

Use A-L-A-R-M-S to Identify the Primary Behaviours of FASD

The acronym ALARMS is a good way to identify these students. All of the following behaviours are caused only by the permanent brain damage of FASD. When any or all of these behaviours are seen you, as an educator, are seeing the brain damage. Remember that you can't fix these students, the brain damage must be accommodated. Without accommodations these students with FASD will not be successful.

Please note that some experts use the acronym ALARMMERS which identifies even more examples of primary FASD behaviours caused by brain damage. ALARMS is a simpler version of ALARMMERS.

The main take-away message here is: When you see these behaviours think brain damage and try to provide Accommodations to support this damage.

A-Adaptation- These students have trouble getting stopped or started on activities. Adaptation is considered to be one of the main disablers of people with FASD throughout their lives. At school it often looks like great trouble managing all the transitions that happen throughout the day. So when a child is asked to stop doing his Math and move on to Art there is likely to be trouble without a lot of warning and supports throughout the process. There is likely to be more trouble with transitions if the child has not finished the Math seatwork. The FASD-affected brain can't cope with or adapt to this reality.

In addition any unsupervised time is very difficult for students with FASD as there are no routines or rules to depend upon. Troubles at lunchtime, recess and on the bus are classic adaptive challenges for children with FASD. Adaptive and Sensory issues are the two ALARMS areas that bring on the classic FASD melt-downs or the tuning out responses that most educators find with children with FASD.

Adaptation: Joey is in grade 1 doing seatwork. Time is up and the class is moving on. Joey is not finished and becomes agitated. Teacher indicates the quiet corner is coming at which point Joey hits the teacher, picks up his chair and throws it hitting another child on the back. He then runs and hides in the bathroom and is found huddled on the floor sucking his thumb. Class is evacuated.

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L-Language- Children with FASD frequently are gifted when it comes to expressive language but show great disability in the receptive language domain. This is very confusing for educators who hear a child "talking a blue streak" and sometimes sounding a lot older than their years. But

these same children often can't comprehend instructions or produce a product based on what they hear. Educators may feel that the child is "playing them" but this is not the case. These language abnormalities are typical FASD primary (or brain-based) behaviours.

Language: Maria is in grade 3 and never stops chattering. She can "talk the bark of trees" and is an expert at "tattling" on the other children. She doesn't seem to "get " that she is annoying even when it is explained over and over again. Her lack of understanding is clear from the blank look she delivers during and after the explanations.

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A-Attention –ADHD/ADD is frequently diagnosed first with students with FASD. Later it is found that the student has been affected by PAE which has caused the ADHD symptoms in this case. It is interesting to note that when ADHD/ADD was first "discovered" over 40 years ago it was labelled as MBD – Minimal Brain Damage. When the pharmaceutical companies became involved in this area the MDB designation disappeared.

This should not be construed as saying that all ADD/ADHD is caused by the brain damage of PAE. But the opinion of adolescent psychiatrist and FASD expert Dr. Kieran O'Malley (used previously in Section 3) can't be discounted. His opinion is that, "FASD are the true clinical masqueraders and ADHD is their most likely disguise". *ADHD and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)* (2007: Nova Publishers)

Attention: **Ronnie** is in grade 5 and cannot sit still or pay attention. He is a *whirling dervish* of unfocused activity, is never on task and often hurts other children on the playground or in class.

Angie, on the other hand is often in her own little grade 5 world. She retreats there when the work gets hard. At home she balks at doing homework and tells her Mom “she is too stupid.”

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R-Reasoning – Abstract concepts are out of reach for many children with FASD. There are exceptions to this rule but on average these children have great difficulty with math, science, reading comprehension, and concepts such as time or money. Teaching a profoundly FASD-affected child about types of loose change or making change for example could take weeks and weeks, time that would probably be better spent on another life skill. The value of money is often lost and students with FASD will trade an expensive pair of shoes for a chocolate bar. Time is another example here, the passage of time or being on time is a concept which is unusually difficult and children with FASD are often late when left to their own devices.

Reasoning: Jasmine is in grade 8 working at a grade 4 level in reading comprehension and grade 3 in Math. Abstract concepts are completely out of reach. She has no concept of time or time passing and often gives away her expensive possessions for candy or cigarettes from others. She is making friends “in all the wrong places.” She has been caught shoplifting at the mall recently ...

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M-Memory- Memory is ‘sketchy’ or has gaps. Sometimes they remember things and other times they don’t. Students with FASD usually don’t learn from experience and tend to make the same mistakes over and over again. [Although this is difficult at school, imagine the grave consequences of memory problems in the justice system.] When a child with FASD can do the Math test on Monday and remembers none of the same concepts on Friday teachers tend to feel

victimized. Educators often think they are being tricked and see these memory problems as misbehavior rather than primary FASD brain damage.

Memory: Amanda is in grade 2. She cannot remember her library book, how to do subtraction on a test or what we do to get ready at lunchtime. That is except when she does remember which is about 1/3 of the time. The teacher thinks she is being manipulative, not realizing that Amanda sometimes can and sometimes she really can't remember...

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S-Sensory Processing Disorders (SPDs) – Almost every student with FASD will merit a diagnosis of Sensory Processing Disorder as FASD brain damage causes serious problems with data input into the brain, data organization, and data output from the brain. These children easily melt-down when stimulation from the environment overwhelms them. Conversely they may retreat into a “tuned-out” state to protect themselves from stimulation overload. (This latter version is decidedly easier on classroom management but the child who “tunes out” then becomes educationally unavailable and learns little or nothing of real value.) Some children with FASD chew their clothing or twirl their hair until it falls out. These are but two of a myriad of calming behaviours used by children to make it through the day at school affected by FASD.

Sensory Processing Disorders: (SPDs) Stephen is in grade 2 , he still sucks his thumb at home but controls this at school. He does, however, chew his clothing and twirl his hair even to the point of pulling it out. Tags on clothing, seams in socks, bright lights and certain smells paralyze this child. He is obviously distressed, on the point of a complete “melt-down” until someone removes him from the offending sensory data ... if they recognize it...

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