

## Chapter 4: Creating a positive classroom climate

This chapter offers suggestions for creating a positive classroom climate and maintaining a supportive learning environment for students with FASD. Key concepts to support emotional and behavioural growth include the following.

- Consider the neurological basis of behaviours.
- Manage the environment to avoid behaviour problems.
- Use language and nonverbal communication that students understand.
- Focus on building positive relationships.
- Modify students' challenging, negative behaviours.

### Consider the neurological basis of behaviours

It is critical to understand the neurological basis of the many behavioural difficulties of students with FASD. While many act in ways that could be considered erratic and irresponsible, their behavioural difficulties may be due to memory problems, an inability to problem solve effectively or the tendency to become overwhelmed with stimulation—all factors related to neurological damage associated with prenatal alcohol exposure.

Teachers are more likely to interpret student behaviour accurately if they understand that the behaviour of students with FASD is not necessarily willful noncompliance. The following chart lists selected behaviours, possible misinterpretations of those behaviours and more accurate interpretations of those behaviours for students with FASD.

Common Misinterpretations of Typical Responses in Students with FASD<sup>56</sup>

Behaviour	Misinterpretation	Accurate Interpretation
<b>noncompliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> <li>▪ attention seeking</li> <li>▪ stubborn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ difficulty translating verbal directions into action</li> <li>▪ doesn't understand</li> </ul>
<b>repeatedly making the same mistakes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> <li>▪ manipulative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ can't link cause to effect</li> <li>▪ can't see similarities</li> <li>▪ difficulty generalizing</li> </ul>
<b>not sitting still</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ seeking attention</li> <li>▪ bothering others</li> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ neurologically-based need to move constantly, even during quiet activities</li> <li>▪ sensory overload</li> </ul>
<b>doesn't work independently</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> <li>▪ poor parenting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ chronic memory problems</li> <li>▪ can't translate verbal directions into action</li> </ul>
<b>does not complete homework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ irresponsible</li> <li>▪ lazy</li> <li>▪ unsupportive parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ memory difficulties</li> <li>▪ unable to transfer what is learned in class to the homework assignment</li> </ul>
<b>often late</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ lazy, slow</li> <li>▪ poor parenting</li> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ can't understand the abstract concept of time</li> <li>▪ needs assistance organizing</li> </ul>
<b>poor social judgement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ poor parenting</li> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> <li>▪ abused child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ not able to interpret social cues</li> <li>▪ doesn't know what to do</li> </ul>
<b>overly physical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ willful misconduct</li> <li>▪ deviancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ hyper or hyposensitive to touch</li> <li>▪ doesn't understand social cues regarding boundaries</li> </ul>
<b>stealing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ deliberate dishonesty</li> <li>▪ lack of conscience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ doesn't understand concept of ownership over time and space</li> <li>▪ immature thinking ("finders keepers")</li> </ul>
<b>lying</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ deliberate</li> <li>▪ sociopathic behaviour</li> <li>▪ lack of conscience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ problems with memory and/or sequencing</li> <li>▪ unable to accurately recall events</li> <li>▪ trying to please by telling you what they think you want to hear</li> </ul>

56. Adapted with permission from Debra Evensen, MA, "Common Misinterpretations of Normal Responses In Children/Adolescents/Adults with FAS and FAE," © 1994–2002, [www.fasalaska.com/interps.html](http://www.fasalaska.com/interps.html) (Accessed 2002). Adaptation reproduced from Peggy Lasser, *Challenges and Opportunities: A Handbook for Teachers of Students with Special Needs with a focus on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)* (Vancouver, BC: District Learning Services, Vancouver School Board, 1999), p. 116.

Three typical behaviours are especially confusing and frustrating in the classroom:

- lack of cause-and-effect reasoning
- lying
- stealing.

