



Strategies for supporting students with FASD



School resources

Students with FASD may find a number of aspects of school life and academic work challenging. However, there are many evidence-based strategies that teachers and school leaders can use to support students with FASD and promote their success in the classroom and beyond. By taking a strengths-based approach and responding to the individual needs of students with FASD in the context of trusting relationships, teachers and leaders can support these students to thrive at school.

The key to supporting students with FASD is to take the time to get to know them as individuals. It is important to remember that all those with FASD present differently. Each student will have their own strengths and areas that need support, including the recognition of [sensory needs](#). It is also important to remember that every environment is different, and students with FASD may struggle to generalise or transfer their learning and behaviour across environments. This means that the way they present in one place may be entirely different to how they present in another, and what happens at home may be different to what happens at school. It is vital that schools and families work together to ensure the best outcomes. It is also important to understand that each day will be different, and that students with FASD may not remember today what they could do yesterday.

The central importance of relationships

The key to supporting students with FASD is to build positive relationships. The authors of the [8 Magic Keys](#) resource call trusting relationships the 'master key'. One way to build strong, trusting relationships with students with FASD is to use the '10x2' method. This involves spending 2 minutes a day for 10 consecutive days just sitting and chatting about anything unrelated to schoolwork¹. Connections with the student's family or whānau are also key: they know the child best and understand their individual needs. Parents also need support and a willingness from those working with their child to offer understanding rather than blame².

In addition to being committed to building positive relationships with students with FASD and their caregivers, there are a number of strategies that teachers and school leaders can use to enhance students' wellbeing and support them to be successful in their learning.

Pay attention to structure and consistency

Structure is the 'glue' that enables a child with FASD to make sense of the world. A student with FASD achieves and is successful because his or her world provides appropriate structure as a permanent foundation for learning. With these supports in place, a child with FASD can experience success, which is vital to developing self-worth and self-confidence.

Children with FASD also experience difficulty generalising and transferring their learning from one situation to another, which means it is best to create an environment with few changes. This includes consistency of language and routines. It is beneficial for teachers and caregivers to agree to using consistent language and strategies across school and home settings. It is also important to think about how relievers and release teachers may be supported to maintain structure and a consistent approach in the absence of the regular classroom teacher.

The following ideas and examples may help to promote consistency and structure:

- Use visuals related to the task, such as a reading book for reading time or lunchbox for lunchtime, to help students know what to do when. Use photos rather than abstract pictures.
- Keep key phrases short, simple, and consistent.
- Use consistent language for all concepts and in all classrooms and lessons: for example, use either zero or nought, but don't use them interchangeably.
- Keep the set-up of the classroom the same, and, when changes need to be made, do one thing at a time and communicate it to the student.
- Assign students with FASD a buddy and use the same buddy for a sustained period of time.
- Negotiate the amount and type of homework that is achievable. Consider whether some tasks usually given as homework, such as reading practice, may be done at school so as not to confuse the two environments.
- Encourage students to arrive at school at the same time each day and use the same entrance.
- Keep the student's belongings in the same place and return them each day. For example, for students in the early primary years, store bookbags in the same place and ensure they are returned there consistently.

Be specific and use concrete language

Students with FASD have difficulty with abstract language, generalisations, and 'filling in the blanks' when given an instruction. It is important to be specific and tell them step by step what to do. This will help them develop appropriate habit-forming patterns. Keep instructions concise and broken into achievable chunks. In addition, the social-emotional understanding of children with FASD is often below their chronological age, so it may help to think about providing assistance and giving instructions that might ordinarily be more suitable for younger students. It is also beneficial to speak in concrete terms, especially to students who may be learning an additional language or dialect. Refrain from using idioms or words with double meanings such as 'jump on the computer'.

The following are some strategies for using concrete rather than abstract concepts:

- Expect learning to take place at a slower pace, make teaching interactive, and allow students to talk through their learning, as this may help with memory.
- Demonstrate a concept (show the students what to do rather than explaining it), and be prepared to repeat the demonstration/instruction several times.
- Provide concrete examples of abstract concepts, such as number lines, an abacus for understanding place value, and real objects for counting in sequence in maths. Similarly, using vertical number lines instead of horizontal number lines will help students visually identify that adding results in numbers going up and subtracting results in numbers going down.
- Create a visual journal that documents learning, using photos rather than abstract pictures.
- Use art projects to make abstract concepts more concrete. For example, you might use coloured sand to teach students about volume.
- Where appropriate, use computer-based learning programmes alongside a hands-on learning experience, because they are repetitive, visual, and provide immediate feedback.

