

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH FASD & TRAUMA :

A Guide for Educators

HOW DOES TRAUMA AND FASD AFFECT CHILDREN?

Students with FASD have brain differences that slow processing and regulate stress differently. When trauma or overwhelm happens, they enter “trauma fog,” causing shutdowns or agitation.

Prenatal alcohol exposure affects brain development in areas controlling memory, attention, and executive function. Trauma adds layers of hypervigilance, fear, and mistrust.

When both occur, the child’s brain may frequently enter “survival mode,” leading to shutdown, impulsivity, agitation, or apparent defiance when stress exceeds coping capacity.

These behaviors are not a choice; they reflect an overwhelmed nervous system and slower processing.

Neurotypical children may calm within hours after emotional overwhelm, whereas Neurodiverse children, including those with FASD, may take **24 hours or longer** to fully recover from emotional overwhelm due to their unique brain wiring and sensory processing differences.

SIGNS

- Difficulty recalling instructions or making mistakes even after reminders.
- Sudden disengagement mid-lesson (staring, doodling, humming).
- Emotional meltdowns after minor stressors.
- Zoning out or nonresponsive.
- Overreacting or seeming untruthful due to memory gaps (confabulation).
- Sensitivity to changes or sensory input
- Difficulty transitioning between activities.
- Forgetfulness or difficulty following routines
- Emotional outbursts or withdrawal

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

SAFETY FIRST

- Build predictability: post daily routines, use visual schedules, & prepare for any change.
- Provide sensory support incorporating movement-based activities & sensory tools.
- Create a calm, predictable environment with soft lighting & accessible quiet spaces

RELATIONSHIP-BASED TEACHING

- Greet by name daily and use positive connection rituals.
- Repair ruptures quickly; consistency builds trust.

SIMPLIFY INSTRUCTIONS

- One step at a time. Check comprehension by asking the student to show rather than tell.
- Pair spoken directions with pictures or written cues.

ADJUST PACE

- Give processing pauses instead of repeating or escalating.
- Extra time for transitions prevents overload.

CO-REGULATION OVER DISCIPLINE

- Calm your tone before correcting.
- Shift focus from consequence to re-safetying: Lower your voice, get on their eye level, & “Let’s take a breath, then solve it together.”

FLEXIBLE ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

- Chunk tasks into short sections.
- Use concrete examples and hands-on materials. Use Visuals.
- Reduce visual clutter; use color coding for subjects or tasks.

TEAM COLLABORATION

- Partner with caregivers, SLPs, OTs, counselors, & other professionals & include brain-based accommodations.

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CORE TEACHING PRINCIPALS

Focus on relational safety, predictability, and pacing to help students navigate stress & overload to access learning.

	FASD NEED	TRAUMA NEED	PRACTICAL RESPONSE
SLOWER PROCESSING REQUIRES EXTRA TIME TO THINK, RESPOND, & RECOVER.	SLOWER COGNITIVE AND SENSORY PROCESSING	SENSE OF SAFETY AND CALM TRANSITIONS	USE A SLOW PACE, GENTLE TONE, REPEAT DIRECTIONS, & ALLOW PAUSES BEFORE EXPECTING A RESPONSE
MEMORY CHALLENGES MAKE LEARNING INCONSISTENT DAY- TO-DAY.	WEAK OR INCONSISTENT MEMORY RECALL	PREDICTABILITY AND STRUCTURE	PROVIDE VISUAL PROMPTS, CONSISTENT CUES, AND REPEAT CONCEPTS DAILY
IMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS REFLECT STRESS, NOT DEFIANCE.	IMPULSIVE REACTIONS AND POOR SELF-REGULATION	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND CO-REGULATION	OFFER CALM REDIRECTION, MODEL SELF-REGULATION, AND PROVIDE SENSORY BREAKS
DIFFICULTY APPLYING SKILLS ACROSS SITUATIONS LIMITS LEARNING CARRYOVER.	DIFFICULTY GENERALIZING AND TRANSFERRING LEARNING	REASSURANCE AND RELATIONAL SAFETY	TEACH NEW SKILLS WITHIN DAILY ROUTINES AND REAL-LIFE CONTEXTS
ABSTRACT LANGUAGE CAUSES CONFUSION AND DYSREGULATION.	NEED FOR CONCRETE, LITERAL LANGUAGE	CLEAR EXPECTATIONS TO REDUCE ANXIETY	USE SHORT, CLEAR STATEMENTS; AVOID METAPHORS & SARCASM; SHOW WHAT YOU MEAN.

This incorporation is based on evidence that neurodivergent individuals, including those with FASD, often require much longer nervous system & cognitive recovery time from stress compared to neurotypical peers.

GUIDING BELIEFS FOR EDUCATORS

- All students with FASD can learn with clear communication, individualized pacing, and relational safety.
- A structured, predictable environment fosters safety and learning.
- Healing and learning happen together when adults respond to distress with structure and empathy.
- Trauma-informed classrooms protect against further harm by building trust, safety, and belonging.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

[FASD United](#)
[Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Complex Trauma](#) (FASD Network, 2024).
[CDC FASD Resources page](#)

