



FASD: Questions and Answers

by Kim Skidmore



Q. I have heard presenters talk about the “External Brain” and how an external brain can help children, youth and adults with FASD. Can you tell me more about this idea?

A. The term, external brain, was first used by Dr. Sterling Clarren. The idea of an external brain, is that external cues take the place of complex brain functions in individuals with a brain injury like FASD. We know that a brain injury changes the structure and function of the brain. Strategies that compensate for the brain injury help an individual to make sense out of life and make it easier to learn and remember. Because of brain differences people with FASD have trouble with abstract ideas and executive functioning activities like remembering appointments, managing time, problem solving, or organizing the steps in everyday tasks. Some examples of how external cues support these activities might help you understand this idea.

In our family we are all each others external brains! We rely on family members to keep each other on track. “Dad, don’t forget it’s garbage morning.” “Kaylum, remember your library books.” “Mom, remember I have basketball after school today.” To me, this is part of being a healthy functioning family that looks out for each other.

Six of my children, aged 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 28, have been diagnosed with an FASD. To support their brain differences and their issues concerning short term memory loss, we have become very creative at home and at school and have found ways that help set the kids up for success.

I like to use a lot of visual cues at home. Kozmic Visual Connections is

a company that promotes useful and inexpensive kits with picture cues and charts. The materials are colourful, simple and respectful and laminated so they can withstand daily use. I hang the charts around our home wherever they are needed. In our bathroom, the shower routine hangs in the shower stall and the taps are labeled Hot and Cold; the toilet routine is posted by the toilet and the hand washing routine is hung by the sink. In the kitchen, a hot spot for many confrontations, the kit with anger management skills hangs on my cupboard. I appreciate that the charts take some of the nagging out of my parenting.

Over the years I have seen teachers do creative things that have helped my children gain confidence and be successful in the classroom. In grade one Jesse needed help learning to regulate his behaviour. His teacher taped a small chart on his desk. She personalized it by including a picture of a truck and his name on it. When Jesse was behaving in a positive manner, she would come over and put a check mark, if his behaviour was crossing over into the negative she would put an x. To the teacher’s credit he always brought the paper home with more check marks than x marks. This solution helped Jesse to learn to regulate his behaviour.

My son, Kerry, found it hard to transition from grade 2 to grade 3. He would challenge his new teacher about everything she did that was different from last year. Kerry is a very concrete thinker so we had to come up with a strategy that was simple but firm. I remembered how effective Jesse’s chart on his desk had been. Kerry’s new teacher and I met and we came up with six simple “jobs” for Kerry and his teacher. The list of jobs was laminated and taped on his desk. The list served as a

reminder and left no room for doubt about what his job was and what his teacher’s job was.

In grade 9, my daughter Kate was having problems remembering what homework she needed to do and when it needed to be done. The school started a great strategy for Kate. Every Friday each teacher would write down on a single sheet of paper the homework that needed to be done and when it was due. Kate was soon on track with her homework and her assignments were handed in on time.

Similarly, date books and agendas are wonderful tools for keeping track of life; appointments and important events can be added quickly and easily. Our adult daughter often forgets to look in her day book. What works for her is to also write the appointment in my date book. That way she has my brain to back hers up! In addition to these strategies, I am a big believer in white boards for messages and reminders, and labels on drawers to help stay organized. One of my favorite examples of an external brain that has worked well for my children comes from author, Liz Lawryk. She suggests that the child’s palm is the perfect place to write messages. (their very own palm pilot!) These are just a few examples of how external cues have helped my children gain confidence and experience successes each and everyday at home and in school.

Kim Skidmore is a creative parent who has gained much insight into FASD over the years. She is generous with her knowledge and has supported many other parents and professionals to learn more about FASD. Kim is a member of the Network Board of Directors and a member of the Saskatchewan Speakers Bureau. She has developed a reputation as a wise, funny and down to earth speaker. Thanks so much to Kim for responding to the question in this issue of *Living with FASD*.