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WEBINAR SPEECH FOR POSTER

INTRODUCTION

Hello, my name is Shelly, and today I want to talk about Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a hidden disability that is often overlooked. This condition is very close to my heart, as I have had firsthand experience caring for a child with FASD. Through this speech, I hope to shed light on the challenges individuals with FASD face and emphasize why greater awareness and understanding are crucial.

Di Pietro (2016) states that Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is increasingly recognised as a significant public health issue worldwide. It is acknowledged as a lifelong condition that affects brain structure and function, leading to neurodevelopmental impairment.

DEFINITION

However, National Organisation for FASD (2020) highlight, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is identified as a lifelong neuro developmental condition caused by prenatal alcohol exposure. This leads to cognitive, emotional, and behavioural difficulties while also impacting multiple physiological systems beyond the brain. Some children may have distinct facial features, while others exhibit no outward physical indicators. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2025) concur, acknowledging FASD can have lifelong effects, including behaviour and learning difficulties as well as physical implications to young children. However, Mukherjee and Aiton (2021) refer to FASD as the 'hidden' disability, due to many children not displaying any physical characteristics of FASD. Moreover, Adoption UK (2018) describes FASD as a "hidden epidemic," stressing the challenges individuals face, due to a lack of awareness and difficulties in obtaining a formal diagnosis.

DIAGNOSIS

According to NHS (2023) parents or caregivers can seek a referral from a GP or paediatrician for an FASD assessment. An essential part of the diagnosis involves healthcare professionals first determining whether prenatal alcohol exposure occurred. Smeets and Roeleveld (2016) emphasize the importance of recognising signs and symptoms of Additional Learning Needs (ALN), as children with ALN form a diverse and varied group rather than a strictly defined collective. However, Carter and McKenzie (2024) argue that ALN referrals are influenced by systematic biases, leading to certain groups of children being classified under ALN due to institutional practices rather than individual differences.

CHALLENGES OF DIAGNOSIS

The Department of Health and Social Care (2021) stress that diagnosing Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is complex, as no definitive test exists for the condition. Instead, clinicians identify characteristic features while ruling out other possible explanations. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), (n.d) affirms assessing FASD in babies presents additional challenges, and obtaining an accurate history of prenatal alcohol exposure can be difficult. Moreover, Bell *et al.* (2016) highlight that mothers may be hesitant to disclose alcohol use due to stigma, fear, or difficulties recalling specific details. Morrison *et al.* (2020) further supports this, noting that such reluctance can influence healthcare advice and support, as mothers may fear judgment from professionals.

The Child Psychology (2025) links heavy alcohol use during pregnancy to poor attachment, as maternal guilt, resentment, and judgment may hinder bonding. This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, stressing the need for care, love, and security to promote healthy development (West, 2025). Bowlby's attachment theory also highlights the vital role of early emotional bonds in a child's well-being and long-term growth (Bowlby, 1997).

National FASD (2024) points out that the lack of specialised training among healthcare professionals in diagnosing Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) can lead to misdiagnosis or delayed identification, affecting support and intervention. Moreover, FASD Cymru (2020) states there is a significant shortage of specialised FASD training, which can limit the ability of healthcare professionals

to provide effective diagnosis and support, potentially placing them at a disadvantage in addressing the needs of individuals with FASD.

National Fostering Group (n.d.) affirms misdiagnosis can lead to anxiety, frustration, and guilt for parents and carers, especially when interventions are delayed. It may also reduce trust in medical professionals, making individuals hesitant to seek further assessments or support.

BENEFITS OF DIAGNOSIS

- Families will gain access to FASD specialised services that include healthcare support, specific therapies and education.
- Early interventions are beneficial for improving learning outcomes.
- Behavioural management strategies will be implemented (FASD, 2020).

The ALN Code for Wales establishes statutory guidance for assisting children with learning difficulties, including FASD. It requires schools and local authorities to identify learning barriers and implement appropriate support, helping to prevent misdiagnosis and ensure that children receive the necessary interventions (Welsh Government, 2021). Furthermore, this links to the UNCRC Article 23- Rights of children with disabilities: Governments must ensure children with disabilities, including those with ALN, receive education and care that promotes independence and inclusion (UNICEF, n.d.).

