

FASD Characteristics across the Lifespan

Individual fetal alcohol (FA) characteristics will vary from child to child and as adverse impacts of fetal alcohol exposure are dependent on the timing and dose of alcohol use during pregnancy. This poses a conundrum for diagnosticians because the absence of observable signs or biomarkers (as in partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS); Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND); or Neurodevelopmental Disorder – Alcohol Exposed (ND-AE) means it is often undetected. However, as a guide, damage to the brain means individuals living with FASDs will typically experience some or all of the following characteristics:

- Memory problems
- Difficulty storing and retrieving information
- Inconsistent performance
- Impulsivity, distractibility, disorganization
- Ability to repeat instructions, but inability to put them into action
- Difficulty with abstract thinking – mathematics, money, Time
- Cognitive processing deficits – thinking which is slowed
- Slower auditory pace (may only pick up pieces of the information or instruction)
- Developmental – development is younger than chronological age
- Inability to predict outcomes or understand consequences

INFANCY

- Unusual posturing of hands;
- Chronic constipation
- Unable to support head
- Small head
- Often tremulous and irritable and may cry a lot
- Weak sucking reflex and muscle tone
- Highly susceptible to illness
- Problems with bonding
- Feeding difficulties, often disinterested in food with feeding taking a very long Time
- Erratic sleep patterns, no predictable sleep-wake cycle
- Sensitive to light, sound and touch
- Failure to thrive
- Slow to master developmental milestones – walking, talking, imitating sounds
- Poor motor co-ordination

EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Disinterest in food and disrupted sleep continues
- Moves from one thing to another with ‘butterfly – like’ movements
- More interest in people than objects
- Overly friendly and highly social
- Unable to comprehend danger, limited response to verbal warnings
- Prone to temper tantrums and non-compliant
- Short attention span
- Expressive speech may be delayed, may have less in depth language than peers, may be excessively talkative and intrusive - superficial appearance that speech is not impaired
- Easily distractible or hyperactive
- Does not respond well to changes, prefers

routine and structure

EARLY SCHOOL AGE

- Reading and writing skills during the first two years may not be noticed as delayed
- Arithmetic (maths) may be more of a problem than spelling/reading
- Attention deficits and poor impulse control become more apparent as demands for classroom attention increase
- Inability to transfer learning from one situation to another or to learn from experience
- Requires constant reminders for basic activities at home or school
- Information is learned, perhaps retained for a while and is then lost and poor performance of 'learned' tasks may appear deliberate
- Gross motor control problems – clumsy
- Fine motor control problems – handwriting, buttons, shoe laces
- Difficulties with social skills and interpersonal relationships, be unable to share, wait for a turn, follow the rules or cooperate, be inappropriately intrusive
- Poor peer relationships and social isolation, may prefer to play with younger children or adults rather than peers
- Memory deficits
- Exists in the here and now and seems to lack an internal Time clock
- Unable to monitor his/her own work or to pace self

MIDDLE SCHOOL AGE

- Delayed physical and cognitive development
- Reading and spelling skills usually peak
- Increased difficulty maintaining attention, completing tasks and mastering new academic skills
- Usually very concrete thinking, may have trouble working with ideas or concepts, tends to fall further behind peers as world becomes increasingly abstract and concept based
- Continuing fine motor problems may make volume work production impossible
- Good verbal skills, superficially friendly social manner and good intentions often mask the seriousness of the problem
- Psychological evaluation and remedial placement may be necessary
- A pattern of school suspensions may begin

