

How You can use Structure to Help Children with FASD

Children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder often have a hard time without structure in their lives. When we structure our day, we arrange our busy lives into an order that makes sense to us. Some people get up early and go to bed early. Some people get up late and go to bed late at night. We like to do what works well and helps us in our day-to-day tasks.

A child with FASD needs structure to help with all their daily activities. The use of reminders is helpful in giving structure to our daily lives. These reminders can be like having an 'external brain'. An external brain can be very helpful. Things like day planners, wall charts, timers, verbal reminders and school agendas all help us to make sense of our day.

Here are some "real life" examples of how to use structure in your home.

Example #1:

A child with FASD is playing in the yard. Her father calls out that it is time to go to the doctor. The child has been told many times that they will visit the doctor today. The child becomes upset and does not want to go. She refuses to leave the back yard.

What is happening

The child has trouble remembering she has a doctor appointment and gets upset because she does not want to leave the fun she is having in the yard. She may not have understood the words that were used to tell her of the appointment. The child with FASD often does not understand the days of the week or the structure of the day without external reminders. She does not understand that most appointments need to be booked ahead for a set time during the day.

How you can help

When your child gets up in the morning, use both a verbal and visual cue to remind her about the doctor appointment. Help her understand what time the appointment is. Use words she understands such as after breakfast, before morning recess, or after her favourite TV show. Remind her several times. Write it in her school agenda or on the back of her hand. If you use a visual calendar, write it down so she can see when the appointment will be in her day.

Example# 2:

A child with FASD always wants to eat and asks over and over again when the next meal is. Mom has said that lunch is not for another hour, yet the child keeps asking for food.

How you can help

Use visual reminders for meal times. If a meal has just ended, show the child on a chart when the next meal is. Teach your child that we eat meals at set times. You may have to watch how much food your child eats.

FASD Tip #14

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Please feel free to photocopy
and use these sheets.

Tips on How to use Structure in Your Home:

1. Meals can be a simple way of having some structure in daily life. Plan meals for the same time everyday. For example mealtimes could be 7 a.m. breakfast, 10 a.m. snack, 12 p.m. lunch.

Having this structure can cut down on the child's stress about eating. The child could also learn to see structure in their day by using meal times as markers. You can explain that an activity is happening "before lunch" or "after supper".

2. A weekly calendar that has pictures can help children with FASD understand the days of the week. It is helpful to split the day into 3 parts: morning, afternoon, and evening. You can place a picture of an event on the day it will happen.

For example a picture of a church on Sunday morning or a picture of a child in their Brownie uniform on Monday evening. This will help the child remember activities.

3. Keep the same activity patterns every day. Children with FASD thrive on routine and structure. School gives structure to the day. Staying up really late on weekends or holidays can make your child feel out of sorts. This can lead to poor choices and behaviours that are upsetting for the whole family.

4. When your child keeps asking about an activity, have him check the calendar and then tell you what activity is on the calendar. Every time he asks have him check the calendar. It can be his job to check the calendar and let you know what his schedule is. This teaches him to use the calendar as an "external brain".

5. Family activities can be colour coded. All activities for Jamie are blue and all activities for Anna are in red. Mom's activities in green and Dad's in orange.

6. When changing from one activity to another, children with FASD need time to adjust. Warn your child about a change in plans.

7. Helping your child use structure in her day will lead to a better understanding of the passage of time, the days of the week, the weeks in the year and even the seasons of the year.