

FASD and adolescence

A guide for permanent and adoptive carers

Adolescence brings rising expectations for any young person: they are expected to become more independent, and the adults around them tend to step back to let them build that independence and learn from their own experience.

For a young person with FASD, whose skills develop unevenly and more slowly, there is already a gap between what is expected of them and what they can actually manage, and in adolescence that gap tends to widen, leading to new challenges.

What changes in adolescence

Adolescence usually comes with an expectation that young people will take on more responsibility and independence, in areas like:

- managing time and money
- being responsible for phones and other technology
- managing school, timetables and homework with fewer reminders
- managing friendships, relationships and dating
- getting places on time
- making decisions.

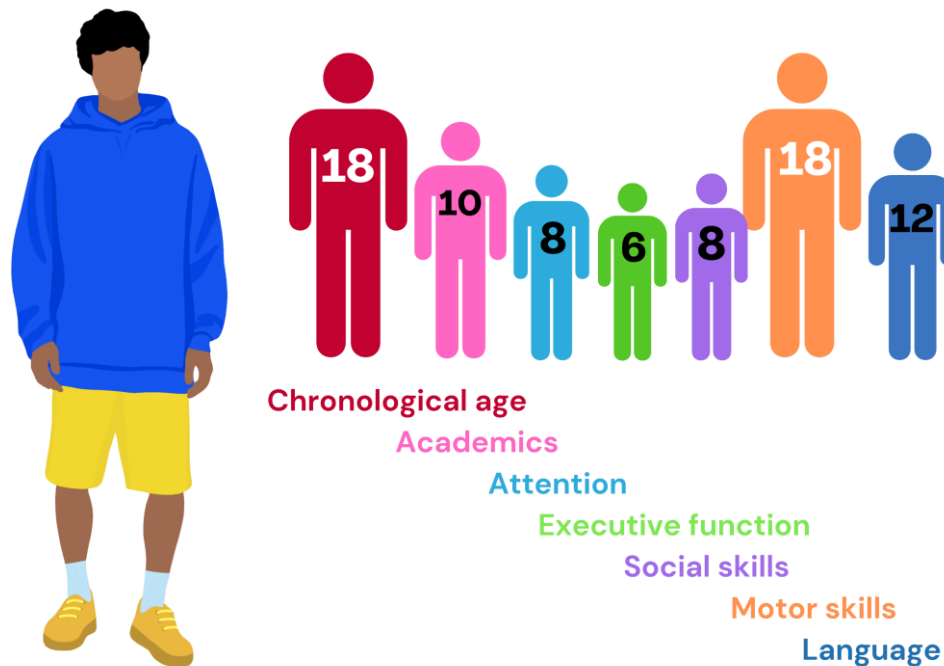
Independence also brings new risks:

- more time online and unsupervised
- greater influence from friends and peers
- increased access to money, transport and the community
- new relationships and sexual experiences
- greater exposure to alcohol, drugs and other risks
- more opportunities for exploitation, coercion or unsafe decisions.

Young people with FASD are likely to struggle with many of these expectations to manage themselves, their time, money, belongings and relationships. They are also more vulnerable to many of the risks, due to difficulties with self-regulation, judgement, social understanding and learning from experience.

Maturity does not keep up with expectations

A young person with FASD may be 12, 14 or 18 chronologically, but functioning much younger in some areas of development. Their skills are likely to be uneven, and the gap between them and their peers widens, particularly in areas like executive functioning and self regulation.



Chronological age is only one part of the picture. Skills such as executive function, social skills and academics may sit well below a young person's age.

In childhood, a young person with FASD might be managing reasonably well in a structured environment like school, or at home with predictable routines, where they are well supported and supervised and much of the scaffolding is provided for them. They have often been working hard to keep up with their peers.

In adolescence, as expectations rise and young people are expected to take on more for themselves, the gap tends to widen between their abilities and what we expect of them. Other young people seem to manage without difficulty – they are allowed to have mobile phones, use social media, choose how to spend their money, go out alone. Young people with FASD want to be doing what everyone else is doing with the same freedoms and choices, but don't have the skills to navigate this safely.



“Knowing better” and “doing better” are not the same

A common source of frustration for carers is when a young person seems to understand what they need to do, but does not do it. This might involve remembering to feed the dog, keeping track of their belongings or following an instruction.

When children are younger, adults may be more likely to see this as part of learning and needing help. As young people get older, the same difficulties can start to feel more deliberate. Carers may feel that their young person “knows better”, is being oppositional or unhelpful, or does not care about the impact on others.

A young person may say they understand, explain why something matters, and still not follow through. Being able to do something *sometimes* does not mean they can do it consistently or independently.