### Lack of cause-and-effect reasoning

Students with FASD often have difficulty connecting cause and effect, and changing behaviour as a result of consequences used in typical behaviour modification systems.<sup>57</sup>

There are a number of reasons why these students have problems perceiving consequences. First, their behaviour is often impulsive—many children with FASD simply do not think about the possibility of consequences or the implications of their actions.<sup>57</sup>

Second, consequences are not always linked to behaviours. “If you throw a snowball, somebody might get hurt.” “Do not run out in traffic because you might get hit.” There are many times, fortunately, when dangerous behaviours do not result in consequences, or at least natural consequences. Nobody gets hurt. The child runs into the street and does not get hit. At times, it seems that it is not enough to warn children with FASD about what might happen; they need to experiment and find out for themselves. This can lead to serious outcomes.<sup>57</sup>

Third, situations are never exactly the same. Students with FASD often have rigid thinking and may not generalize behaviour in one setting to the same or similar behaviour in another setting. Sometimes, such students generalize too well—instead of remembering the rule, they remember the one-time-only exception to the rule.<sup>57</sup>

This does not mean that imposing consequences is useless, but parents and teachers may need to make extra efforts to apply consequences consistently and immediately. Using clear, concrete language, frequently and patiently remind students of the reasons for consequences.<sup>57</sup>

Deb Evensen, an experienced educator and consultant for students with FASD, suggests caution when using behaviour modification systems because they rely on students implicitly understanding cause and effect. She points out that even young adolescents may not link the idea of working for points with completing tasks. She suggests structuring situations to induce desired student behaviours. She also suggests immediately linking natural rewards and consequences to targeted behaviours. Using a token economy, points or rewards given in the future may not be effective.<sup>58</sup>

### Lying

Lying needs to be understood within the context of the neurological impairment of students with FASD. These students may have language difficulties, memory deficits, immature social skills and anxiety that underlie their fabrications. They may not understand what it means to lie. In some cases, they are functioning at a much younger developmental level and have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, such as “truth” or “accuracy.” Some students say the first thing that comes into their heads when asked

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57. Adapted from British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, *Teaching Students with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effects: A Resource Guide for Teachers* (Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1996), p. 23. Copyright © 2004 Province of British Columbia. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission of the Province of British Columbia. [www.ipp.gov.bc.ca](http://www.ipp.gov.bc.ca)

58. Debra Evensen, personal communication with author, July 2001.

questions. This is an impulsive response related to how students process information and plan verbal responses. In some situations, students may be so eager for social acceptance or so anxious about a situation that they say what they think others want to hear in order to please them.

When students with FASD are asked questions, they may misunderstand or misinterpret them and give unrelated or partial answers because of language difficulties. At other times, students may attempt to fill in information they cannot remember. They may confabulate or tell stories that leave out information, put information in the wrong sequence or confuse the details of real events with other experiences or television programs. As Conry and Fast state in their book, *FAS and the Criminal Justice System*, “It is not lying, because there is no intention to deceive.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- Directly teach the concepts of true and false, real and imaginary, and fiction and nonfiction. Often, parents of children with FASD report their children do not spontaneously engage in pretend play. If they do not pretend, it makes it difficult to distinguish pretend from true and real.
- Directly teach younger students what pretending involves. Use costumes and props to demonstrate taking on other roles, such as pretending to be a police officer, superhero or animal. Use these situations to discuss the difference between pretending and lying.
- Discuss what is unreal, fictional or fantasy on television or videos. Discuss how seeing or reading something is not the same as directly experiencing it.
- Help students distinguish story telling from lying by providing them with positive opportunities to tell stories. When you suspect students may be story telling, ask them a simple question, “truth or story?” This cues students to stop and think, and get back to the truth.
- Build on the strengths and story telling abilities of individual students. Provide opportunities to record stories into a tape recorder or tell stories to younger children. Clearly explain that these are stories, not true occurrences.
- When students clearly understand the concept of true and false, start rewarding truth telling.
- Avoid asking rhetorical questions that cause students to feel trapped or anxious. When students feel anxious, they may instinctively say what they think the adult wants to hear.

### **Stealing**

Brain damage may make it difficult for students with FASD to understand the concept of personal ownership of property that is a prerequisite for understanding why stealing is wrong. If a person does not appreciate what personal ownership means, he or she cannot understand that taking another’s possessions is stealing. Often it takes many years of direct instruction for students to understand the abstract concept of rightful ownership. Like young children, students with FASD may believe that if a person is holding an object, that object belongs to that individual. However, it may be difficult for them to see that an object left on a table has a particular owner. They often act impulsively and take things they need or want.

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59. Conry and Fast 2000, p. 22.

