

# HOW TO EXPLAIN AN FASD DIAGNOSIS TO YOUR CHILD

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# WHAT IS FASD?

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Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a diagnostic term used to describe impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, and need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and social skills, to reach their full potential. Each individual with FASD is unique and has areas of both strengths and challenges.

To learn the basics of what FASD is, you can take the CanFASD free online course. The course was created for anyone that may interact with someone who has FASD, including parents, caregivers and family. You will learn about the effects of alcohol on the developing child, signs and symptoms of FASD, how alcohol impacts brain development, and more.

- KnowFASD is an online resource for caregivers that provides information across the spectrum and lifespan of individuals who have FASD.
- You may also find our Caregiver Resource Guide helpful in explaining the challenges your child with FASD may face, and how to gather support to help you and your child.



# AFTER THE DIAGNOSIS

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Receiving a diagnosis of FASD can cause a number of feelings in the caregiver and the individual with FASD.

Depending on your child's age, they may feel relief from having an explanation for their behavior, but many may be confused by what the diagnosis means. Health care professionals will explain to the caregiver what the diagnosis means, and how to best help the child. However, explaining the diagnosis to the child can be difficult, and it will take time for them to fully understand. There is no right age to tell your child. It is important to answer questions they may have about why they think and act differently than their peers.

# HOW DO I EXPLAIN FASD TO MY CHILD?

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*The following are tips on how to explain the diagnosis of FASD to your child in a way that they can understand, and feel empowered by their disorder:*

- Begin talking about FASD as early as possible, and take advantage of teaching moments that come up.
  - If your child becomes frustrated with his/herself, explain that they are having a hard time because of FASD, and that you are there to help them.
  - If they ask why they can't do something, explain that their brain is different than other people's, but encourage them to keep practicing until they get it.
- If the child feels angry about their diagnosis, remind them that everyone deals with challenges, but they also have many unique strengths and talents as well.
  - Some days will be better than others.
  - You can remind them that they are not the only ones with this disability (sometimes kids think they are the only ones).



# TIPS ON EXPLAINING FASD

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- Continue the conversation as they age
  - Remember to use simple language when explaining FASD to your child, and use examples to make it easier for them to understand.
  - “Your brain works differently, like someone in a wheelchair, their legs work differently”.
  - Keep in mind that you will need to repeat yourself several times, in different situations, until your child understands. Focusing on the fact that their brain works differently is important at any age.
  - You will need to provide more information and present it differently as your child gets older and can better understand aspects of the disorder.
- Re-frame the diagnosis in a positive light by reinforcing their strengths while acknowledging the challenges they may face.
  - Someone who doodles in class may have a hard time focusing, but are also showing a creative side. How could this become a part of their school work and everyday life?

# EXPLAINING STRENGTHS

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Just as important as understanding what an individual with FASD may have difficulty with, is knowing what they *can* do, and encouraging their strengths. Come up with a list of strengths with your child, and talk about how these things can help them.

FASD consultant and motivational speaker Myles Himmelreich, encourages people to think about FASD as *Faith, Ability, Strength* and *Determination*.

People with FASD are often known to be:

- Friendly
- Helpful
- Outgoing
- Good storytellers
- Artistic and musical
- Forgiving and Caring
- Strong hands-on learners
- Good with children and animals



# TIPS ON EXPLAINING FASD

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- Explain to the child that they will still be happy and successful, but they will need different supports along the way.
  - With the diagnosis, your child is more likely to get the help and support they need.
  - They will be able to understand themselves better and why their brain works the way it does.
- To alleviate blame and anger toward the birthmother, use non-judgmental language, explaining that their birthmother wanted the best for them, but there may have been circumstances that lead to her consuming alcohol.
  - Explain that often times the mother drinks before she knows she is pregnant...
  - ...or that many people have disorders of their own that prevent them from stopping their alcohol use, even if they are pregnant.
  - If you are the birthmother, this could be an emotional conversation. Remember to give only the information that is appropriate for the child's age and understanding.



# TIPS ON EXPLAINING FASD

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- Depending on the age of the child, you can use story books, pictures or videos to help explain what FASD is:
  - Forgetful Frankie, The World's Greatest Rock Skipper, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
  - The Best I Can Be: Living with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Effects
  - Simon Says: FASD for Kids, Parents and Teachers



- Grief and loss is a normal part of accepting and understanding the diagnosis.
  - You may wish to seek professional support to address grief and loss following a diagnosis.
  - You may also seek professional help for your child if they are having a difficult time with the diagnosis.
- Your attitude will reflect in your child. The more accepting and open you are discussing FASD, they will feel the same.