

COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

What are foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD)?

FASD is the result of alcohol being drunk while pregnant. FASD includes foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), which is the easiest to recognise, as the students have certain facial features. These can include a thin upper lip, a flat philtrum (the groove between the nose and upper lip) and smaller eye openings. Although students with FASD may need support with some behaviours, they also have strengths.

Some common **strengths** are:

- strong verbal skills
- being bright in some areas, such as being artistic, musical, athletic, or having practical skills
- a friendly, affectionate, helpful and generous nature
- being good with younger children
- determination and persistence.

Likely **difficulties** are:

- memory problems; difficulty storing and retrieving information
- inconsistent performance (on and off days)
- being impulsive, easily distracted and disorganised
- an ability to repeat instructions, but not to put them into action
- difficulty with abstract concepts such as maths, money management and time
- being slow to process information; needing time to think
- being slow to follow what is said to them, such as only taking in every third word
- developmental delays, which make them seem younger than their actual age
- inability to understand the consequences of their actions.

Strategies that may help

Students with FASD are affected in different ways and to different degrees, depending on what stage of the pregnancy alcohol was consumed. This means that every student's pattern of difficulties will be different to some extent and, unlike students who are slow to develop, these students may have parts of the brain that were never fully formed. This can make learning some things extremely hard. Often, maths is a particular area of difficulty.

The following strategies are useful in supporting a student with FASD.

- 1 Closely supervise the student to ensure their safety.
- 2 Keep to the same routines, and help students to follow the structure of the day.
- 3 Keep in close contact with family or carers so that there is a consistent approach.

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- 4 Keep instructions short and simple. Support what is said with visually presented material as well, such as visual timetables, symbols and pictures, etc.
- 5 Present tasks in a similar way each time, so that students know what to do.
- 6 Use students' strengths so that they can experience success. Help them to gain satisfaction from their work and celebrate their successes.
- 7 Teach them how to communicate their feelings; for instance, by talking about pictures of people showing different emotions. Help them to understand how they feel and to learn the words to describe their feelings.
- 8 Help them to become more organised, for instance, by having pictures or lists of the equipment they need for a lesson or activity. Keep the classroom as organised as possible, and label everything that they might need.
- 9 Help them to understand and remember school or class rules by discussing them regularly. It is helpful if these are positive statements rather than a list of 'Don't do's. If rules are broken, correct the behaviour immediately in a supportive way and practise the right behaviour.
- 10 Work on social skills and life skills as well as helping students with their work.

It is thought that up to 80% of children with FASD are fostered or adopted, so they need the school to provide as much support, stability and encouragement as possible.

It is important to remember that every student has their own likes and interests, and to use these to help them to learn. Families may also have ideas they would be happy to share, and may like to hear about what strategies work in the classroom. It will help the student if their family and the school work together.