Vicky McKinney, an FASD parent advocate, has an adopted adolescent daughter with FASD whom she describes as a “collective gatherer,” who randomly gathers up everything she is attracted to in the house. As a way to deal with this problem behaviour, family members go through the daughter’s purse and bedroom every day, and return gathered items to their rightful owners.<sup>60</sup>

Susan Doctor, a special educator and trainer, shares the story of a student who repeatedly took items from the classroom. The school team developed a plan and asked parents for permission to search the student’s locker and backpack once or twice a day. They returned these items in a low-key manner without punishment. Other students were encouraged to use positive ways to remind the student with FASD not to take their things.<sup>61</sup>

Students with FASD may eventually understand that they should not take items from people at school, but often do not generalize this rule to the community. Typically, the environment needs to be structured so individuals with FASD are monitored to reduce opportunities for stealing.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- Teach the concept of personal space and ownership. Write students’ names on items or colour code students’ property.
- Teach students the association between specific items and their owners. Students can practise by picking up labelled objects from a central location and delivering them to their owners.
- Teach students how to politely ask if they can borrow something from another person. Model how to give the item back and thank the owner for use of the item.
- Establish and implement appropriate consequences for taking others’ items.
- For older students, use restitution or restitution plus community service as a consequence for stealing.
- Encourage students to apologize to people they have taken things from, in person or in writing.
- Provide ongoing, professional counselling and support to deal with deeper, underlying security issues that result in stealing and hoarding, when necessary.

### **Manage the environment to avoid behaviour problems**

Teachers need ways to create a classroom environment that is physically and psychologically safe for all students. As a group, students with FASD benefit from structure and routine, and a predictable environment where their comfort and competence levels can grow. If an environment meets students’ needs for structure and support, many behavioural problems can be prevented. As Weir states, “Managing behaviour is about predicting and preventing an unwanted behaviour before it happens—not always possible but a more effective place to put our energy than always being reactive.”<sup>62</sup>

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60. Vicky McKinney, personal communication with author, 2000.

61. Susan Doctor, personal communication with author, February 2003.

62. Weir 1999.



### Manage the environment to avoid social problems.

- Plan the daily schedule so students have appropriate levels of social support. Some situations, such as unstructured time on the playground or the availability of illegal drugs from peers, present obvious challenges. However, even crowded school hallways and noisy lunchrooms may be too stimulating, and lead to problems for students with neurological impairments.
- Try to predict and plan for situations that can be confusing to students.
- Work with students to develop a plan for what to do when they feel overwhelmed by people, sound, light or movement. Include strategies, such as moving to a quiet place in the classroom, going for a drink of water or asking to take a short walk around the school building.
- Help others have realistic and fair expectations. Unrealistic expectations can lead to misunderstandings. It is important for peers, family members, teachers and employers to understand that in some situations the student “can’t” rather than “won’t.”<sup>63</sup>



### Structure the environment to accommodate active behaviours.

#### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▷ Note students’ activity levels throughout the day and in a variety of activities and learning settings. Use this information to plan the schedule and learning activities.
- ▷ Provide additional opportunities for movement if students are especially active. For example, ask them to deliver a message to the office when fidgety.
- ▷ Seat students with FASD next to appropriate role models, such as students who are less active and demonstrate good work habits.
- ▷ Stand near students when speaking or presenting instructions.
- ▷ If the classroom has tables rather than desks, seat students with FASD at the end. Ensure there is enough space between students so they are unable to physically bother one another.
- ▷ Seat students in quiet locations away from pencil sharpeners, cupboards, windows, colourful displays and other materials that might be distracting.
- ▷ Limit the number of students moving at any time. For example, send young students in small groups to get materials or into crowded areas, such as coatrooms.

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63. Malbin 1999.

- ▶ Plan movement breaks in the day.
  - Schedule frequent, regular breaks and give a short break when it looks like students need time to move.
  - Alternate activities requiring movement with those that are calmer.
  - When changing activities, allow for a calming time in between.
  - Offer a variety of rewards or reinforcers that provide opportunities for movement, such as coupons for free trips to the water fountain or pencil sharpener.
  - Limit how long students spend on each activity, e.g., less than 15 minutes per activity for younger students and 30 minutes for older students.
- ▶ Ignore fidgeting or movement that does not interfere with learning.



Ensure smooth transitions from one activity to the next to reduce behaviour problems.

Students with FASD benefit from settings that maintain continuity and reliability through routines and rituals. Scheduling activities to occur in a predictable order strengthens students' self-control and sense of mastery over the environment. Moving from one activity to the next can cause anxiety and behavioural disruptions for these students. There can be as many as 50 transitions in a school day so it is important that students develop skills and strategies to handle transitions.

