

# STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH ADOLESCENTS WITH FASD

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**PARENTING IS HARD. PARENTING A TEEN WITH FASD? EVEN HARDER.** IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT OUR ADOLESCENTS WITH FASD ARE JUST LIKE OTHER TEENAGERS, STRUGGLING WITH MANY OF THE SAME ISSUES, SOCIAL COMPLEXITIES, CHALLENGES AND HORMONES. THAT BEING SAID, OFTEN OUR TEENS HAVE BRAIN BASED CHALLENGES THAT MAKE THESE AREAS MORE DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE AND MORE STRESSFUL OR WORRISOME FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS.

The transition from childhood to adolescence can be full of unique challenges for adolescence with FASD and their caregivers. The difficulties and challenges I'm normally presented with from the adults in our adolescents lives tend to follow thematic behavioural characteristics: they do not listen, they are not learning from their mistakes, they were disrespectful, we cannot get them to understand, they just are not trying, they are manipulative of me and their peers. When we see youth behaving in these ways it is easy to think they are doing it purposely, or seeking attention, maybe that they are stubborn, manipulative, or defiant. Unfortunately, I often hear others attributing these behaviours to poor parenting, abuse or neglect, lack of supervision at home or simply that these youths are just "bad eggs." However, what we know about youth with FASD that what's really going on are *brain based* challenges with translating verbal instruction into action, an impacted capacity to understand, a difficulty linking cause and effect or generalizing from one situation to another, memory issues, sensory overload issues, and a challenge to understand social cues or knowing what to do in social settings which can lead to vulnerability and being easily led by adverse peers. Many of these challenges are not new. We have watched these kids grow

up and we have dealt with these challenges before but now they are teenagers with racing hormones, age-typical boundary pushing and general moodiness that makes these issues seem so much more difficult to manage.

## HOW DO WE WORK WITH ADOLESCENTS WITH FASD?

**Relationship, Relationship, Relationship:** I cannot stress enough the importance of building a strong, non-judgmental and understanding relationship with our individuals with FASD. There is no MAGIC ANSWER, only strategies and useful tools we can use. Teens with FASD are as different from each other as any group of individuals. Each youth presents an individual and complex brain profile of strengths and challenges which can be demanding and difficult to accommodate for. Behaviours of these children and youth can often be challenging and try our patience. Responses to the strategies we put in place can be inconsistent. This is where RELATIONSHIP is key; strategies and tools will only work with a strong foundation.

# STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

## 1. BE SUPPORTIVE

### Successful Support looks like:

**Structure** is vital to success so help with lists, schedules, timers, and supportive technology

**Respect, partnership and participation** by the individual. We are not trying to control their lives; we are trying to support their development of autonomy.

Offer some degree of **assistance that reflects the person's developmental age** (think younger when needed) that is **RESPECTFUL** – working **WITH**, rather than **AT** the person

## 3. LANGUAGE MATTERS

Use fewer words, **slow down**, give them time to answer

Be direct, **concrete**

Avoid abstract words, sarcasm, metaphors

Use **visual cues**

Don't over explain things

Be respectful!

## 4. HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Changing our expectations to meet a youth's abilities is essential. There are multiple ways of doing this: thinking younger, slowing your pace for processing, trying to match your communication level to the youth's, and matching academic expectations to the ability of the youth.

## 5. FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

### Strengths come in all shapes and sizes:

Focusing on **strengths** rather than constantly on limitations and negative behaviours is essential. We can **build** on strengths to develop **strategies** and abilities to working with our youth. Take every opportunity to **celebrate strengths and small successes** as this emotional reinforcement builds self-esteem and mean so much to our youth. Look for kids who are **creative, funny, engaging, determined, musical, athletic, cultural, who love to cook, who love to dance, who love to do nail design, who are great with animals**, the list goes on and on.

## 2. SHIFT YOUR PARADIGM

Modelling **ACCEPTANCE** begins with us. Many of our youth feel isolated from their peers, different from their peers and un-accepted for who they are. **EVERYONE** is different and that is okay. Part of modelling acceptance is in **shifting our paradigms**. Seeing behaviour as brain based and not intentional is the first step. Behaviour is **COMMUNICATION**. Behaviours are the actions that an adolescent often cannot put into words. We see youth "acting out" and feel that they need to be disciplined. We need to guide behaviour and change our thinking from **WON'T TO CAN'T**; from **PUNISHMENT TO LEARNING**, redirection and re-teaching. **Trying differently, not harder**. If the strategy is not working, **try another**.

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