

FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

What is it?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs) is an umbrella term describing a group of conditions that can occur in an individual prenatally exposed to alcohol. Alcohol is a teratogen and can affect the brain, heart, liver, kidneys, eyes, ears, bones, and face of a developing fetus. Exposure can cause physical, mental, behavioral, and/or learning disabilities with lifelong implications.

FASD is not intended to be a clinical diagnosis. It refers to an umbrella encompassing 4 conditions used to describe FASDs including Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND), Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD), and Neurobehavioral Disorder Associated with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure (ND-PAE).

Diagnosis of FASDs can be difficult as other disorders have symptoms of FAS that overlap. There are several common co-occurring or misdiagnoses of FASD including: learning disability, speech and language delay, sensory dysfunction, ADHD, ASD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Delay.

What are common characteristics and effects?

Effects of FASD are dependent upon the time and frequency of maternal alcohol consumption. These effects can also be the result of poor prenatal care and nutrition. FASD is referred to as a “hidden” disability because its characteristics are subtle and go unrecognized. Children may be affected in varying degrees, from mild to severe. Certain physical findings, developmental problems, behavioral concerns, or problems in school may trigger consideration of exposure.

- Abnormal facial features that include: small eye opening, thin upper lip, short nose, flat mid-face, small upper jaw
- Small head size
- Growth deficits, height and/or weight
- Brain damage including intellectual delay
- Tremors, seizures
- Heart, lung, and kidney defects
- Hyperactivity and behavioral problems
- Attention and memory problems
- Vision and hearing problems
- Poor coordination and motor skills



Kennedy Krieger Institute

The Specialized Health Needs Interagency Collaboration (SHNIC) program is a collaborative partnership between the Kennedy Krieger Institute and the Maryland State Department of Education.

Suggested school accommodations

Due to the wide range of intellectual and behavioral abilities, the FASD student is placed in a variety of educational settings. Learning disabilities will range. Students will not outgrow the brain damage caused by alcohol exposure but manifestations of it will change as expectations, demands and transitions naturally develop. Understanding the brain will also help educators prepare and implement appropriate interventions. Supporting students with this condition in the school require educators and parents/guardian to work as a team. Some accommodations to consider for a 504/IEP could include:

- PT/OT/SLP evaluation
- Psychological evaluation
- Behavioral Assessment
- PT/SLP/OT evaluations
- Adaptive PE
- Transition planning
- Use of visual, auditory, and sensory cues
- Use of simple, clear steps
- Modeling and demonstrating appropriate behaviors
- Maintaining a daily schedule
- Use of multiple modalities
- Providing structure
- Maintaining smaller class size
- Creating quiet and safe zones
- Limiting distractions
- Organizing materials
- Supervision as needed for safety
- Staff education/training as appropriate
- Emergency Evacuation Plan (EEP)

Specific health issues for Individualized Healthcare Plan

- Diagnosis including co-occurring effects that could include heart defects, kidney defects, GI issues
- Review of current medications including side effects
- Identified safe areas for student
- Hearing screening (prone to ear infections)
- Baseline pain assessment, student may have high pain threshold
- Communicate with school staff, parents/guardian, and provider any changes or concerns about the disease
- Emergency Care Plan(s) (ECP) related to medical needs in the school setting and staff education/training as appropriate for each

Resources & Manuals

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

<https://www.nofas.org/about-fasd/>

American Academy of Pediatrics– The Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Toolkit

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders-toolkit/Pages/default.aspx>

University of South Dakota– Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Strategies

<https://www.usd.edu/-/media/files/medicine/center-for-disabilities/handbooks/fasd-educational-strategies-handbook.ashx?la=en>

Duke– Understanding FASD , A Comprehensive Guide for Pre-K-8 Educators

<https://sites.duke.edu/fasd/>