Footsteps Community Services

# FASD Support

## Mini Handbook






# Understanding FASD



# What is FASD?

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a range of lifelong physical, cognitive, and behavioural conditions that result from alcohol exposure during pregnancy. Alcohol crosses the placenta and can interfere with the developing baby's brain and body, as the fetus cannot process alcohol effectively.

## What Causes FASD?

Prenatal alcohol exposure is the only cause of FASD. Alcohol exposure can be harmful, particularly during key stages of brain and organ development.

The following factors can affect the severity of FASD:

- **Timing -** Exposure early in pregnancy often affects physical features and organ development, while later exposure impacts brain growth and behaviour.
- **Frequency and amount** - Regular or binge drinking increases the likelihood and severity of effects.
- **Maternal health and nutrition -** Poor nutrition, stress, or other substance use can heighten risk.
- **Genetic factors -** Some genetic differences can affect how alcohol is processed and how sensitive the fetus is to its effects.

# Things to Remember

In supporting children with FASD, remember the following:

### 01 Children with FASD may learn differently

Children and youth with FASD have different strengths and weaknesses. The best way to support them is to tailor the strategies according to their strengths and needs.

### 02 Children and youth with FASD need to know and feel that it's okay to talk about their disability.

They need to know that this is not something to be ashamed about. Keep the communication open and non-judgmental.

### 03 Play is important for all children, including those with FASD

Encourage playfulness in your child and include play into your child's day,

### 04 Look out for other potential health problems

Alcohol exposure during pregnancy can affect the child's health. It is important to be mindful of their health too.

### 05 You know your child best

There are many strategies that may work for different children with FASD. You know best what will work on your child and how to advocate for them.




# Adjusting the ENVIRONMENT

# Adjusting the Environment

Children and youth with FASD experience the world differently. Adjusting the environment, rather than expecting the child to change first, helps reduce stress and promotes success. The goal is to create a setting that is **predictable, calm, and supportive** of their sensory and cognitive needs.



### Know and Respect their Preferences

Create an environment supportive of their preferences by:

- Knowing what they like or dislike. Observe and ask them to give them a sense of autonomy.
- Make adjustments in the environment that are considerate of their preferences.




### Create Predictability

Create predictability to support a sense of safety and control by:

- Use visual schedules and consistent routines.
- Provide warnings with transitions and keep them clear and calm.



### Manage Sensory Input

Manage your child's different sensory needs by:

- Reducing sensory input that may cause overwhelm such as loud noise and unexpected, unwanted physical touch.
- Provide sensory regulation tools such as fidget items, weighted lap pads, or movement breaks.
- Remember, sometimes less is more.



### Co-regulation for a calm environment

Practise co-regulation for a calm environment by:

- Use calm tones when communicating to avoid defensive responses for perceived threats.
- Maintain a non-threatening posture to create a sense of safety.



# Structure, Support, and Supervision

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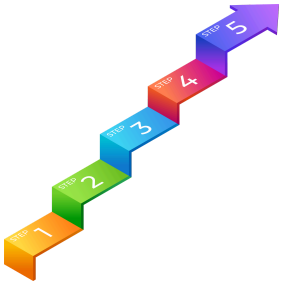
People with FASD thrive in environments that are **structured, predictable, and relationally safe**. External supervision and structure are often needed due to differences in brain function. Supporting them to stay regulated, organized, and connected is a step in setting them up for success.



**Routine is Important**
Consistent daily schedules help them know what to expect, reducing anxiety and confusion.



**Clear communication**
Keep communication clear. Use short phrases, visuals, or charts rather than abstract explanations.




**Make tasks manageable**
Break tasks into manageable steps and guide one step at a time.



**Non-intrusive supervision**
Keep environments well-monitored not to control, but to prevent situations where impulsivity could lead to harm.

# Sensory Support



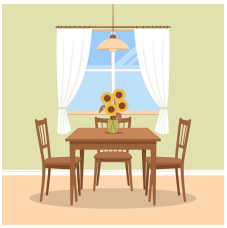
# Sensory Support

People with FASD often experience the world through a different sensory lens. Their brains may **over-respond (hypersensitive)** or **under-respond (hyposensitive)** to sights, sounds, textures, smells, or movement. These differences can strongly influence how they focus, behave, and connect. Understanding and supporting their sensory needs helps prevent overload and promotes regulation and engagement.



