why a child might be exposed to alcohol before birth, like the mother not knowing she was pregnant, misinformation about the effects of alcohol during pregnancy, or alcohol misuse.

Support Open Communication and Partnership

With your caseworker's support, build a relationship with the parents that focuses on the child's best interest. Open communication and partnership between the child's family and out-of-home caregivers, including kinship caregivers, can make transitions smoother and improve overall care for the child.

■ **Facilitate Collaborative Discussions:** Your caseworker can help you and the family of origin navigate these conversations and stay focused on the child's needs.



Understanding FASDs

[Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders](#), or FASDs, is the umbrella term for a group of conditions that can occur in a person exposed to alcohol before birth, even modest amounts (also referred to as “prenatal alcohol exposure”). People with FASDs can have lifelong effects, including behavior, learning, and physical challenges.



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.

Topics for Conversations with Families and Out-of-Home Caregivers

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| ✓ Child's strengths and interests | ✓ Child challenges and triggers, including potential difficult times such as transitions | ✓ Typical routine (morning, after school, night) |
| ✓ Ways to soothe and comfort the child | ✓ Identified friends and natural supports of the child | ✓ Current services in place |
| ✓ Food preferences | ✓ Goals or rewards | ✓ Areas where the child needs more time (such as getting ready for school) |

Talking About Alcohol Exposure Before Birth and FASD With a Child

Create a plan with your caseworker to discuss who, what, when, where, and how this information will be discussed with the child. Be clear on who is having the first discussion with the child.

■ **Prepare for the Conversation:** If you need to talk about a child's alcohol exposure before birth or FASD diagnosis, work with your caseworker to prepare. Create a plan, practice the discussion, and review resources with [strategies for sharing sensitive information with children and teens](#).

■ **Follow-Up Questions:** Understand that the child might not ask questions right away. They may need time to process the information and might come to you with questions later. When planning with your caseworker, discuss how to handle follow-up discussions with the child.

Talking About Alcohol Exposure Before Birth and FASD With Others

Discuss with your caseworker how this information will be shared with teachers, current and new service providers, and family and natural supports in the child's network.

■ **Discuss Sharing Information:** Decide how information about alcohol exposure before birth will be shared. Determine if your caseworker will

take the lead in talking with current and new service providers about the child's needs before diagnostic assessments and services.

■ **Determine Educational Needs:** Talk with your caseworker about any educational needs the child may have and how to get educational assessments and services in place.

■ **Talk with Older Youth:** Based on the youth's developmental age, discuss how and when this information is shared with others. Ask them how they want the information shared and if they want to be present.

Counteract Shaming Messages

Parents of a child with alcohol exposure before birth often face potential shame, stigma, and judgment. Ensure that your response and relationship is supportive and focused on the child's best interest.

■ **Acknowledge and Process Your Feelings:** As an out-of-home caregiver, you might feel conflicted or even angry about a child's exposure to alcohol before birth and the reasons they are in the child welfare system. This is normal, but it's not something to share with the child. Talk with your caseworker to process and work through these feelings.

Support Transitions

Support the child's experience when reunifying with parents or having a placement change to a new caregiver.

■ **Recognize the Importance of Permanency:**

It's important for children with alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs to have stable placements. Disruptions can affect their services, treatment plans, and make it harder for them to learn life skills, which are best supported by continuous caregivers.

■ **Participate in Transition Meetings:** Join transition meetings with the parent or new caregiver to share insights about the child's needs. These meetings can happen multiple times. Write down information like tips, strategies, educational services, current service providers, and important numbers for the parent or caregiver. Having written information helps them focus on the discussion.

■ **Provide a Transition Visit:** If possible, offer a visit back to your home to support the child's transition to their parent or new caregiver.

■ **Offer Respite:** If possible, offer respite to the parent or new caregiver. Since you know the child, you can be a safe person for them to spend time with when the parent or caregiver needs a break.

Get Connected

Connecting with other children and families affected by alcohol exposure before birth and FASDs through support groups can help reduce feelings of isolation, judgment, and shame.

■ **Take Care of Your Mental and Behavioral Health:**

Caregiving for a child with alcohol exposure before birth or an FASD can be challenging. Get support from a behavioral healthcare provider or support group to help you process your needs and feelings about caring for a child with alcohol exposure or FASDs.

■ **Schedule Breaks:** All caregivers need breaks to take care of themselves and recharge their mental and emotional energy. Find trusted individuals and talk with your caseworker about who can watch the child in your care for short periods of time.

Caring for Older Youth With Alcohol Exposure Before Birth and FASDs

The transition from adolescence to adulthood involves many changes, challenges, and decisions for young people and their caregivers. You can support a young person with alcohol exposure before birth or an FASD by helping them access transition services in school, connecting them with community resources, and preparing them for independent or supported living. [Learn more about supporting transition-age youth with FASDs from FASD United.](#)

Additional Resources

- [Caring for Children With Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and FASDs in Child Welfare: Resources for Youth and Families](#)
- [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide](#) (Children's Trust Fund Alliance)
- [Resources and Support for Families](#) (FASD United)
- [FASD and the Family](#) (FASD Network of Southern California)