

# FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

## Background

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) describe a group of disorders that result from prenatal alcohol exposure. FASD is an umbrella term describing a range of physical and functional brain anomalies that lead to neurodevelopmental and behavioral challenges. As result of disrupted brain development during gestation, there is also risk of significant birth defects affecting the heart, eyes, kidneys and/or bones.

The effects of FASD vary in range and severity depending on biology, exposure, and even access to prenatal care. Most common signs and symptoms of FASD include:

- Dysmorphic facial features most notably the eyes and upper lip
- Growth deficits
- Poor coordination and motor skills
- Frequent ear infections
- Tremors
- Seizures

Neurodevelopmental and neurobehavioral challenges will continue to change and often worsen as the child develops. Problems with self-regulation and sensory processing can be particularly challenging in the school environment as children struggle with attention, impulsivity, overstimulation, anxiety, and aggression.

Diagnosis of FASD can be difficult as cognitive and behavioral challenges often overlap with symptoms of other disorders. Several common co-occurring or misdiagnoses of FASD include learning disability, speech and language delay, sensory dysfunction, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), reactive attachment disorder, and pervasive developmental delay.



## Top Takeaways for School Considerations

Children with prenatal exposure to alcohol can experience physical, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological dysfunction.

FASD create significant implications for learning and behavior including executive functioning deficits, sensory processing differences, spatial awareness problems, and challenges with memory and comprehension.

Abstract concepts like time, math, space, and money may be particularly challenging.

Students with FASD often struggle with self-regulation affecting their attention, anger, and impulse control.

Maintaining student safety can include use of a safe space or rest breaks.

Students may have a high threshold for pain. Any injury should be assessed by the school nurse.

Staff should be educated about signs and symptoms to recognize a seizure and procedures to notify trained staff.

## Considerations for the Individualized Healthcare Plan (IHP)

- Nursing diagnosis of impaired thought process, impaired communication, imbalanced nutrition: less than body requirements and impaired physical mobility
- Current diagnosed health condition including date of diagnosis, progress of disease process and other chronic health conditions
- Current medication and treatment orders (consider schedule, equipment needs and side effects)
- Use of specialized equipment, adaptive equipment, and orthotics
- Consider emergency care plan(s) (ECP) and emergency evacuation plan(s) (EEP) as related to medical needs in the school setting, and staff education/training, as appropriate

## Discussion Starters for Educational Team

1. Has the school staff been trained to implement the student-specific emergency plan?
2. Would the student benefit from evaluations or assessments in any of the following areas: physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, assistive technology, adapted physical education, functional behavior, psychology, hearing and vision?
3. Would the student benefit from additional academic support and/or modified education (e.g., copies of notes, extra time, reduced workload, simplified instructions, alternative formats for presentation of material, 504/IEP)?
4. Can strategies be implemented to assist the student with executive function (e.g., plan, prompts, organizers, agendas)?
5. Does the student need additional adult support to access the academic curriculum in the least restrictive environment?
6. Can rest breaks, safe spaces or reduced stimulation times be built into the student's schedule?

## Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics: The Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Toolkit  
[aap.org/en/patient-care/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders/](https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders/)

Understanding FASD: A Comprehensive Guide for Pre-K-8 Educators  
[sites.duke.edu/fasd/](https://sites.duke.edu/fasd/)



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