ADOLESCENCE

- Increased truancy, school refusal and dropout
- Increased behavioural disruption in school
- Reading comprehension is poorer than word recognition
- Faulty logic, lacks basic types of critical thinking and judgement skills
- Mathematics tends to be the most difficult task suggesting poor memory, poor abstract thinking and difficulty with basic problem solving
- May indicate an understanding of instructions but are unable to carry these out, may have learned to act as though there is understanding of instructions but cannot follow through
- Often misjudged as being lazy, stubborn, and unwilling to learn
- Increased problems with abstract thinking and the ability to link cause and effect
- Depressed/ suicidal ideation or withdrawn and isolated
- Impulsive, total lack of inhibition and easily influenced, subject to peer manipulation and exploitation
- Difficulty showing remorse or taking responsibility for actions
- Problems managing Time and money
- High risk for problems with law and involvement with criminal justice system likely
- Difficulty identifying and labelling feelings
- Low motivation
- Low self-esteem
- Clinical depression may be evident
- Sexual boundary issues with sexual activity beginning at an earlier age
- May not exhibit primary symptoms of FASD but may display secondary disabilities
- Have a need to develop social skills appropriate to their age group
- High risk for exploitation and peer manipulation

ADULT

- Uncontrolled repetition of a particular response - ideas or activities may appear compulsive and/or rigid
- Poor social skills and difficulty holding jobs
- Unable to live independently
- Unable to safely parent children
- Problems managing money
- Lack of reciprocal relationships
- Unpredictable
- Alcohol and other substance misuse

FASD: A CHECKLIST

NB: The observations and assessments of parents and carers can be useful to assessment, diagnosis and planning interventions. This simple tool will help get you started.

Concern	Symptoms	Y/N
Hearing	Ear infections – with or without complaint of pain	
	Little or no response to noise	
Vision	Wandering or lazy eye	
Dental	Displaced teeth	
	missing teeth – never formed	
Co-ordination	poor eye-hand co-ordination	
	visual spatial difficulties	
	poor balance	
	accidents	
Physical stature	Small height and weight	
Eating	Never hungry	
	No appetite	
	Always hungry	
	Inability to stop eating	
	Gorging	
Disabilities	Academic – school and learning	
	Attention deficit disorder (with or without hyperactivity)	
	Speech/language	
	Information processing	
	Development	
Compromised Executive Functioning	Patterning problems - sequencing	
	Planning	
	Predicting	
	Organising	
	Prioritising	
	Initiating play and following rules	
	Setting goals	
	Apply a new rule in a different setting	
Memory	Integrating (making sense of) information	
	Forming associations	

	Learning from past mistakes	
	Same mistakes despite increasingly severe consequences	
	remembers a thing for two days then forgets on the third day – like it was never learned at all	
Conceptual skills - abstract concepts	Time	
	Maths	
	Money	
Judgement, consequential thinking	Inability to make decisions	
	Cannot recognise danger	
	Cannot distinguish danger from safety	
	Cannot tell difference between friend and stranger	
	Cannot tell difference between fantasy and reality	
Speech and language	Cannot easily answer simple questions	
	When answering, agrees or complies – fills in the gaps	
	When answering, makes up an answer	
	Volume or use of words can create expectation of competence	
	Talks excessively without any depth of understanding	
	Talks excessively without exchange in conversation	
	Says “I don’t know” a lot or seems ‘shut down’	
	Needs Time to answer – delayed reply	
	Difficulty with opposites – hot when meaning cold	
	Picks up information only from every third or fourth word	
Poor impulse control	With poor judgement and not recognising consequences, acts without thought	
Perseveration	Stuck on an idea or thought	
	Difficulty switching thoughts	
	Difficulty stopping activity or changing to a new one	
	Reacts strongly to a change in setting	
	May repeat words or phrases over and over	
	Reacts strongly to a change in program - support worker, new teacher or respite carer	
Development	Much younger age – socially/friendships	
	Much younger age – emotionally	
	Much younger age – thinking	
Sensory	Over-reacts to stimuli	Touch
		Textures

		Lighting	
		Taste	
		Smell	
	Unable to filter out background noise		
	Under-reacts to pain	Does not complain	
		Does not notice heat or cold	
Attention	Over-reacts to external stimuli	Hyperactive	
		Moves from one	
		Cannot follow through on a task	
		Poor focus and concentration	
		Does not get unspoken rules in socialising with others	
	Withdrawn in own world	Daydreaming	
		Slow moving	
		Appears unmotivated	

