Understanding FASD

FASD is a lifelong condition that affects brain structures, processes and functioning, and emotional regulation. Students with FASD can have strong visual memories, good verbal fluency, and high energy levels.

Explaining FASD

FASD is an umbrella term used to describe the lifelong neurodevelopmental and/or physical impairments that can result when the prenatal brain is exposed to alcohol.



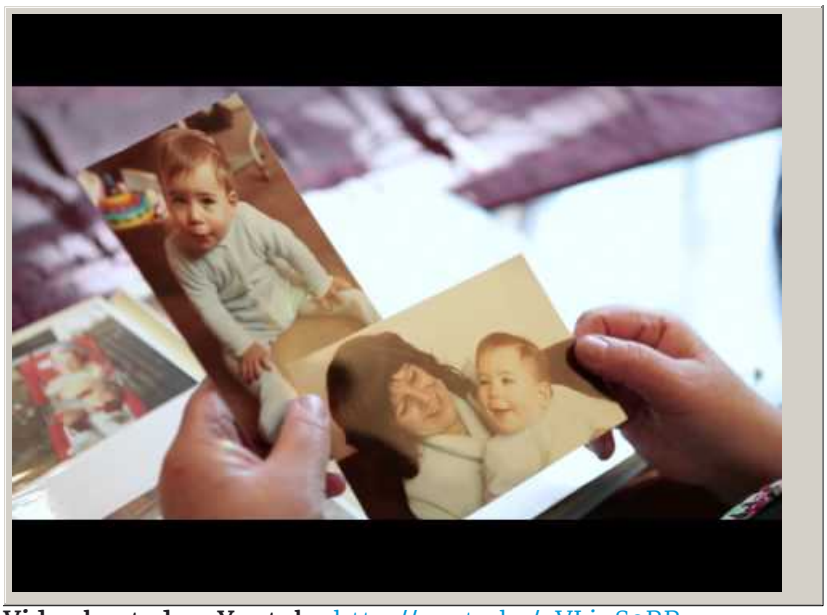
Video hosted on Youtube http://youtu.be/gVqYIgX1RIE

To support students with FASD to be successful learners, we need to understand FASD and how it can influence learning.

Closed Captions

Source:
POPFASD (Canada)
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWRoE1YnO371Fc_hWx6Pnhg?nohtml5=False

Indications of FASD



Video hosted on Youtube http://youtu.be/-VLj_S9BBsg

FASD can affect individuals in varying degrees.

Family and experts describe FASD and how it affects different children.

No captions or transcript

Source:
Mencap (UK)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VLj_S9BBsg&feature=youtu.be&t=29s

Primary behaviour characteristics

Primary behaviours reflect the underlying brain differences caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol. They may include:

- impulsivity
- memory problems
- slower processing pace
- difficulty with abstracting and predicting skills.

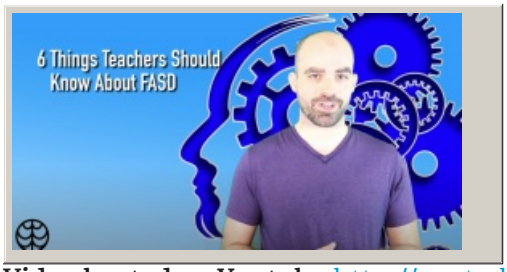
Secondary behaviour characteristics

These are often defensive behaviours that develop over time as a result of frustration and repeated failure. They can lead to depression and mental health issues, and contribute to students disengaging from school and learning. Secondary behaviours may include:

- anxiety
- frustration
- depression
- social problems
- inappropriate behaviour.

Many characteristics associated with FASD are common to other conditions such as ASD or ADHD.

Influences on learning



Video hosted on Youtube http://youtu.be/fSsCXnsYKRI

Children and teenagers with FASD require specific supports that are unique from other developmental disabilities and conditions.

- – Give students time to process information.
- – Use visuals.
- – Teach skills incrementally and revisit often.
- – Provide prompts to support thinking.
- – Support emotional regulation with a quiet space.

