

# 1. FASD: Practical strategies for daily life

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## Understanding brain and behaviour

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

### Understanding FASD and the brain

Helpful questions to keep in mind include:

- What is going on for my child right now?
- What do we know about how their brain works?
- What do I notice day to day?
- What do their therapists notice?
- What do assessments tell us about how they learn, cope and manage daily life?

Making the link between brain and behaviour is key. 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.

### Adjusting expectations and environments

Once we recognise what is too hard for a child, we can change our expectations and the environment — for example, 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.

Once you notice where a child is struggling, it can help to ask:

*“If she was a younger child, what support would I naturally provide?”*

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

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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. At the same time, mornings matter — how they go often sets the tone for the rest of the day.

A simple, consistent and predictable routine can be helpful, but it often means more work for carers, not less.

Even when a routine is familiar, mornings can still fall apart because of how much the brain is being asked to do all at once.

### 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?***

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## Strategies for the morning routine

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The Eight Magic Keys remind us to keep things:

- Simple
- Concrete
- Routine
- Repetitive
- Supervised

These principles help reduce pressure on the brain during busy parts of the day.

### Transitions matter, especially waking up



Waking up is a transition, and transitions are particularly hard for many children with FASD. Moving from sleep to being awake and alert can take time.

Helpful strategies include:

- Slowing the waking-up process, even if it means starting earlier
- Opening the blinds and letting light in before talking
- Giving the child time to orient before giving instructions
- Offering a drink to help the body wake up

Many adults recognise that disoriented feeling when they first wake up. For children with FASD, that feeling can last much longer.

### Keeping language simple and concrete

One of the most helpful changes in the morning is to reduce how much talking is needed. For example:

- Show the cereal box rather than asking, "What do you want for breakfast?"
- Put the bowl and spoon on the bench as a prompt
- Point to shoes by the door instead of saying, "Go and get your shoes"
- Hold up the jumper or place it next to the child rather than reminding them verbally
- Use one-word instructions – "teeth", "shoes" and give the child time to process.



These small changes reduce the load on memory and language, and make it clearer what is expected without relying on words.

### Supporting attention and memory

Children with FASD may:

- Forget where their shoes or bag are
- Get distracted by the TV and struggle to shift attention
- Walk away halfway through a task and not remember what they were doing

Rather than repeating instructions, it can help to:

- Turn the TV off before starting the routine
- Keep items in consistent places
- Walk with the child to the next step.

### Getting dressed

Getting dressed can be difficult for children for many different reasons. For example:



- Forgetting what order to put clothes on
- Struggling with buttons or getting clothing over their head
- Becoming distracted partway through
- Experiencing sensory discomfort
- Wanting to change clothes or wear something unsuitable for the weather

Depending on what is hard for your child, helpful strategies might include:

- Laying out clothes the night before
- Using visual supports (your child's OT can help with this)
- Putting away clothing you don't want worn so it isn't visible
- Reducing the number of clothing items in the room
- Removing clothing that causes sensory discomfort
- Getting dressed in a room with fewer distractions
- Offering as much choice and control as your child can manage
- Turning dressing into a game, a race or a playful challenge.



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### For more strategies:

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NOFASD Australia resources for carers including the Parent Carer toolkit:

<https://www.nofasd.org.au/parents-caregivers-family/resources/nofasd-resources/#toolkit>

There are some helpful videos by Dan Dubovsky, Nate Sheets and others on my Youtube channel –

visit: <https://www.youtube.com/@pruewalkerFASD/playlists> and navigate to Practical strategies for parents and carers playlist.