

## Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) & Youth Group

### What is FASD?

The term fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) refers to a wide range of physical, behavioral, and cognitive impairments that occur due to alcohol exposure before birth. FASD is an umbrella term that includes four specific types of disorders: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS), Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) and Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD). Each person with FASD is impacted differently. Some people may be mildly affected, while others, such of those who have been diagnosed with FAS, may have significant impairment. However, the vast majority of people with FASD do not have any physical differences in their appearance, which makes FASD a largely invisible disability. It is also the most common neurodevelopmental disorder in the general population (Waite, 2023).

### FASD Can Impact the Brain– (Hanlon-Dearman, 2016) -

FASD often causes differences in the way that the brain processes information, manages emotions, and handles social situations. While every person with FASD will be impacted differently, the following brain areas can be affected:

- Brain Structure
- Motor Skills
- Cognition
- Language
- Academic Achievement
- Memory
- Attention
- Executive Function
- Social Skills
- Emotional Regulation

### Why Understanding FASD Matters for Youth Leaders–

The effects of FASD may become more apparent during adolescence. This is often because the expectations that are placed on teens and young adults may become higher than the student is developmentally ready to meet. In order to help set your student up for success, strive to build a relationship with the student and their family. Then work together to create a plan that supports the student's individual needs.

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## Three Tips for Youth Leaders

### 1. Expectations should match a student's developmental level, not their age level -

Understand that when a student's developmental age is behind their chronological age, they will not be able to meet typical age-level expectations, even though they want to. So accept them as they are. Then change your expectations to match their development. Work with your team to create flexible spaces where a student can participate at their own pace, provide extra volunteer or peer support, and encourage leaders to meet challenges with compassion. Also be aware that sometimes students with FASD may gravitate towards younger students in the group. This is perfectly OK, but also know that having more supervision here is a good idea.

### 2. Structure is your friend -

Structure and clear communication help everyone but can be crucial for students with FASD. So, create clear routines, use visual schedules, give consistent expectations, and break down complex activities into smaller steps.

And don't forget, teaching the gospel in a way all students can connect with matters too. Some students with FASD may have a more difficult time with abstract reasoning. So, when teaching the gospel, try making abstract concepts concrete. For example, instead of just saying "love your neighbor," why not add in specific actions of what that could look like? You could say something like, "Loving your neighbor may mean saying hello when someone new joins the group." You may be surprised what a big difference this can make.

### 3. Focus on strengths, not struggles -

Many people with FASD are often reminded about the things they find challenging, which can cause discouragement and even low self-esteem. But it doesn't have to be that way at church. Get to know each person and discover their gifts. Look for opportunities to highlight those strengths and skills. Praise them often. Speak life into their lives and never forget to remind them that they are valuable.

**For more information on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder please visit [fasdunited.org](https://fasdunited.org)**

#### Citations -

Hanlon-Dearman, A Longstaffe, S. and Millar, M. (2016). *What's New in the 2015 Canadian Guidelines for FASD Diagnosis*. FASDCoalition.ca. <https://www.fasdcoalition.ca/whats-new-2015-canadian-guidelines-fasd-diagnosis/>

Waite D, Burd L. Common developmental trajectories and clinical identification of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: A synthesis of the literature. *Adv Drug Alcohol Res*. 2023 Apr 3;3:10877. doi: 10.3389/adar.2023.10877. PMID: 38389815; PMCID:

**I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well. - Psalm 139:14**