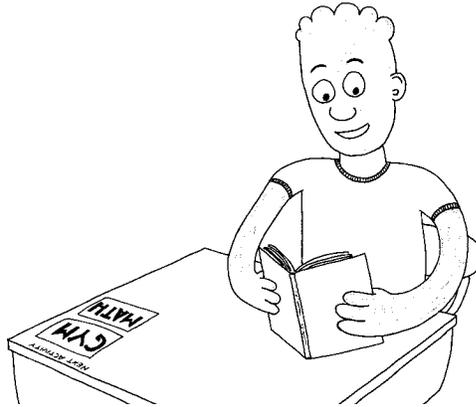
Transition times must be seen as activities in and of themselves, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Unstructured time in a classroom is an opportunity for disruptive behaviour. Keep the time required for transitions to a minimum and carefully plan each transition.

### Samples of specific strategies

- ▶ Alert students a few minutes before an activity is over.
- ▶ Prepare students for change by talking about the next activity before it begins.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for students to physically end an activity before beginning the next, such as putting a picture or article representing the activity away, or turning a picture over before going on to the next activity.
- ▶ Create cues that signal transitions. For example,
  - use a kitchen timer or other visual cues in addition to verbal reminders that an activity is going to end
  - turn off classroom lights or use a music cue to signal time to move
  - create a special transition song for children to sing during transition.

## Building Strengths, Creating Hope

- ▶ Place a visual reminder of the next activity or location on students' desks.



- ▶ Assist nonreaders by using daily schedules with pictures. Refer to them as activities change.

Daily Schedule: Tuesday morning		
	9:00	Silent reading
	9:15	News
	9:30	Reading groups
	10:15	Recess
	10:30	Math
	11:30	Lunch

- ▶ Increase monitoring of students during transition times.
- ▶ Praise and recognize students who make transitions quickly and cooperatively.
- ▶ Organize materials and have them readily available as each new activity begins.
- ▶ Ask students who have major difficulty with transitions to carry something important or hold the teacher's hand.



## Establish clear rules.

Rules clearly define what is and is not acceptable in the classroom, in the school and on school grounds.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Focus on rules that are essential to smooth classroom operations.
- ▶ Make rules before, not after the fact, so students know what to expect.
- ▶ Post rules so students can refer to them frequently and rehearse regularly. Use graphics to illustrate each rule.
- ▶ Use guided observations to teach understanding of rules. Guided observations involve directing a student to carefully watch another student who is following a rule successfully. This allows students to attend and focus on the critical dimensions of a positive behaviour.
- ▶ Remind students of rules at key times and in a variety of contexts throughout the day.
- ▶ Use role-play and other strategies to practise rules.
- ▶ Acknowledge and reinforce students' positive behaviour when the rules are followed appropriately.

## Use language and nonverbal communication students understand

Students with FASD often have language difficulties that may not be obvious. They may not have articulation difficulties, and their expressive language often superficially seems adequate. However, they may have limited understanding because of receptive language deficits and social communication weaknesses. These students often speak better than their level of understanding. They may say a lot of words without really communicating meaning. Teachers need to carefully consider the language used in instruction and discipline.



## Use specific and concrete words to describe behaviour.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Use concrete words in rules, whenever possible.

## Building Strengths, Creating Hope

- ▶ Explain abstract words with actions and role-plays. The following words may be abstract to students with FASD and may need explicit instruction:<sup>64</sup>

wait	be responsible	join
get started	clean up	choose
ask for help	watch.	

- ▶ Use rules that are specific enough for most elementary students, such as:
  - put your worksheet on my desk
  - do not bump or touch other students.



Consider the phrasing of directions and corrections.

### Samples of specific strategies

- ▶ When students misbehave, explain why that behaviour is inappropriate a maximum of two times. Do not repeat requests or try to reason with them. Students may “shut down” with too much talk.
- ▶ Avoid using rhetorical questions when making requests. Use statements, such as “Please start your work,” instead of “Can you get started on your work?”



Consider the nonverbal aspects of communication.

