

Supporting Clients with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

What is FASD?

CanFASD describes FASD as “a lifelong disability that affects the brain and body of people who were exposed to alcohol in the womb. Each person with FASD has both strengths and challenges and will need special supports to help them succeed with many different parts of their daily lives.”

Prenatal Alcohol Exposure (PAE)

may cause deficits in the 4 following areas:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Physical | 3 Behavioural |
| 2 Medical | 4 Cognitive |

Facial Features

Those diagnosed with FASD may have recognizable **sentinel facial features**, though they are quite rare. These features become less noticeable as the individual grows older and include:

- Short palpebral fissures
- Smooth philtrum
- Thin upper lip

You cannot tell if someone has FASD by the way they look or talk. **You'll likely only know if someone has FASD if someone tells you.**

Stigma

There is stigma often associated with FASD which may include:

1. Birth family may feel blamed
2. Caregivers may not want their child “labelled”
3. Families/individuals may see FASD as a disability with a “perpetrator” and a “victim”

Strategies When Supporting Someone with FASD

An individual with FASD may require your help in these following areas:

Memory

Difficulty with remembering information, making use of information, repeating information, or expressing themselves in a way that appears “untruthful”

Strategies

- Use reminders & visual reminders in easy-to-see locations
- Prompt them to ask for help
- Use repetition when teaching a skill
- Reduce opportunities to confabulate by giving them time to process questions

Communication

Difficulty with complex, abstract, symbolic language, understanding instructions, the meaning of certain words, or agreeing to something they don't understand

Strategies

- Say their name first and make eye contact
- Say what you mean
- State exactly what to do, show them how to do it or do it alongside them
- Break everything down to simple pieces

Social Skills

Difficulty with developmental age, being teased or rejected, or being bullied, or told by peers to do things they are not allowed to do

Strategies

Teach by practicing scenarios regarding:

- Managing bullies
- Handling rejection or frustration with peers
- Personal boundaries
- Turn taking or sharing

Strategies When Supporting Someone with FASD

Cognitive and Auditory Processing

An individual may be slow to answer, give an answer right away, be apathetic in certain social situations, or follow through on instructions improperly

Strategies

- Give them time to process
- Be patient
- Avoid rapid-fire orders
- Be aware of overloading or overwhelming

Abstract Thinking

Difficulty with managing money/time, understanding cause and effect, planning for the future, or understanding concepts and systems (e.g. token systems or justice system)

Strategies

- Use concrete objects to teach concepts (e.g. money)
- Avoid complex language
- Say what you want and do not assume they will know what is expected of them because of what has happened in the past or what is customary

Sensory Thinking

Difficulty with responding effectively to different types of sensory input, managing the input consistently, or appropriately communicating sensory difficulty

Strategies

- Choose a time to talk and ask questions
- When they are upset, keep your talking at a minimum
- Have a back-up plan in case an environment or activity becomes 'too much' for them

Strategies When Supporting Someone with FASD

Self-Regulation

Difficulty with managing and controlling emotions, encountering or recovering from a stressor, or misconstruing events as threats

Strategies

- Show them they are safe
- Keep talking to a minimum as noise is just more information for the brain to process
- Use a calm and neutral tone
- Identify any “triggers” or sensory issues beforehand
- Reduce expectations or provide them easier steps

Executive Functioning

Difficulty with being on time, knowing how long something will take, knowing what to do first and in what order, or following through on what was agreed upon

Strategies

- Create visual schedules for routines that they can easily refer back to
- Do not assume they already know how to do something within a plan or routine
- Plan together for routines and scheduled events
- Provide many reminders, especially close to the event

References and Additional Resources

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