

# Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): A Neurodevelopmental Disorder

## What is a Neurodevelopmental Disorder?

Neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) are conditions that impact how the brain functions. The impact of alcohol on the developing brain can lead to a range of impairments from mild to severe—additionally, ongoing trauma and adversity compound vulnerabilities for individuals in this population. FASD is more common yet less recognised than other neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, Downs syndrome and other developmental disabilities. Because FASD may impact multiple areas of the brain, providing comprehensive, personalised care and support that considers the individual needs of patients is crucial for their wellbeing.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) describes the range of disabilities in children due to alcohol exposure during pregnancy. The impacts may include brain impairments that affect memory and executive functioning (decision-making) and physical impairments that may cause defects to the kidneys, heart, lungs, eyes, ears and musculoskeletal system.

FASD is not genetically passed down from mother to child and only occurs when there is the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. The Australian Guide to the Diagnosis of FASD<sup>1</sup> recommends that the best choice for women is no consumption of alcohol during pregnancy and breastfeeding.



## What we know

- With appropriate supports at school, children with FASD can succeed and indeed thrive at school. Children with FASD have many strengths.
- Most children with FASD are born without any identifying features of a disability. Approximately 10% of children will be born with the identifying facial characteristics of FASD, which change over time as the individual ages.
- FASD is commonly referred to as a “hidden disability”, increasing the vulnerability of the child not being assessed for FASD or misdiagnosing their condition.
- The most common signs of children having FASD are delays in reaching developmental milestones and complex behaviour problems that are challenging for parents or caregivers to manage.
- Children who have FASD may present to health services with developmental delays, difficulties adjusting to school, learning problems, ADHD and symptoms of poor social and adaptive functioning.

## Best practice and culture as care

It is vital to provide ongoing training for parents and caregivers to help them better understand and care for their child with FASD, along with financial and social supports for carers to help them manage their responsibilities.

Structured ongoing support at school is crucial for children with FASD to help them succeed academically and socially. Identifying a child's strengths and supporting them in areas such as music, sports, and drama is also essential to help build their confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Social skills training is an important aspect of treatment and may need to be repeated throughout childhood as the child develops and grows.

**Resource:** The [FASD and Complex Trauma – A resource for Educators](#) by Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre is an exceptional resource and is available for download.

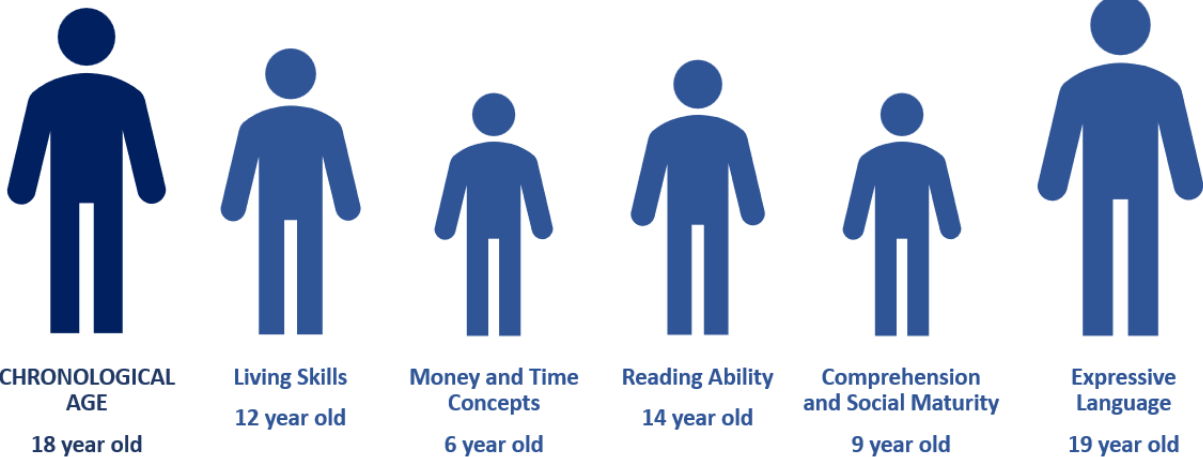
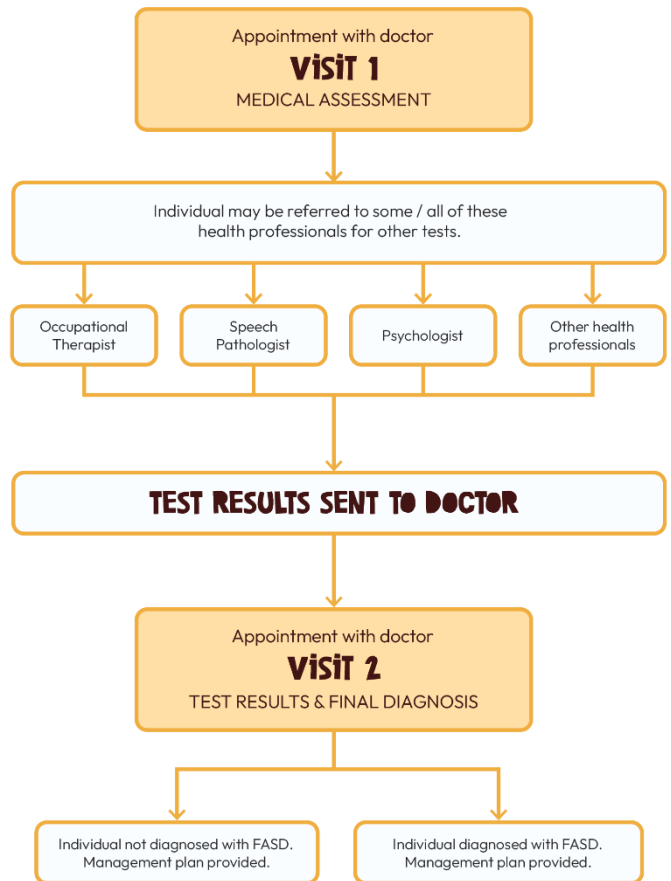
## Advice for the health workforce

Access to early screening and FASD diagnosis is crucial in ensuring prompt and effective treatment. People diagnosed with FASD should be eligible for and have access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and therapeutic supports, such as speech/language therapy and occupational therapy, to help manage their symptoms.

In some cases, pharmacological treatments may also be necessary to manage the symptoms of FASD.

Ongoing training in FASD for health workforce is highly recommended including allied health.

**Resource:** [www.fasdhub.org.au](http://www.fasdhub.org.au) has extensive information on [assessment and diagnosis](#) including a list of [assessment services](#) and information related to the [NDIS](#).



**Diagram:** Dymaturity - Example developmental stages of 18 year old person with FASD.

## References

<sup>i</sup> The Australian Guide to the Diagnosis of FASD <https://www.fasdhub.org.au/fasd-information/assessment-and-diagnosis/guide-to-diagnosis/>