### Samples of specific strategies

- ▶ Ensure students are paying attention before giving directions and instructing.
- ▶ When making a request, stand or sit near students.
- ▶ Use a quiet, calm voice.
- ▶ Ensure students have sufficient processing time to follow through with requests or answer questions. Students with processing difficulties often need several seconds to a minute to process information. Repeating a request during this time interval interrupts the original processing time.
- ▶ Avoid asking questions when the answer does not solve a problem. For example, if two students are involved in a fight on the playground and fighting is against school rules, little will be accomplished by trying to ascertain who did what to whom first.
- ▶ Use verbal and nonverbal positive feedback regularly. In order for students to feel positive about their learning environment, a ratio of at least four positive interactions to every negative consequence is necessary.<sup>65</sup>

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64. Doctor 1994.

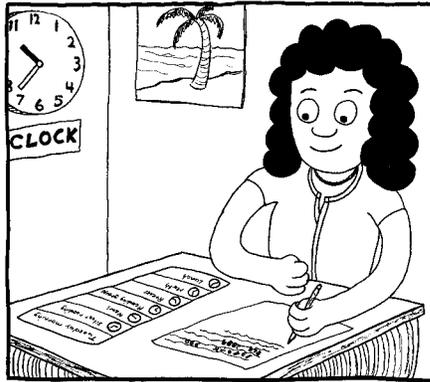
65. Fredericks et al. 1977.



Use visual cues to enhance communication.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Use timers, buzzers and stop watches to show students physical, concrete ways to measure time.
- ▶ Provide students with simple charts or checklists of steps to be completed and a space to check steps as they are completed.



- ▶ Use visual indicators of positive feedback, such as smiles, thumbs-up signals, stickers or stars, tailored to individual students.

### **Focus on building positive relationships**



Enhance the teacher-student relationship.

The teacher-student relationship forms the basis for student learning and students' enjoyment of school. Whenever possible, there should be a strong relationship with at least one teacher in a student's environment. A special teacher can often act as an emotional support and a potent reinforcer to help students through behavioural challenges.

Many students with FASD are eager to please their teachers. They strive to do what they are asked, but often misunderstand or are incapable of the work expected. If teachers note where the problems are, make necessary changes, and support and guide students to do their best work, successful learning often occurs. If instructional levels and tasks are beyond students' current levels of performance, classroom teachers can provide modified tasks. Have appropriate, positive expectations that students will make gains and learning will take time.

Maintain positive and supportive relationships with students. When encountering behavioural difficulties, remember that the behaviours are the source of frustration, not the students. It is critical to remember the organic cause of the disability, and continue to concentrate on how to help students acquire appropriate skills for coping.

Focus on the positive accomplishments of students and be willing to remind, guide and supervise them on a daily basis. Progress may be uneven. Some students continue to live and grow within unsettled home environments, however they will learn and improve with teaching and support. Forgiveness, humour, caring and the willingness to be flexible will help teachers start each day anew to create a learning environment that meets these students' needs and enhances their self-esteem.



Understand that students use behaviours to communicate.

Students often express their feelings more effectively through their behaviours than their words. Think about the message behind a specific behaviour. Donna M. Burgess, a researcher, professor and special educator, says teachers should look for communicative intent of challenging behaviours.<sup>66</sup> For example, a teacher may hypothesize that a student is not completing tasks because he or she feels the work is too difficult. The teacher can communicate the hypothesis by suggesting something like, “Your behaviour tells me that maybe you find the work too hard. Does it feel like it’s too hard? Do we need to find some ways that would make this work easier for you?”

### Samples of specific strategies

- ▶ Teach students to communicate in an acceptable manner, such as raising a hand to request help. Reinforcing these attempts lets students know that their communication has meaning and is understood.



- ▶ Model and teach alternative, appropriate forms of communication to replace outbursts or shutdowns.

66. Burgess and Streissguth 1992.

## Building Strengths, Creating Hope

- Create an environment where students feel safe to express feelings, wants and needs.
- Establish a positive climate for asking for assistance, asking questions or asking for repetition.
- Investigate students' behaviours by asking questions to discover what they need, want or fear.
- Encourage students to ask questions when confused and praise them for taking the initiative to request information if they don't understand.
- Respond to specific needs of students with predictability and regularity.



Use language, approaches and interactions that enhance students' self-confidence and self-worth.

Many students with FASD, in spite of their best efforts as well as those of their teachers, struggle with the academic curriculum, social relationships and issues of self-management. Emphasize students' special talents, and find tasks and activities that nurture their self-confidence and enhance their self-worth.

