

How to Help a Child or Teen Understand Time

Understanding time is hard for people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Time is an abstract idea. There is the telling of time, like reading a watch or a clock on the wall and the passage of time, such as playing for 30 minutes while waiting for supper. There is also being on time, being early or late! Time involves numbers and numbers can be very confusing. People with FASD learn best when they can touch and see things – time cannot be touched or seen.

Here are some “real life” examples and tips...

Example #1:

A parent tells a child that he may go bike riding after lunch. The child really wants to ride his bike, so he makes a peanut butter sandwich, eats it for lunch, and is out riding his bike by 9:30am.

What is happening

The parent gave clear and simple directions for when the child could ride his bike. The child knew he could not go riding until after lunch. He made lunch, ate it and left. The parent used the word ‘lunchtime’ to mean the child could ride his bike in the afternoon, after 12. The child understood he needed to eat his lunch before he could ride his bike!

What you can do

If your child can tell time, say “You can ride your bike at 1 o’clock” instead of ‘after lunch. Many watches have simple alarms that can be set to ring to notify a child when they can do an activity.

Example #2:

Your child asks you over and over again when an event is going to happen. “When is Barney on?” “When is it supper time?” “When is Daddy coming home?” are just some examples. You are going crazy because he asks the same questions twenty times a day!

What is happening

A child with FASD has no internal clock. Passing time, 10 minutes or 1 hour both feel the same to him. He looks at the clock on the microwave and it says 8:00. He does not know if it means 8:00 in the morning or 8:00 in the evening. He needs help keeping his day organized. Many children with FASD get thoughts stuck in their heads, (this is called perseveration). This causes them to ask the same question over and over again.

What you can do

A digital clock is much easier for a child to understand than a clock with hands. Be very consistent with how you say the time to your child. We understand that 2:45, fifteen minutes to one and quarter to one all means the same time. A child with FASD may think you are giving him 3 different times.

FASD Tip #13

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Please feel free to photocopy and
use these sheets.

Some Tips to Help your Child Understand Time:

1. Establish routines that will help to develop habits. The habits will serve in place of the inner clock.
2. Use an egg timer for activities like showering and brushing teeth. Teach your child how to set the timer.
3. Use an egg timer or the timer on the oven to remind the child when it is time to pick up toys or go to bed.
4. Write down what time the child is to leave for school. Tape this paper under the digital clock on the microwave. Tell your child, “When the numbers match it’s time to leave for school.”
5. Compare the passing of time to something the child might understand. “We will be at Grandma’s house in the time it takes to watch Rugrats.”
6. Use the radio or TV to help the child understand when it’s time to do something. “It’s time to go when The Magic School Bus is over.” “We will clean up for one more song.”
7. Link the time of day to an activity such as brushing teeth before bed or washing the dishes after breakfast. This will help the child develop good lifelong habits.
8. FASD causes faulty memory. Teach your child to write down appointments and events in an agenda or day timer and to refer to it often during the day.
9. Be your child’s ‘external brain’. They need your help to understand what they need to do and when they need to do it.