

# FASD: practical strategies for daily life

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## Understanding brain and behaviour

**Effective support for children and young people with FASD begins with understanding what is hard for them, rather than focusing on behaviour alone.**

When you see behaviour that is challenging, it can help to pause and ask:

- What is my child struggling with in this moment?
- What feels too hard right now?
- What does the environment expect of them – for example, to sit still, wait, line up, not touch things, follow verbal instructions, or understand unspoken rules?

The more you notice about how your child's brain works, the easier it becomes to understand behaviour as a sign that support is needed, rather than something that needs correcting.

Once we recognise what is too hard for a child, we can change our expectations and the environment – by changing what we ask, how we ask, and when we ask. This is often more effective than expecting the child to cope with demands that are too much for them in that moment.

## When skills are uneven

FASD affects brain development in uneven ways. A child might cope like an 8-year-old in one situation, then struggle like a 6- or 4-year-old in another. Using the kind of guidance, structure and reassurance you would offer a younger child can make expectations more realistic and reduce stress for everyone.

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## Why morning routines are hard

Morning routines are often stressful for families. The pressure to get ready, manage multiple tasks and leave the house on time can be especially hard for children with FASD. A simple, consistent and predictable routine can help – but it often means more work for carers, not less.

## What mornings really ask of the brain

Think about what many children hear in the space of a few minutes:

*"Wake up."*

*"Time for school."*

*"What do you want for breakfast?"*

*"Sit down."*

*"Turn the TV off."*

*"Get dressed."*

*"Where are your shoes?"*

*"Have you got your jumper?"*

*"Put that down."*

*"Brush your teeth."*

*"Get in the car — we're going to be late."*

Each of these instructions relies on different parts of the brain working together. For a child with FASD, difficulties might show up as:

- Not remembering where shoes or bags are
- Getting stuck watching TV and not being able to shift attention
- Not understanding what “hurry up” means – hurry what, exactly?
- Feeling overwhelmed by verbal instructions and not knowing where to start
- Struggling with fine motor tasks like opening toothpaste or managing buttons
- Refusing a jumper because it feels uncomfortable, even if it’s cold

**When you see dysregulated behaviour, ask yourself: What part of this morning is hard for my child right now?**

## Strategies for the morning routine

**The 8 Magic Keys remind us to keep things simple, concrete, routine, repetitive and supervised. These principles help reduce pressure on the brain during busy parts of the day.**

### Transitions – especially waking up

- Slow the waking-up process, even if it means starting earlier
- Open the blinds and let light in before talking
- Give the child time to orient before giving instructions
- Offer a drink to help the body wake up
- Many adults recognise that disoriented feeling on waking – for children with FASD, it can last much longer

### Keeping language simple and concrete

- Show the cereal box rather than asking what they want for breakfast
- Put the bowl and spoon on the bench as a prompt
- Point to shoes by the door instead of giving a verbal reminder
- Hold up the jumper or place it next to the child
- Use one-word instructions – “teeth”, “shoes” – and give the child time to process

### Supporting attention and memory

- Turn the TV off before starting the routine
- Keep items in consistent places
- Walk with the child to the next step rather than repeating instructions
- Reduce the number of verbal reminders

### Getting dressed

- Lay out clothes the night before
- Use visual supports – an OT can help
- Put away clothing you don’t want worn so it isn’t visible
- Reduce the number of clothing items in the room
- Remove clothing that causes sensory discomfort
- Get dressed in a room with fewer distractions
- Turn dressing into a game or a playful challenge

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## For more strategies

### Resources

- NOFASD Australia resources for carers, including the Parent Carer Toolkit:  
[nofasd.org.au/parents-caregivers-family/resources](http://nofasd.org.au/parents-caregivers-family/resources)
- Videos by Dan Dubovsky, Nate Sheets and others:  
[youtube.com/@pruewalkerFASD/playlists](https://youtube.com/@pruewalkerFASD/playlists) – navigate to the Practical strategies for parents and carers playlist