### Samples of specific strategies

- Students need help understanding that although their behaviour may need to change, they are not “bad people.”
- Use body language and smiles to show students that you like them.<sup>67</sup>
- Make a point of saying something positive to each student several times a day.<sup>67</sup>
- Look for each student's individual strengths and refer to them whenever you can. “You're really good at drawing so you will probably like this project.”<sup>67</sup>
- Reinforce students' roles in successes. For example, say, “Good job. You really worked hard on that.”



67. Adapted with permission from Peggy Lasser, *Challenges and Opportunities: A Handbook for Teachers of Students with Special Needs with a focus on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)* (Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School Board, 1999), pp. 108–109.

## Building Strengths, Creating Hope

- ▶ Plan activities that highlight individual strengths, talents and hobbies.
- ▶ Set realistic and attainable goals for each student so school is a positive place to be.<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ Design learning activities with students with special needs in mind. This may require modified expectations, small steps, much praise and encouragement, and an appreciation of the many small gains.<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ Less can be better. Reducing the amount of work required is more positive than assigning a greater volume of work that will be left incomplete or finished long after everyone else.<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ During cooperative learning activities, partner students carefully and assign tasks that can be accomplished by each member of the team. Set students up for success.<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ Try to partner students with FASD with students who are patient and good role models.<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ Give all students opportunities to help around the school, such as reading simple stories to primary students, delivering messages to the office or looking after class pets.<sup>67</sup>

He/pe/ers	
Conrad	Reading baskets 
Wai-Ling	Water plants 
Robyn	Sharpen pencils 
Levi	Calendar person 
Kimmy	Feed fish 

- ▶ Help students increase their use of positive self-talk by practising positive affirmations. “I am becoming a good reader. I read a page with no errors.”
- ▶ Be aware of situations that cause stress for individual students.
- ▶ Be consistent when enforcing rules and expectations. Give credit for approximations.



Help students learn how their own efforts contribute to success.

Students need to experience success. They need to stick with tasks and finish them in order to realize the role of effort. They need to learn what it feels like to make a personal investment in completing tasks. Self-confidence and self-worth come from positive experiences.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Reinforce students' roles in successes. Say, "You did well. You must have studied last night," or "Good job. You really worked hard on that."<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ Ask students why they think they did well on a test or assignment. Encourage them to relate their success to their own efforts, skills or abilities.<sup>68</sup>
- ▶ Have students repeat tasks they have completed successfully or complete similar tasks to ensure they understand that they are responsible for their achievements.<sup>68</sup>
- ▶ Help students monitor how many minutes they persevere on a task. As they increase their determination, they will increase their success.
- ▶ Use stories and concrete examples to demonstrate the relationship between effort and achievement.
- ▶ Encourage students to use self-talk to reframe their beliefs about their own abilities. Model positive self-talk.



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67. Adapted with permission from Peggy Lasser, *Challenges and Opportunities: A Handbook for Teachers of Students with Special Needs with a focus on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)* (Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School Board, 1999), pp. 108–109.

68. From Special Programs Branch, Alberta Learning, *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 1996), p. 202.



Provide choice in projects and strategies to gain student cooperation.

**Sample of specific strategy**

- ▶ Actively involve students in the selection of strategies, once they have tried several under teacher direction. The more actively students are involved, the more aware they become of what works for them.



Help students understand their own learning strengths and needs.

**Sample of specific strategies**

- ▶ Talk with students about their particular strengths and needs.
- ▶ Provide specific feedback that helps students understand how they learn best. For example, “You seem to remember better when you get a chance to see the information.”
- ▶ Help students learn to think about and describe their thinking. “Talk aloud,” describing your own thinking and encourage students to “talk aloud” about their thinking. Rephrase their ideas to highlight their learning strengths and needs.
- ▶ Explain assessment results so that students understand their abilities, needs, and the implications for schooling and life. Explanations will vary depending on the age and functioning levels of students. With elementary students, be specific and concrete. With older students, more information can be conveyed. Use visuals, e.g., graphs and pictures, and ask students to paraphrase what you say.
- ▶ Provide parents with suggestions for explaining FASD to their children in ways that reinforce their children’s strengths. See *Explaining FASD to Your Child*, Appendix A8, pages 120–121.



