

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Children have behavior problems for lots of reasons, such as getting attention or not knowing how else to communicate what they need. One reason that is harder to determine but should be considered is the possibility that the child has a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). FASD is a permanent brain-based condition caused by the mother's alcohol use during pregnancy and affects about 1 in 100 live births in the United States. The possibility of FASD needs to be approached sensitively (so as not to increase guilt for something the mother may already feel guilty about and cannot change), but the child's future success may depend on understanding the condition and getting the right supports.

Some Symptoms of FASD in Young Children

- Cries frequently and is irritable
- Has weak muscle tone and poor motor coordination
- Has erratic sleep patterns
- Is sensitive to sights, sounds, touch
- Is easily distracted and has a short attention span
- Acts impulsively
- Is overly friendly and has little sense of boundaries
- Has frequent temper tantrums and is non-compliant
- Has trouble remembering simple things
- Has difficulty learning from experience
- Responds poorly to changes in routine
- Has problems with bonding and attachment

How to Help a Child with FASD

- Learn about FASD and encourage an assessment if there is reason to suspect it.
- Build on the child's strengths (e.g., friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, good intentions, artistic ability).
- Give immediate feedback to the child rather than relying on delayed reward systems.
- Provide loving and stable environments that minimize frequent disruptions in routine.

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How to Help a Child with FASD *continued*

- Be concrete with instructions, and use visual aids and hands-on activities to help the child learn.
- Use positive reinforcement and praise.
- Be aware of when the child seems overwhelmed by external stimulation and sensory overload.
- Recognize that the child *can't* do something rather than he or she *won't* do it (as a result of the permanent brain damage).

R E S O U R C E S

There are many sources of excellent information about FASD. The following are recommended by the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services:

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Support, Training, Advocacy, Resources: fasstar.com

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Consultation, Education and Training Service, Inc.:
www.fascets.org

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: www.nofas.org

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