Whether they can manage a task on a particular day may depend on:

- how stressed, tired or distracted they are
- how they are feeling emotionally
- what else is happening around them at the time.

When we think a young person “knows better”, it is easy to assume they could do the task if they wanted to. This can lead us to overestimate what they can manage. Carers need to have a realistic expectation of a young person’s capacity because that’s how we make decisions – can they stay home alone, and for how long? Can they catch public transport alone? Making the connection to executive functioning abilities is important – we might need to refer back to assessments, to check our expectations.

*We understand a young person’s capacity best by reflecting on what they **actually do** – not what they could do if they wanted or chose to.*

Needing help, but rejecting it

Adolescents naturally want more independence, privacy and control, and young people with FASD want the same things as their peers. And if they don’t see why they shouldn’t be allowed to do something, why would they accept help? They may push back hard against help, reminders and supervision, even while they still need support, especially as life becomes more complex. They might reject support if they think it is “control” – and wanting or needing to be in control is often a feature of FASD.

A young person might reject help, but when they make a mistake or something goes wrong, this can lead to frustration, anger and outbursts. Think about the young person trying to undo a knot in their shoelace – we can see how frustrating it is, they don’t want help, but they can’t manage it by themselves.

There might be times that a young person acknowledges they need help with something – but when the time comes, they don’t want that help.

For example, they agree to put a tracker on their schoolbag – but when you get them one, they don’t want to use it. This is something all carers may need to navigate, and what works for one young person may not work for another.



I can do it myself!!

Parenting the gap: keep the scaffolding

Young people with FASD may still need a style of parenting we would usually use with a younger child – supervision, prompts, scaffolding – but they might be a lot less willing to accept it. Carers might need to maintain a lot of these supports, but find ways to make them more acceptable to a teenager.

Instead of using visual charts or timers, you might use:

- phone alarms and reminders

- calendar or scheduling apps
- notes, lists or photos on their phone.

Adult-looking scheduling and routine apps can replace the child-oriented visual schedules used in earlier years. Carers can also role model using these supports themselves, so that using tools to remember things feels ordinary rather than singling the young person out. *Tiimo* (tiimoapp.com) is one example of a more adult-looking planner.

Educational supports

Children with FASD can do well at primary school, but the scaffolding that has supported them often falls away in secondary school. Moving between classrooms, managing their own books and equipment, and harder academic work can cause things to fall apart quickly. As the academic gap widens young people can feel embarrassed about their academic skills, for example not wanting to read books that look 'childish'.

If a young person is struggling academically, and the curriculum gets harder, they can quickly disengage. They might find it harder to regulate in a noisy environment or no longer want to do work separately with an aide.

When FASD is not recognised, the school environment and the responses to a young person's difficulties can actually contribute to, or make worse, the challenges they experience. Teachers might think a young person "knows better" but is being intentionally defiant, when they have not understood the task, cannot hold the steps in mind, or are overwhelmed. Behavioural consequences do not address those underlying difficulties.

Executive functioning can be one of the biggest barriers at school. A young person may agree to use a strategy but still be unable to use it in the moment. Carers may need to help school staff understand that not using a strategy is not the same as refusing to. This excerpt from a documentary [*Moment to moment: growing up with FASD*](#) shows the story of a young person, Cara, who with FASD. Cara understands that she needs help with a homework diary, but doesn't react well when her mother asks her to check the diary. Her mother explains that because Cara can't remember having any homework, she is certain that she doesn't have any, and so when her mother turns out to be right, she gets angry.

Young people need supportive staff at school who really understand them: what they can do, what they find difficult and what support helps. A key relationship at school can also make a real difference. This may be a wellbeing staff member, teacher, education support worker or another adult who knows the young person well and takes an interest in them.

The *Learning with FASD* website includes a section for educators in secondary schools: learningwithfasd.org.au/secondary-school.

Build safety around them

Adolescence brings more opportunities for young people to be out in the community, online and influenced by other people. These opportunities also come with risks, particularly for a young person who is too trusting, impulsive, keen to fit in, easily influenced or unable to think ahead when something changes.

A key principle when caring for young people with FASD is:

Teach them about safety and encourage them to make good choices - but don't rely on them to keep themselves safe.

Safety needs to come from the environment – supervision, monitoring, external supports.

Create safety in the environment:

- supervise online activity
- use safe settings on phones, apps and devices
- set limits around money and spending
- plan transport and use familiar routes
- know where they are and who they are with
- identify trusted adults they can contact
- agree clear plans for what to do when something goes wrong.

Simple, concrete plans work better than open-ended ones. “If the bus does not come, ring me straight away” is far easier for a young person to manage than expecting them to work out a plan B on the spot.