## Move toward greater self-management of behaviour.

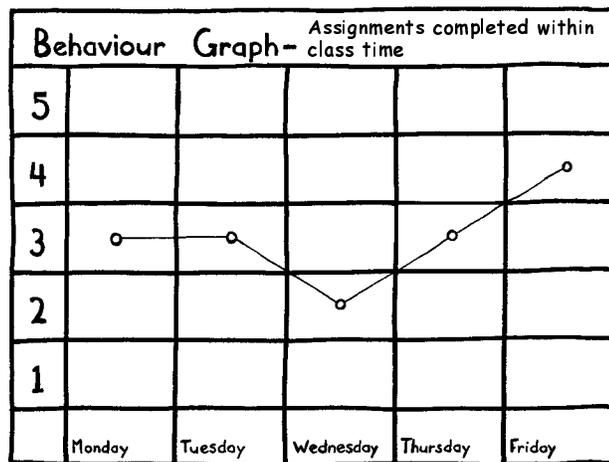
The overarching goal of behavioural intervention strategies is to help students develop self-management skills. Students need to understand and be aware of their difficulties before they can begin to manage their behaviours. For some students with FASD, this is an ongoing challenge throughout life and complete self-management is not a realistic goal. Other students develop personal management in selected domains of their lives. Teachers need to provide ongoing structuring and support, and be encouraged when they see signs of self-management.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Encourage students to list their strengths and needs, and talk about how to use their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses.
- ▶ Use self-assessment tools, such as the Learning Challenges Inventory, Appendix A9, pages 122–123, to identify areas of need and set goals for improving specific behaviours.
- ▶ Offer feedback when students are attending, calm and relaxed.
- ▶ Provide feedback in concrete, specific language.
- ▶ Demonstrate and replay incidents instead of talking about them, if helpful.
- ▶ Help students interpret the nonverbal cues of peers by role-playing interactions.
- ▶ Prepare and practise for potentially challenging situations.
- ▶ Rehearse needed behaviours immediately before new or challenging situations.
- ▶ Model, discuss, demonstrate, rehearse and evaluate a variety of problem-solving strategies.
- ▶ Emphasize how effort contributes to the solution of problems.
- ▶ Work with students to explore the effects of various strategies.
- ▶ Encourage students to keep a book of coping strategies that work for them.

## Building Strengths, Creating Hope

- Work with students to record and graph one or two behaviours that they want to modify. Use the graph to show changes.



- Provide recorded, taped messages to support positive behaviours. For example, an adult voice can be recorded with positive statements and friendly reminders, such as “Good work” or “Check your answers.”
- Model and demonstrate the use of self-talk to guide behaviours.
- Use role-play and play situations as opportunities for students to practise self-talk.
- Help students internalize self-talk strategies by teaching key phrases to focus attention, resist distractions, manage frustration, self-reinforce with positive affirmations, anticipate consequences, relax and appreciate the feelings of others.
- Use timers to help students monitor time on task. Increased awareness may eventually lead students to initiate strategies without external reminders.
- Take a baseline measure of students’ independent work duration. Make a contract with students to increase work intervals by small increments.
- Write key behavioural goals on desk cards as nonverbal reminders, such as “Raise your hand before speaking.”



- ▶ Use pictures to help younger students remember good behaviours and cue them to self-monitor such behaviours. For example, provide students with pictures of themselves sitting quietly and attending during a story or circle activity.
- ▶ Videotape students going through the classroom routines, practising strategies and working in cooperative groups appropriately. Show students the video.

## Modify students' challenging, negative behaviours

Despite teachers' best efforts at providing routine, structure and understanding, some students continue to demonstrate challenging behaviours that are detrimental to themselves and others. These students may need a modified behavioural approach.

### Work as a team

A supportive team approach can help classroom teachers deal with students' behavioural challenges. Collaborative planning ensures clear understanding by all those involved. The team may include administrators, special educators, school psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, counsellors, teacher assistants and social workers. Establishing behavioural priorities helps teams focus on what is most critical for students to learn.

### Involve parents

Actively involve parents when establishing behavioural goals. Establish clear, open lines of communication so parents will inform the school if there are upsets in the home, family emergencies or changes in students' routines, such as sleeping patterns. These may cause sudden changes in behaviours. Students function best when consistent strategies are used at both home and school.

