

Educating and preparing yourself to support someone with FASD is their most important protective factor

UNDERSTAND THE BRAIN

Damage done by alcohol is behind the challenges

Damage to the frontal lobes leads to 'executive functioning' impairment and working memory problems. Damage to the parietal lobes can cause problems with mathematical ability and tasks requiring a high degree of spatial awareness.

Disorganisation in the way different parts of the brain connect and 'talk' to each other affects the speed of thinking and problem-solving is slower and often disorganised. The brain must work harder, causing over-stimulation and over-tiredness

The damage creates challenges with understanding what others say, despite reasonable expressive language

It also causes sensory processing difficulties.

Behaviours are symptoms

These issues with brain wiring can make for an anxious, confused and overwhelmed child who then will 'act out' but it's not out of 'naughtiness'.

People with FASD are trying

Behavioural challenges are common but often misunderstood and exacerbated by 'traditional' parenting strategies.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

There are reasons for the challenges

Impaired executive functioning is not dependent on IQ. It can be helpful to split executive functioning impairment into 'hot' and 'cold' symptoms which correspond with damage to different areas within the prefrontal cortex. Cold executive functioning problems include difficulties with: planning, sequencing behaviours and routines, working memory, switching between tasks, inhibiting action, attention, concentration, initiation and organisation. Hot executive functioning problems include difficulties with: social immaturity, hyperactivity, emotional regulation, socially inappropriate or disinhibited behaviour, social naivety and vulnerability.

SUPPORT IS KEY

Caregivers scaffold the world around the person with FASD, enabling them to do things they can't do alone due to frontal lobe impairment, unlocking their potential.

Top tips

Speak slowly. When escalated a person with FASD may only hear every third word.

Understand confabulation. People with FASD often have gaps in their memories. Their brains fill in missing information to compensate. This 'confabulation' isn't lying with intent to deceive.

PARENTING TIPS

Focus on strengths

Keep rules and expectations consistent. Use positive reinforcement. Provide significantly more supervision than peers in the same age-group may require. Understand that truth-stretching may be in keeping with their social developmental level. Provide close supervision during puberty. Stay positive-remember a person with FASD can achieve and will master skills. Look after yourself.

How you give instructions matters

Be predictable and explicit about expectations. Use and review visual timetables and planners to decrease anxiety and increase a sense of control. Create and review check lists and to-do lists. Rehearse new information - repetition is key. Give step-by-step instructions. Use clear and positive language (avoid negatives). Avoid abstract phrases and use fewer words. Adjust expectations for children to a level half their actual age. Give cues about how to behave. Give children a little 'job' when becoming fidgety or agitated.

Create a positive environment

Focus on smaller group settings. Create clutter-free environments. Decrease background noise. Use visuals to help with sequencing routines.

Encourage children and young adults to recognise when they need to retreat to calm themselves. Create a 'calming down zone' to go to when overwhelmed (not a 'time out') - create it together using favourite comfort toys and sensory items.

ADULTS NEED SUPPORT TOO

As children with FASD move into adulthood they will continue to struggle with abstract concepts and subtleties of the social world, leaving them more vulnerable financially, socially or otherwise. People with FASD need support to some extent throughout their lives with matters such as money and income management, general routines, cooking, and time keeping. Those with FASD rely on support networks. They can of course lead positive and fulfilling lives. Some will live away from parents with support. Others will not be able to live alone, because it would not be safe. Adult services may play a supportive role.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Diane Malbin

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Trying Differently Rather than Harder is the classic resources for the neurobehavioural' approach. Or see this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBth4bGjmOk>

FASD and Trauma – Parenting Tips for Carers

A resource by Sue and Tony Sharp, two foster carers. www.NationalFASD.org/resources/

Oregon Behavior Consultation

Nate Sheets has fantastic resources. Be sure to check out the YouTube videos. www.oregonbehavior.com

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