If you are putting boundaries around something a young person has a strong desire for, such as device or internet access, this can provoke a strong reaction. Where behaviour may escalate, plan the change carefully and, where possible, with a therapist or support worker involved. Do not put yourself at risk.

Working with therapists

Therapy can look different in the teenage years. It may be more about finding practical supports and ways of managing everyday life. Therapists can support young people and carers with:

- tools and aids to support daily life and organisation
- problem solving and practical supports
- skill development, such as emotional regulation and executive function strategies
- coaching.

Keeping a young person engaged in therapy can be difficult, and some will not want to attend. Even so, it can be worth having a therapist or worker involved who knows the young person and can support them and their carers when things are difficult. It is much harder to find the right support in a crisis than to have someone already involved. Some organisations now offer gaming-based counselling for neurodivergent young people, which may be worth exploring for young people who are socially isolated, spending much of their time online, or finding it difficult to engage with school and face-to-face support.

Focus on strengths and future planning

Young people with FASD do best when they spend as much time as possible doing things they are good at:

- identify and nurture the young person’s interests and talents
- create opportunities to use their strengths and enjoy activities
- find ways for their abilities to be recognised and appreciated by others
- develop concrete, positive and achievable goals for the future.

It helps to be realistic. An interest is not always a career, and enjoying baking does not mean a commercial kitchen, which can be a very demanding environment, is the right fit. Interests can still open doors. When you are somewhere the young person enjoys, look around at the roles that might suit their abilities, and start planting those seeds early, so that a future doing something they find interesting feels possible.

Social connection and identity

Young people with FASD often struggle with friendships and may have few friends. Social connection matters, and so does feeling accepted.

What can help:

- supportive relationships, mentors and role models, including funded supports where available
- welcoming environments that clearly accept difference, such as some youth groups, clubs and community groups
- groups designed for neurodiverse young people, including options developed for autistic young people that may also suit FASD.

A young person may do things for a particular mentor or worker that they will not do otherwise. That is not nothing. Structured activities can still be difficult, so some flexibility and adult support is usually needed.

Understanding their diagnosis

Understanding that they have a disability can help a young person make sense of why some things are harder for them than for their peers. Some young people are resistant to the idea, and this takes time and a gentle, ongoing approach. They are entitled to understand their diagnosis, and to learn about it in a way that makes sense to them. Resources such as *Me & My FASD* (fasd.me) are designed for young people to learn about FASD.

Apps and tools

There are increasing numbers of apps that can help people with schedules, tasks, focus or daily living. It is important to look at the apps and make sure they are not too complex for the young person to use. *Make it Easy* (makeiteasy.com.au) is an app designed to simplify information for people with disabilities. It can help young people simplify instructions, read a public transport timetable, or break down the steps of a task.

Apps and tools can also be used to support mental health - Beyond Blue has a list of recommended [platforms and tools](#). This includes [eheadspace](#) which provides online support to young people 12-25. Apps such as *Smiling Mind* (smilingmind.com.au) include meditation and mindfulness activities.

Information about online safety can be found at the [eSafety Commissioner's website](#).

A note of caution: AI chatbots can give young people quick answers to questions or problems. It is worth making sure they are not relying on them instead of thinking things through or practising their own problem-solving skills.

Support for transitions

Young people with FASD need substantial support around transitions, including the move towards adulthood. NOFASD Australia has two useful guides, *Guiding your young adult with FASD into adulthood* and *Turning 18 and living with FASD*: nofasd.org.au/resources.

Take aways

- It can help to think about interdependence as the goal, rather than full independence. It is okay to rely on others for help.
- Aim to increase choice, participation and autonomy, with the scaffolding needed for success and safety.
- Support the young person to recognise when they need help, and to accept it.

Knowing better and doing better are two different things. The aim is not to expect a young person to manage alone, but to keep the right support in place while giving them as much choice and control as they can safely hold.

Resources and links

- Moment to moment: growing up with FASDs (video on executive function) – youtu.be/NdANbWlpJm4?si=4atfcWoM4pDpMTQG
 - Learning with FASD – secondary school resources – learningwithfasd.org.au/secondary-school
 - Me & My FASD – for young people – fasd.me
 - Beyond Blue – [resources for supporting mental health](https://beyondblue.org.au/resources-for-supporting-mental-health)
 - eHeadspace - <https://headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/connect-with-us/>
 - E-Safety Commissioner <https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents>
 - Smiling Mind – mental health app – www.smilingmind.com.au
 - Make it Easy – simplifies instructions – makeiteasy.com.au
 - NOFASD Australia – transition to adulthood guides – www.nofasd.org.au/parents-caregivers-family/resources/nofasd-resources
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