

Summary of a research project into education and FASD

SUMMARY

Students with FASD experience a range of developmental, learning, behavioural, social, emotional and sensory difficulties which can create barriers to learning. These not only have an impact within the educational context, but also on the subsequent acquisition of crucial life skills (e.g. telling the time; self-organisation).

However, it is important to set the learning difficulties of children with FASD in the context of their strengths. These strengths will become the foundations on which to develop personalised curricula, to encourage and develop further strengths, and build emotional resilience.

EDUCATIONAL STRENGTHS

Students with FASD are often ambitious and have a range of practical strengths which are useful in their educational careers and throughout life.

Many are articulate and have engaging personalities. They enjoy being with other people.

Many have learning strengths around Literacy and practical subjects, such as Art, Performing Arts, Sport, and Technologies, although they often have difficulties with comprehension

While they have working/short-term memory difficulties, rote learning and long-term memory can be strengths.

BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Every person with FASD is different, these are generalised statements.

Developmental Difficulties

Significant delays in achieving developmental milestones such as toileting and hygiene skills, in some cases beyond the primary years.

Medical Difficulties

Medical and health related difficulties including organ damage, poor sleep patterns, eating and dietary difficulties, small stature, vision and hearing impairments.

Learning Difficulties

Understanding cause and effect.

Difficulty in understanding mathematical concepts, such as time, understanding money.

Cognitive difficulties, including poor short-term memory, and poor concentration.

Frontal lobe damage to the brain, which is associated with FASD, results in impaired executive functioning leading to deficits, such as impaired ability to organise, plan, understand consequences, maintain and shift attention, and process and memorise data. This has an impact on independence in a range of situations. Executive functioning impacts on daily living skills.

Behavioural Difficulties

Behavioural difficulties, including hyperactivity, inattention, aggression, obsessions with people and objects, agitation, can cause anxiety and frustration for students as well as parents and teachers. These difficulties, whilst often seen as behavioural issues, can also be related to sensory processing disorders requiring Occupational Therapy input.

Teaching and Learning Frameworks resulting from this project recommend that teachers seek the assistance of an Occupational Therapist in order that a Sensory Profile can be completed and the student's needs correctly addressed.

Social Difficulties

Evidence from this project and the wider context suggests that, for students with FASD, the current focus in schools on assessing and addressing their cognitive needs omits full recognition of the impact of students' social and emotional needs on their ability to learn and to function appropriately and effectively within their communities.

Emotional Difficulties

The need to rely on external prompts from adults can result in low self-esteem and frustration. Students begin to identify the differences between themselves and peers (and vice versa) even in special school settings, resulting in low self-esteem.

Secondary disabilities, such as mental health problems, disrupted school experience, trouble with the law, confinement, inappropriate sexual behaviour, problems with independent living and employment can result from a lack of identification/support at primary age.

Teachers and the professionals who support children with FASD in the classroom will require an understanding of the compounding factors associated with the condition and ensure continuing multidisciplinary assessment that is necessary to allow identification of secondary disabilities so proactive action can be taken to ameliorate the effects. The importance of working closely with families and "putting families at the centre" of their child's educational journey (David Braybrook 2010) cannot be overestimated.

TRANSITION

Students with FASD will continue to need provision and support throughout their adult life, including ongoing multi-disciplinary assessment leading to appropriate and sensitive support packages which ideally include: maximising appropriate levels of independence; provision of supported/sheltered living accommodation with access to assistance with daily living skills; supported work and leisure opportunities.

SUPPORT MATTERS

Detailed consideration needs to be given to the curriculum for students with FASD, particularly teaching approaches which recognise the need for specific interventions which match the unique learning profile. A more robust process of assessment of needs for students with FASD needs to be put in place.

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Source: Carolyn Blackburn, Primary and Secondary Frameworks,
Teaching and Learning Strategies to Support Students with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, NOFAS-UK, 2010.

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