### Use comprehensive observations

Observing student behaviour in natural settings is key to gathering information for effective programming. Comprehensive observations in the context of natural routines are essential to determine how students behave in a variety of settings, such as at play, at transition times and while engaging in self-help activities. Close observation indicates how they experience stress, relieve tension, cope with obstacles and react to change. These observations provide essential information for setting realistic goals. Observing students in all the environments they experience helps teams plan interventions.<sup>69</sup>



## Develop a plan for changing challenging behaviours.

Some students with persistent challenging behaviours need formal behavioural plans. When organizing such plans, consider using the resources of a student support team. Once the team selects and defines a particular target behaviour, develop a behavioural intervention plan.

By developing clear procedures and guidelines for intervention, the likelihood of successful intervention increases. In the initial planning stages, select a single behaviour to target.

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69. Hartness 2000.

Once the target behaviour is selected, the team needs to determine what purpose the inappropriate behaviour is currently serving, and what factors might be reinforcing and maintaining the behaviour. Use comprehensive observations to record occurrences of the behaviour, the cues and consequences surrounding the behaviour, and the particular settings in which it occurs. Data collection charts are helpful and assist with record keeping.

Data can then be analyzed to determine the frequency of occurrence, the factors seemingly precipitating the behaviour, its nature, the time of occurrences and the consequences. Once the apparent situational factors surrounding the behaviour are established, the next step involves identifying environmental factors that can be altered to positively influence the behaviour. For instance, altering the controlling cues for the behaviour, or teaching the student an alternate behaviour or strategy can result in positive changes.

For an intervention plan to be successful, clear expectations for appropriate behaviour must be communicated to students. Students need concrete, regular, ongoing feedback about their behaviours. Intervention plans should be monitored on a regular basis and modified as needed. Behavioural modification, especially with token economy systems and delayed rewards, are often not effective with students with FASD. Because of their neurological damage, these students may not be able to link their behaviour with the rewards.

### **Samples of specific strategies**

- ▶ Model and teach appropriate behaviours.
- ▶ Use specific concrete behavioural descriptors when explaining behaviours students need to increase or decrease.
- ▶ Be prepared to teach the same concept many times over.
- ▶ When the opportunity arises, use natural situations as teaching opportunities.
- ▶ Plan for generalization across situations. If necessary, be prepared to re-teach behaviours in new settings and situations.
- ▶ Use concrete, tangible reinforcers as soon after desired behaviours as possible.
- ▶ Be aware of symptoms of student stress, such as irritability, agitation and overreactions to minor occurrences.



**Use positive reinforcements.**

When designing behavioural programs, the goal is for students to learn and have successful experiences. Many students with FASD do not link behaviours with rewards. However, a systemic approach can be helpful. It offers a structure for observing and analyzing students' interaction patterns, and provides information to help make changes that promote good behaviour.

Many students with FASD become accustomed to failing and the attention they receive from failing. It is critical for them to experience being successful. Initially, students may need to receive reinforcement for incremental steps toward goals. Effective reinforcement or feedback should be immediate and follow the demonstration of appropriate behaviours, the use of routines or successfully following instructions. Positive feedback can lead to improved behaviour. It needs to occur more frequently than negative feedback. Positive feedback does not always have to be verbal—it can also include physical prompts, such as smiles, handshakes, nods and eye contact. Reinforce approximations and small improvements in appropriate behaviours. Gradually shift the emphasis from extrinsic rewards, such as concrete tokens, to positive social praise. The end goal is that students will be able to express their own feelings of happiness at their successes.

### Samples of specific strategies

- Enlist the help of students, families and peers in generating a list of social, activity-oriented and tangible reinforcers.
- Consistently recognize and encourage students' efforts, and praise accomplishments.
- Deliver reinforcers immediately, consistently and specifically.
- Develop a variety of reinforcers and change them often so they remain rewarding.



Work with counsellors and behaviour consultants who are knowledgeable about FASD.

Counselling approaches that work with this population are often different than typical talk therapy approaches. Parents and school staff can benefit from working with trained behavioural consultants who have knowledge of students with FASD, their issues and strategies to improve negative behaviours.

Generally, concrete, literal techniques work best with students with FASD. Insight and talk therapy are of limited help. However, Susan Baxter, a psychologist in Alaska, has written about her success with modified talk therapy in *Fantastic Antone Grows Up*. Her success relies on building trusting relationships and using concrete ways, such as photos and role-plays, to demonstrate concepts.<sup>70</sup>

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70. Baxter 2000.

*Building Strengths, Creating Hope*