

## How to create a supportive learning environment for primary aged children with FASD

Students affected by FASD may learn and behave differently to neurotypical children due to the impact of prenatal alcohol exposure. The challenges that students with FASD may experience in the school environment can be due to the neurodevelopmental impairments caused by their brain injury. Behaviours should be understood or interpreted effects of this brain injury, rather than deliberate misbehaviour. It is possible to make adjustments and modifications to the classroom environment that allow schools to better meet the needs of children with FASD and support their ongoing learning. Meeting the needs of children with FASD requires a whole school approach to ensure that these children have the opportunity to reach their potential in a successful and supportive learning environment.

However, it's important to note that each child with FASD will have different strengths and challenges, and these strategies may not be effective every time. Maintaining flexibility is crucial when working to support children with FASD. Additionally, while the strategies below are designed to support children with FASD, due to the overlap between FASD and other neurodevelopmental disorders they may be useful for other children who are experiencing difficulties in the classroom.

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### Create a calm, uncluttered learning environment

Sensory processing difficulties can be a significant challenge for children with FASD. Busy, noisy, and cluttered classroom environments can be overstimulating, may be a distraction and may cause anxiety. The classroom should be structured to decrease stimulation where possible. For example:

- Use natural light instead of fluorescent lights that may flicker.
- Use cabinets or storage boxes to put away classroom supplies when not in use.
- Minimise excess noise from outside the classroom (or allow student to use headphones to screen out noise).
- Minimise the items on the student's desk or workspace.

### Minimise visual distractions

Children with FASD can easily become overwhelmed or distracted by a cluttered visual classroom environment. It's important to minimise visual distractions in the classroom to support children in maintaining focus and attention. For example:

- Remove colourful displays or posters near the student's workspace (or cover when not in use).
- Avoid hanging items on windows or ceilings.
- Use warm, neutral tones rather than bright colours for interior décor, furniture, and floor coverings (where possible).
- Use black and white worksheets or cut worksheets into sections to avoid an overload of information.

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### Provide fidget items

Some children with FASD experience a need to move or fidget frequently. This helps them to de-escalate or calm down. Fidget items can be a useful tool to assist children with FASD to relax and focus their attention. Fidget items should be small and quiet, and can include things such as a stress ball, textured fabric or cushions, specialised fidget toys, or a plush toy. Weighted blankets are also useful to assist children to remain calm in some situations. However, it is important to be cautious that fidget items do not overstimulate a student.

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## Planned seating arrangements

Children with FASD benefit from consistency and routine. It's important that a child with FASD sits in the same seat each day. If possible, try to ensure that the child's seat is located away from distractions (e.g., seating the student at the front of the classroom near the teacher, or away from other students who may cause conflict). A sense of safety and predictability are important for children with FASD.

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## Ensure a consistent and well-defined classroom layout

Much like maintaining a permanent seating location, children with FASD will benefit from a consistent classroom layout that is easy to navigate. Avoid rearranging or making significant changes to the layout of furniture in the classroom. It can also be helpful to clearly demarcate different spaces in the classroom. For example, when lining up or sitting on the floor, coloured tape can be used to define personal boundaries. This can assist a student with FASD to ensure they don't intrude on another student's personal space.

## Provide a calm and quiet breakaway space

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It's important to provide a calm and quiet breakaway space in the classroom where a student with FASD can go when they are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or need time to calm down. This space can also be utilised to allow a student to move away from their peers and complete tasks without distractions. It's important to remember that these spaces should never be used for punishment, but as a tool to positively support students with FASD to learn self-regulation. A breakaway space could be:

- A quiet area with cushions on the floor (defined by coloured tape to create clear boundaries).
- A small tent or enclosed space.
- A small cubicle or carrel desk.

In the absence of a physical space, students may be able to achieve 'time out' by using headphones.

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## Identify and minimise specific triggers in the environment

Every individual with FASD has different strengths and faces different challenges. It is important to adapt and personalise the classroom environment (where possible) to support each child according to their individual needs. When a child with FASD is in a school environment, there may be certain sounds, smells, sensations, or other distractions that impact on their ability to learn and behave appropriately. Specific triggers may be small or unnoticeable to others in the classroom, such as a light buzzing, a ticking clock, the smell of someone's food, or an irritating clothing tag. Identifying, removing, or understanding these triggers can enable a student to engage and participate in learning.

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