Closed Captions

Source:
Cognitive Support Series (US)
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLl1j-SufEEzAZ9svYoGXUo6AZx-CfNHow

Memory

Memory is a neurological function that does not work well in children with FASD. They cannot make a decision about “next time” based on “what happened last time” and there are limits to how well they can process information.

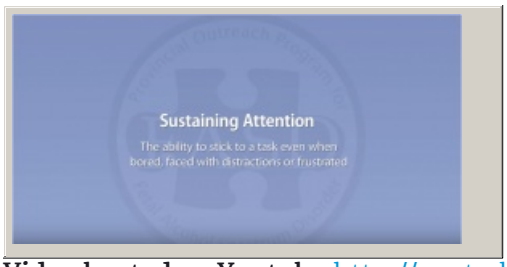
Processing information

Thought processes of a learner with FASD can be highly variable. There may be gaps in connections, and also clusters of connections leading to areas of strength.

Children and young people with FASD often experience difficulties dealing with information. They can find it hard to:

- apply specific learning to new experiences or situations and perceive similarities and differences
- see patterns, predict events, or make judgements
- remember
- translate: what they hear (instructions) into actions; thoughts and feelings into words; reading into speaking.

Planning and completing tasks



Video hosted on Youtube http://youtu.be/3EfWnJ7CXY4

Executive functioning is the ability to plan and complete a task.

Students with FASD may need support to maintain or shift attention, organise, plan, process and memorise information, and understand consequences.

Closed Captions

Source:
POPFASD (Canada)
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWRoE1YnO371Fc_hWx6Pnhg?nohtml5=False

Cognitive fatigue

Learners with FASD often get tired more quickly than their peers. Their brain has to work harder and utilise more brain areas to concentrate on tasks their peers can do easily.

Students experience cognitive fatigue when a task is overwhelming or when expectations are set too high. Cognitive fatigue accumulates. Performance may deteriorate as the day progresses, or towards the end of the school week or term.

Without appropriate support and breaks, learners with FASD experiencing cognitive fatigue can exhibit:

- learning difficulties
- becoming muddled or physically ill
- lack of motivation
- mood swings
- behavioural problems.

Students may find it difficult to cope with the level of work and pressure that's put on them. This may present as difficult behaviours. Strategies for supporting behaviours must be informed by understanding the reasons for the behaviour.

Behaviour and social skills

Behavioural patterns of people with FASD are consistently inconsistent. As a result of their brain injury, students may be hyperactive, easily distracted, and impulsive.

A learner with FASD may experience difficulty:

- understanding consequences
- generalising behaviour from one setting to another
- understanding what is fair – they often work within a rigid egocentric notion of fairness
- understanding personal boundaries and ownership
- perceiving social cues and rules, and the emotions of other people
- making and keeping friends – they might be easily led by others.

Confabulation vs lying

Confabulation is not lying. Damage to the function of the frontal lobes of the brain means that a child or young person with FASD may make things up that are not true. When they are confused or have forgotten what happened, they may say something that suits the situation or what they think is expected of them. They can have difficulty basing what they say on reality and checking it against evidence.

Useful resources

Engaging all learners: Supporting students with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders

Three short modules with accompanying videos explaining how alcohol affects the developing brain. Includes additional information on brain structure and brain function, and the brain and emotional regulation.

Publisher: The Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium (ERLC)

Visit website

Know FASD: Alcohol in utero knowledge base

Short descriptions of how FASD may present in children at different ages. Information is expanded on in a supporting wiki.

Publisher: University of Alberta Educational Psychology

Visit website

Common behaviours, misinterpretations, and characteristics of students with FASD

A guide on how to interpret behaviours to inform understanding and expectations of students with FASD.

Download **PDF (60 KB)**

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder

Read time: 38 min

This documentary provides a window into the lives of children with FASD and their families.

Publisher: Attitude (NZ)

Visit website

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