Davie (2017) emphasises that emotional immaturity in children with FASD can leave them feeling overwhelmed and struggling to comprehend their surroundings, making it difficult to process their environment or recognise unfamiliar people. This can lead to heightened anxiety and emotional outbursts, while difficulties in self-regulation contribute to frustration for both the child and their parent or carer. However, Zieff (n.d.) argues children with FASD struggle with the concept cause and effect, leading to trouble at home and school. Having difficulty with generalisation makes it hard for them to learn from mistakes and make corrections.

BARRIERS

Regulation of emotions presents a daily challenge for children with FASD, as they often struggle to recognise and express emotions. Parental and adult responses play a fundamental role in shaping their emotional development. However, research on these processes in young children with FASD remains limited (Looney *et al.*, 2025). Learning with FASD (2025) highlights that children

with FASD frequently experience difficulties in interpreting others' emotions, which can impact their social interactions and emotional well-being. Consequently, they may be more vulnerable to manipulation and external pressures. Te Nahu *et al.* (2020) notes that children with FASD show reduced adaptive behaviour due to severe brain impairment, though the factors shaping their adaptation and emotional expression remain unclear.

National FASD (2020), Fetal Alcohol Advisory Support and Training Team (2025) state that children with FASD often experience significant emotional challenges, frequently relying on prompts from adults to navigate social interactions. This dependence can contribute to feelings of low self-esteem and frustration. As early as nursery school, children may begin to recognise differences between themselves and their peers. Likewise, peers may notice these differences and express their thoughts and feelings, which can lead to experiences of insecurity, rejection, and social exclusion for children with FASD. (National FASD, 2020), Fetal Alcohol Advisory Support and Training Team (2025).

STRATEGY

According to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (2017) children with FASD can easily become overwhelmed, so it's important to keep things clear and straightforward.

- Break complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps
- Allow time for regular breaks and avoid spending too long on a single task.
- Provide one clear instruction at a time to support understanding (Me and My FASD, 2020).

PROS

- Simple clear instructions can help manage frustration and anxiety
- Enhances focus, provides opportunity to release emotions, preventing overstimulation
- Encourages independence skills and promotes confidence (NICE,2022),

CONS

- Limiting flexibility can make it difficult to adapt to unexpected changes
- Relying on step-by-step instruction may limit problem solving and independent thinking

- Expectations need to be realistic to promote achievable goals- without risk of underestimation (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2017).

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) legislative framework review examines how effectively ALN policies are understood and applied in Wales. It gathers feedback from educators, health boards, and families to identify challenges and recommend improvements in supporting children with learning needs (Welsh Government, 2025).

EVALUATION

Supporting children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) requires a careful balance between support and flexibility to enhance development. Predictable routines provide consistency and stability, but interventions must be adaptable to individual needs to encourage independence and prevent reliance on rigid systems (Healthcare Improvements Scotland, 2019). According to Early identification, professional training, and awareness ensure timely support. Addressing prenatal education helps prevent FASD by informing parents and healthcare providers of its risks (NHS, n.d). When teachers, caregivers, and families collaborate, young children receive the support they need to thrive, develop skills, and build confidence in a nurturing environment (Snap Cymru, n.d).

Any Questions?

QUESTION 1

How does FASD impact a child's sleep pattern? Are there any strategies to help improve sleep?

ANSWER

FASD Sleep (n.d.) state around 80 percent of parents of children with FASD report sleep disturbances, such as sleepwalking and sensory issues.

Consistent bedtime routine – signals such as story time or gentle music

The use of weighted blankets can provide a sense of security and promote relaxation (Mass FASD, 2023).

Adjust sleep expectations

Set realistic goals of quality sleep rather than duration, as children with FASD have different sleeping patterns (Adoption UK, 2018).

QUESTION 2

Do FASD children struggle during transitions?

ANSWER

According to Learning with FASD (2025) sudden changes can be very overwhelming for FASD children. According to FASD Hub (2016) practitioners can help by using visual schedules, prompts and timers these tools provide a consistent familiar routine to ease transitions.

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