- Teach cause and effect with the use of three-dimensional tactile resources. For example, with younger students, you might use pop-up toys, scented bubbles, jigsaws, and books with sound effects.
- Plan games and activities involving right and left instructions.
- Movement can aid memory retention, so plan physical activities to help students learn abstract concepts such as number or positional language.
- When designing worksheets, avoid putting too many problems or questions on one page, and leave plenty of white space in between. Avoid mixing different kinds of problems, such as addition and subtraction, multiplication and division problems, on the same page. Ensure the instructions are clear.
- Make process cards that break down different kinds of information or problems, such as maths problems or the steps in a science experiment, into a step-by-step process for the student to refer to as a reminder.
- Be aware that some activities with more than one component may create additional cognitive load for students with FASD. For example, giving students a set of questions and problems based on a story they have not read before and need to decode creates additional cognitive work that may be overwhelming. Allow extra time and provide scaffolding and guidance.

Keep it simple

Simplicity is an important tool for supporting students with FASD. Students with FASD often have a slower processing speed and struggle to retain and remember instructions and information. They are also easily over-stimulated, leading to 'shutdown', at which point they cannot take in any more information. Below are some ideas and approaches for promoting simplicity in the classroom:

- Have a plan or visual representation of what happens once the student gets to school, such as where to put their bag and what to do when the bell rings. The [visual scheduling tools](#) that are used by some autistic students may be useful, although bear in mind that it may be more appropriate to use photos rather than drawings for students with FASD.
- Ensure that all the equipment they need is readily accessible at the start of a lesson.
- Colour-code the student's books so that they can readily identify which book is for which subject.
- Write instructions on sticky notes that they can attach to their book or desk and refer back to.
- Keep worksheets minimal, cut them into sections, and give one section at a time.
- Use short sentences when giving instructions.
- Consider the student's sensory needs and remove any unnecessary stimulus.

Build in routines and repetition

Stable routines and consistent visual cues that do not change from day to day make it easier for students with FASD to know what to expect next, decreasing their anxiety and enabling them to learn. Repetition is extremely important as children with FASD have chronic short-term memory problems. They forget information that has been learned and retained for a short period of time, and even forget things that they want to remember. In order for them to commit something to long-term memory, it often needs to be repeatedly re-taught. This can be frustrating for students and teachers, but sensitivity and positive

reinforcement will create an effective learning environment. The following are some ideas for providing routine and repetition in the classroom:

- Set up a workstation with desk facing inward toward a wall and away from the door, or a desk in a break-out space that child can use.
- Provide individual cushions for floor work, which allows them to know their personal space.
- Encourage the use of headphones when students need quiet time to concentrate. Have headphones available for all to use, to normalise them.
- Allow students with FASD to leave class earlier or later than other students in order to avoid busy corridors.
- Give them specific tasks, such as collecting the PE shed or library key, to avoid the need for them to line up with others, and to provide a sense of responsibility.
- Provide regular opportunities for movement.
- Where possible, keep communication with home on a consistent day and in a consistent format such as text, email, or phone call. This will help students and their caregivers to know what to expect.

Provide appropriate supervision

Due to their cognitive challenges, children with FASD may bring a naivety to daily life situations. They need constant supervision so, as with much younger children, try to help them develop habitual patterns of appropriate behaviours, and ensure their safety and wellbeing at all times. Below are some ideas for providing appropriate supervision:

- Prepare a routine for break times, and make sure the student knows where to eat, where to play, and so on. Ensure that all duty teachers are aware of who this child is, and consider appointing peer mentors who can support the student in the playground.
- Have a 'silent mentor'. This could be a teacher who informally checks in two or three times a week during break times.
- Where possible, have an older mentor walk to and from school with them.
- Encourage parents to communicate with the teacher via text or email if they need to make them aware of anything; for example, if the student is going somewhere different after school, or had an argument with their sister before school which may affect how they feel.
- Ensure that others with whom the student interacts, such as bus drivers and sports coaches, know how to support them.
- For older students, text them prior to appointments or other commitments, such as a meeting with a counsellor, to remind them.

Endnotes

- 1 POPFASD (2019). 8 Magic Keys. <https://www.fasdoutreach.ca/resources/all/0-9/8-magic-keys>
- 2 Weston, J., & Thomas, S. (2018). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and complex trauma: A resource for educators. Marninwarantikura Women's Resource Centre

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FKirsty Griffith currently works as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb), having completed her post graduate diploma in specialist teaching, Learning and Behaviour in 2012. She is studying towards a Masters of Educational and Developmental Psychology to provide her with a qualification enabling her to further support young people with FASD and other neurodiverse learners. She has a professional interest in FASD, ignited when teaching a young man many years ago. She was fortunate to visit schools in Alberta, Canada to gain an understanding of their support systems for those with FASD.



Tracey Jongens

Tracey is a mum, a doting grandmother, and a passionate educator. After more than three decades working in primary education, Tracey recently became Head of Department for Learning Acceleration at Te Aratai College (Linwood College) in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tracey has previously worked as a teacher trainer at the New Zealand Graduate School of Education (NZGSE) and as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb). Her interest in FASD is both personal and professional. She has been raising awareness of FASD, particularly in education, for the last 12 years. Tracey is a founding member of FASD-CAN (www.fasd-can.org.nz), a New Zealand-based incorporated society founded to support families and caregivers of those living with FASD.