

# FOCUS

on  
Early Childhood  
Mental Health



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Factsheet #23, 3/11

## Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Children have behavior problems for lots of reasons, such as getting attention or not knowing how else to communicate what they need. One reason that is harder to determine but should be considered is the possibility that the child has a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). FASD is a permanent brain-based condition caused by the mother's alcohol use during pregnancy and affects about 1 in 100 live births in the United States. The possibility of FASD needs to be approached sensitively (so as not to increase guilt for something the mother may already feel guilty about and cannot change), but the child's future success may depend on understanding the condition and getting the right supports.

### Some Symptoms of FASD in Young Children

Cries frequently and is irritable

Has erratic sleep patterns

Is easily distracted and has a short attention span

Is overly friendly and has little sense of boundaries

Has trouble remembering simple things

Responds poorly to changes in routine

Has weak muscle tone and poor motor coordination

Is sensitive to sights, sounds, touch

Acts impulsively

Has frequent temper tantrums and is non-compliant

Has difficulty learning from experience

Has problems with bonding and attachment

### How to Help a Child with FASD

- Learn about FASD and encourage an assessment if there is reason to suspect it
- Build on the child's strengths (e.g., friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, good intentions, artistic ability)
- Give immediate feedback to the child rather than relying on delayed reward systems
- Provide loving and stable environments that minimize frequent disruptions in routine
- Be concrete with instructions, and use visual aids and hands-on activities to help the child learn
- Use positive reinforcement and praise
- Be aware of when the child seems overwhelmed by external stimulation and sensory overload
- Recognize that the child "can't" do something rather than he or she "won't" do it (as a result of the permanent brain damage)

### Resources

There are many sources of excellent information about FASD. The following are recommended by the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services:

- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Center for Excellence: [www.fascenter.samhsa.gov](http://www.fascenter.samhsa.gov)
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Support, Training, Advocacy, Resources: <http://fasstar.com>
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Consultation, Education and Training Service, Inc.: [www.fascets.org](http://www.fascets.org)
- National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: [www.nofas.org](http://www.nofas.org)