

FASD AND SOCIAL WORK

Cheat Sheet to Successful Advocacy

Understanding how Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) affects everyday functioning can help social workers recognize unmet needs, develop accessible plans, and improve continuity of support.

1 LEARN BEFORE YOU INTERPRET

Review what is already known before drawing conclusions.

- Learn how FASD affects brain development, memory, executive functioning, processing, learning, and adaptive skills.
- Review existing assessments and previous service records, not just the diagnosis page.
- Look for patterns across reports and settings, even when FASD has never been identified.
- Consider whether current services and expectations reflect the person's actual functioning.
- Begin adapting support when needs are apparent. A formal FASD diagnosis is not required to make services more accessible.

Avoid assuming: repeated difficulties reflect a lack of motivation without considering underlying limitations.

2 UNDERSTAND HOW THE PERSON ACTUALLY FUNCTIONS

A brief intake may not reveal the support someone needs in everyday life.



For children and youth

- Involve caregivers early, alongside the child or young person.
- Ask what caregivers routinely remind, organize, prepare, supervise, anticipate, or do on the child's behalf.
- Identify support that has become so routine that caregivers may not think to mention it.
- Ask what happens when that support is unavailable.
- Ask about capacity and tolerance: how much can the child manage before becoming overwhelmed or unable to continue?



For adults

- Ask what is easy, what is difficult, and what requires assistance.
- Ask who currently supports them and whether they would like that person involved.
- Explore what happens between appointments, particularly with paperwork, scheduling, transportation, and following through on plans.
- Recognize that support needs may continue throughout adulthood, even when someone communicates fluently or appears independent.
- Ask about overwhelm, capacity, and how much the person can realistically manage in a day.

Avoid assuming: verbal ability or performance during an appointment equals independent functioning in daily life.

3 MAKE THE PLAN ACCESSIBLE

Match the plan to the person's abilities and available support.

- Develop the plan with the person and, when appropriate, caregivers or chosen supporters.
- Break the plan into clear, manageable steps with realistic timelines.
- Build in practical help with reminders, organization, transportation, paperwork and follow-through. Identify who will provide it.
- Consider total demands. Several manageable tasks may become overwhelming when combined.
- Anticipate difficulties, arrange support early and maintain supports that are working.
- Identify what needs to be done with the person, who will provide that assistance, and who will help with follow-through.

Avoid assuming: agreement during a meeting means the person can independently carry out everything discussed.

4 INTERPRET DIFFICULTY DIFFERENTLY

When a plan isn't working, examine the barriers before concluding the person is disengaged, declining services, or failing to follow through.

- Did the person understand and remember what was being asked?
- Could they initiate, organize, and complete the next step?
- What assistance or change in the environment might make participation possible?
- Consider whether the pace, complexity, communication, or expectations of the service need to change.
- Could stress, fatigue, sensory overload, or emotional dysregulation be affecting the person's ability to participate?
- Does the person feel safe in the relationship?

Avoid assuming: repeated difficulty means the person needs fewer supports rather than a different approach.

5 MAINTAIN CONNECTION AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

Help ensure referrals result in meaningful access to services.

- Make calls together, assist with applications, and arrange appointments when needed.
- With permission, communicate relevant information and support needs to the next provider.
- Help the person navigate transitions without repeatedly having to explain their history and disability.
- Check whether the new service is accessible and whether the support is actually working.
- Before closing a case, consider whether the person has successfully connected with the support they need.
- A trusting relationship can promote engagement and follow-through.
- **Respect self-determination while offering the assistance needed to exercise it.**

Avoid assuming: a referral, phone number, or accepted application means the person can access and use the service.



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1 in 20
may have FASD

Limited diagnostic capacity

<1%
diagnosed

Professionals are not trained

