

1. FASD Essentials

What FASD Looks Like

FASD is a neurodevelopmental disability affecting learning, behaviour, emotional regulation, and daily function. Because physical features are uncommon, many children appear “typical” but experience significant, often misunderstood challenges.

Common challenges include:

Cognition and Learning

- Needs concepts broken down into concrete, simple steps
- Learns something one day but cannot recall it the next
- Difficulty generalising skills between environments
- Slow processing speed; needs extra time to understand information
- Difficulty understanding abstract ideas (time, consequences, “later”).

Language and Communication

- Might seem articulate but misunderstands verbal instructions
- Repeats back instructions but cannot follow through
- Difficulty with multi-step directions
- Takes language literally; struggles with jokes, sarcasm or metaphors
- Interrupts, talks over others, or misses conversational cues.

Social Skills

- Difficulty understanding others’ intentions or perspectives
- May seem “not empathetic” but is unsure how to respond
- Interprets situations incorrectly, leading to conflict
- Plays or socialises best with younger children
- Vulnerable to peer pressure or manipulation.

Motor and Sensory

- Poor coordination or clumsiness
- Fatigues easily during handwriting, sport or fine-motor tasks
- Overwhelmed in noisy, crowded or unpredictable settings
- Sensory-seeking or sensory-avoidant behaviours
- Meltdowns or shutdowns when sensory input is too high.

Adaptive Functioning (Daily Living Skills)

- Needs detailed prompting for routines (morning, bedtime, getting ready)
- Reliance on visual schedules or modelling rather than spoken instructions
- Difficulty problem-solving when things don’t go to plan
- Struggles with tasks of daily life - self-care, organising belongings, following routines

Understanding the impact of FASD on the brain

Self-regulation depends on a whole set of brain processes that help us manage our thoughts, attention, emotions, and behaviour. For children with FASD, these processes don’t develop in the same way or at the same pace, which means regulation is a daily challenge.

Regulating thoughts, attention, emotions and behaviour

Children and young people with FASD can struggle in several areas:

- **Thoughts:** they can get stuck on an idea or an impulse – if they want something, they want it now, and it’s hard to shift their thinking.
- **Attention:** their attention is easily pulled by whatever is happening around them. Even a small distraction can derail the task.
- **Emotions:** a tiny frustration can lead to a big reaction. They often calm quickly, and can be confused about why others are still upset afterwards.

- **Behaviour:** responding before thinking, acting on impulse, or refusing tasks that feel overwhelming or unclear.

Executive functioning

These regulation skills rely on executive functioning – the higher-order brain skills that organise, plan, remember, and adapt. The areas commonly affected in FASD include:

- **Working memory:** holding information in mind long enough to use it.
- **Task initiation:** getting started without becoming overwhelmed.
- **Planning and organisation:** putting steps in order, and being able to carry them out.
- **Flexible thinking:** coping with changes, switching between ideas, managing disappointment.
- **Self-monitoring:** noticing your own behaviour and understanding its impact.

Difficulties in these areas often *look* like choices – not listening, refusing, being oppositional – when in fact they are signs that the task is too complex for the skills available in that moment.

Interpreting behaviour

It helps to view behaviour as a reflection of brain function.

**Instead of asking: “Why is she doing this?”
we can ask: “What skill is she missing right now?”**

Some examples:

- Ignoring instructions → working memory or verbal processing load
- Refusing homework → task initiation, regulation, academic difficulty
- Taking someone’s belongings → difficulty with concepts like ownership or perspective-taking.

Dysmaturity

Children with FASD often show uneven development – older in some areas, younger in others. A child might have the language skills of their peers but the emotional regulation of a much younger child.

Think about: “At what age would this behaviour be typical?”

Then think about how you would respond to a child of that age. This helps reset expectations and guides you towards strategies that match their developmental, not chronological, age.



Eight Magic Keys



The 8 Magic Keys are practical strategies that make everyday expectations easier for children with FASD by keeping things concrete, predictable and supported.

Supporting Emotional Regulation

Children often need co-regulation:

- Sitting beside them while they calm down
- Using a quiet, low-stimulation environment during big emotions

- Offering sensory strategies (make sure you have talked about these and tested them when your child is calm).

It’s important to manage your own emotions when your child is upset – don’t be afraid to ask for help.