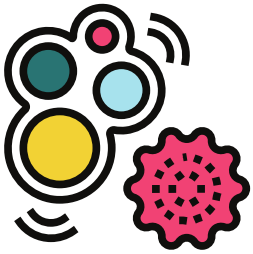
**Understand their Sensory Profile**

- Observe how the child reacts to sensory input — do they seek or avoid certain sounds, movements, or textures?
- Sensory responses may also change depending on the situation,
- Collaborate with professionals to identify sensory profile and support.



**Create a Sensory-Safe Environment**

- Minimise sensory overload. (e.g. soften lighting, reduce background noise, and declutter spaces)
- Predictable sensory environments help them feel grounded and safe.



**Provide Sensory Regulation Opportunities**

- Schedule movement breaks (stretching, walking, swinging) to support focus and self-regulation.
- Provide access to preferred fidget tools, chewable jewellery, or textured objects.
- For under-responsive children, add gentle sensory input.
- For over-responsive children, introduce calming activities.



# Choice and Autonomy

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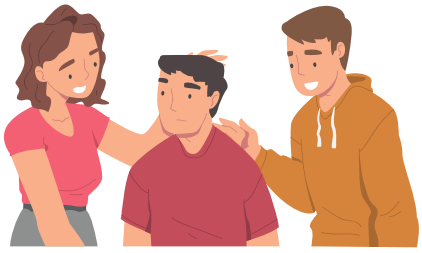
People with FASD often experience reduced control over their environment and internal states They may find planning, flexibility, and impulse control challenging or overwhelming. Still, fostering choice and autonomy is essential. It **builds confidence, reduces power struggles, and strengthens a sense of self**. Even small, guided choices help them feel respected and capable.



**Empowered Choice**
Choice gives a sense of ownership and safety in their world. When they feel controlled or powerless, anxiety and resistance increase. When given meaningful choices, they are more likely to stay engaged, cooperative, and connected.




**Offer Structured Choices**
Present limited, concrete options to avoid overwhelm. If possible, present 2 choices at a time.



**Encourage Participation**
Involve them in planning their routines, sensory breaks, or calming strategies. Always use collaborative language.



**Communication Support**
Support them in understanding others and expressing themselves. Use visual cues (photos, symbols, or objects) if needed. Keep the language simple and consistent.



# Emotion Identification and Regulation

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People with FASD often find emotions confusing and overwhelming. Differences in brain development can make it harder to recognise their own feelings, read others' emotions, or use words to express distress. Supporting emotional understanding and regulation helps children feel safe, understood, and in control of their inner world.



## Teach Emotion Identification

- Use visual tools like emotion charts, colour zones, or emoji cards to help match faces to feelings.
- Practise naming feelings in both structured and natural environments.
- Keep language simple and concrete. Avoid abstract emotional terms.
- Model emotion talk yourself: *"I'm feeling tired, so I'm going to take a deep breath."*



## Emotion Regulation Through Co-Regulation

- Your calm presence helps them find their own calm.
- Use soothing tones, gentle breathing, and predictable responses when emotions rise.
- Stay physically close but not intrusive.
- Practise calming activities such as deep breathing.




## Use in Daily Routines

- Schedule regular sensory and movement breaks to prevent emotional overload.
- Keep emotion tools accessible
- Practise naming emotions and doing calming activities daily.
- Teach strategies when they are calm so they can use them during dysregulation.



## Repair and Reflect After Big Emotions

- After an outburst or meltdown, support them in reconnecting, not reliving the event.
- Use short, supportive language: *"That was hard. You're safe now."*
- Celebrate recovery and reconnection.

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Supporting a person with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is both a journey and a partnership. It calls for patience, creativity, and above all, compassion. Behind every challenging moment is a person doing their best with the brain and body they have. **They need understanding more than correction**, and structure more than control.

This handbook has shared strategies to create safe, predictable, and responsive environments that honour each child's unique way of experiencing the world. These approaches are not quick fixes, but ongoing practices of connection.

When we view behaviour through a person-centred, polyvagal-informed, and trauma-informed lens, we shift from asking *"What's wrong with them"* to ***"What do they need right now?"***

**Progress in FASD support is not measured by perfection, but by connection. When they feel safe, understood, and valued, their potential begins to shine.**

