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FASD & Other Neurobehavioral Conditions Starter Strategies for the Classroom

A person with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) or other neurobehavioral condition (NB) has a physical disability. Brain structure and function has changed. Accommodating these changes provides the best opportunity for successful outcomes. Imagine the necessity of a wheel chair and ramps for someone without typical use of the legs. The same necessity for accommodations exists when working with people with FA/NB—invisible, physical disabilities.

FASCETS neurobehavioral screening tool (NBS) can assist understanding the unique individual's brain function. Noticing patterns of 3's - 5's increases understanding of actual ability vs apparent ability for teacher, caregiver and student and creates a common language. Awareness of strengths offers important starting points for strategic and successful intervention.

Areas to consider:

Dysmaturity: Assess functional developmental age each day and in each area. If you feel like the student is acting a certain age, you may need to respond/ offer support/ teach as you would to that age.

Sensory systems: Ask student what he/she notices in the classroom environment including all five senses and adjust distractions as possible: fluorescent lights buzzing, too many colors/images on walls, overwhelming scents can be mitigated by using essential oils, etc. Have sensory tools available. Is eye contact possible or is listening improved without eye contact?

Nutrition/Sleep: Some people with FA/NB need to eat protein and healthy fats regularly (every 2 hrs) throughout the day. He/she is working much harder than a neurotypical person just trying to keep up and respond with disorganized and inefficient neuropathways. High sugar foods can make this even harder. Consider offering treats other than candy/food to the class as a whole. For the same reason, many people with FA/NB need much more sleep than neurotypical children. Asking the same question you would of a dysregulated infant can help: "Is this child fussy because of the need to eat or sleep?"

Language and communication: Check regularly for true understanding of words/concepts rather than basing your assessment on nonverbals or simple affirmations. There can be major differences in expressive (often high) and receptive (often low) language skills. It is common for a person with FA/NB to confabulate (fill in the gaps) when they haven't understood directions or can't remember something. It sounds like lying but is actually the brain trying to make sense of things without all the information. Confabulation is a red flag that there isn't full understanding.

Slow processing pace: Some students only hear every few words of communication at typical speed. Consider giving permission for the student to ask you to slow down or pause so they can catch up. Check for understanding/ missed information at regular intervals. Caregivers can often tell you what it looks like when their child has "zoned out" because things are moving too quickly. Allowing a ten second pause between question and answer will often give enough time for processing.

Learning and memory: Understanding learning styles is imperative as a person with FA/NB may not be able to absorb or offer information outside of areas of strength. Match learning style to strategies (e.g.,

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providing visual cues, reading questions aloud, allowing written rather than spoken answers). Daily variability in access to memory is common as well. Like a radio with a loose wire: sometimes the station comes in clearly, other times fuzzy or not at all. Consider gauging whether the student is having an “on” or “off” brain day and adjusting expectations accordingly. Begin each class session reminding the student of pertinent information (e.g., rules, expectations, where to turn things in). Creating plans based on students remembering and utilizing multi-step tools may be ineffective. Plans that are concrete, concise and written are often most effective.

Abstract thinking and executive functioning: Metaphors and idioms are often ineffective for literal thinkers. Regularly check for understanding and be as literal as possible in your speech. Making plans and predicting outcomes challenges many people with FA/NB. Offering several options/suggestions can help if needed. Changes in environment or routine may cause stress. Prepare clients ahead of time and process the stress. Learning from consequences requires strengths in memory, planning, and impulse control. Many people with FA/NB are unable to process information in these ways which makes consequences (positive and negative) largely ineffective. Creating an environment that fits the brain function encourages positive behaviors and learning.

Strengths: Understanding an individual’s strengths is the basis for providing effective accommodations. A student who is behind grade level in an area of learning and is also very good with younger children might become a helper in a younger classroom in order to reinforce the learning that is needed.

For support with the screening tool and other problem solving tools, please contact Lynn Alsup, LMSW.