

# FASD and Mental Health

This factsheet will assist secondary school teaching and support staff to **better understand the mental health needs** of young people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). It provides practical advice and strategies to help educators support the mental wellbeing of these young people. It's important to note that every individual with FASD has person specific needs as FASD involves a spectrum of disorders depending on the level and frequency of alcohol exposure. Each young person will have their own strengths and challenges, and it is vital that educators seek to support young people with empathy by building from these strengths. **These strategies may not be effective every time and may need constant repetition and reinforcement.** It's also important to note that FASD is so prevalent many educators may not realise they are interacting daily with students who have undiagnosed FASD or FASD that has been misdiagnosed as another neurodevelopmental disorder. As the pathway to a FASD diagnosis can be lengthy, it's important that **support strategies are implemented as soon as possible.** The information in this factsheet will be useful for all students experiencing mental health challenges, regardless of whether or not they also have a formal diagnosis of FASD.

It's important to note that each school will have a unique context and needs and therefore a unique policy and approach to responding to and reporting mental health concerns. Teaching and support staff should be aware of the relevant procedures that apply in their school to promote and manage students' wellbeing.

Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It influences how people handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. During adolescence, young people go through significant neurobiological change as well as social and emotional challenges which can impact their mental health.

## Key Facts

### Onset age

Mental health challenges commonly emerge during adolescence, with the **peak onset age around 14 years**. Up to 75% of mental health conditions emerge before age 25.

### Common Conditions

Anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and conduct disorders are most prevalent, however less-common conditions such as eating disorders, psychosis, and mood disorders also tend to emerge during adolescence.

### Prevalence

Mental health conditions in young people are rising, potentially driven by the unique social and environmental factors that today's young people face. National data indicates that **40% of young people** (16-24 years) experienced a mental condition in the past 12 months. Since 2007, there has been a **50% increase in mental disorders** among this age group, particularly in young women.

### Challenges

Mental health can impact a young person's engagement with education which may present as **increased absenteeism, reduced focus, and an increased likelihood of suspension, expulsion, or leaving school**. Young people who are struggling with their mental health may also face challenges with interpersonal relationships, and behavioural issues such as risky substance use or sexual behaviours. Self-harm and suicide are also significant concerns during this period.

### Wellbeing

Good mental health is associated with better interpersonal relationships, greater academic achievement and completion, better physical health and increased life expectancy. Evidence shows that **early interventions can significantly reduce harms associated with mental health conditions** over the course of a young person's life. **Strong relationships with peers and trusted adults, and being engaged in the school community** have also been shown to encourage mental wellbeing in young people.

## FASD & Mental Health

Young people with FASD are **significantly more likely to experience difficulty with their mental health** when compared with their peers and are especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of mental health challenges. The challenges of adolescence are often amplified by the challenges of FASD and vice-versa. An estimated **90% of people with FASD experience mental health challenges over their lifetime**, in contrast with 43% of the general Australian population. Adolescents with FASD are significantly more likely to experience depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation compared to their peers.

ADHD also commonly co-occurs with FASD. Approximately 50% of people with FASD also have ADHD, and this often **amplifies mental health challenges**. Additionally, young people with FASD also commonly experience difficulties with emotion regulation, which is the ability to modulate emotions, moods, feelings, and expressions. The presence of emotion regulation difficulties makes it more likely an adolescent with FASD will experience certain mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder.



### How can teaching and support staff promote wellbeing?

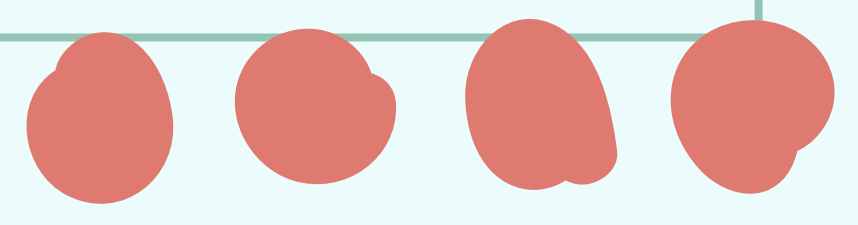
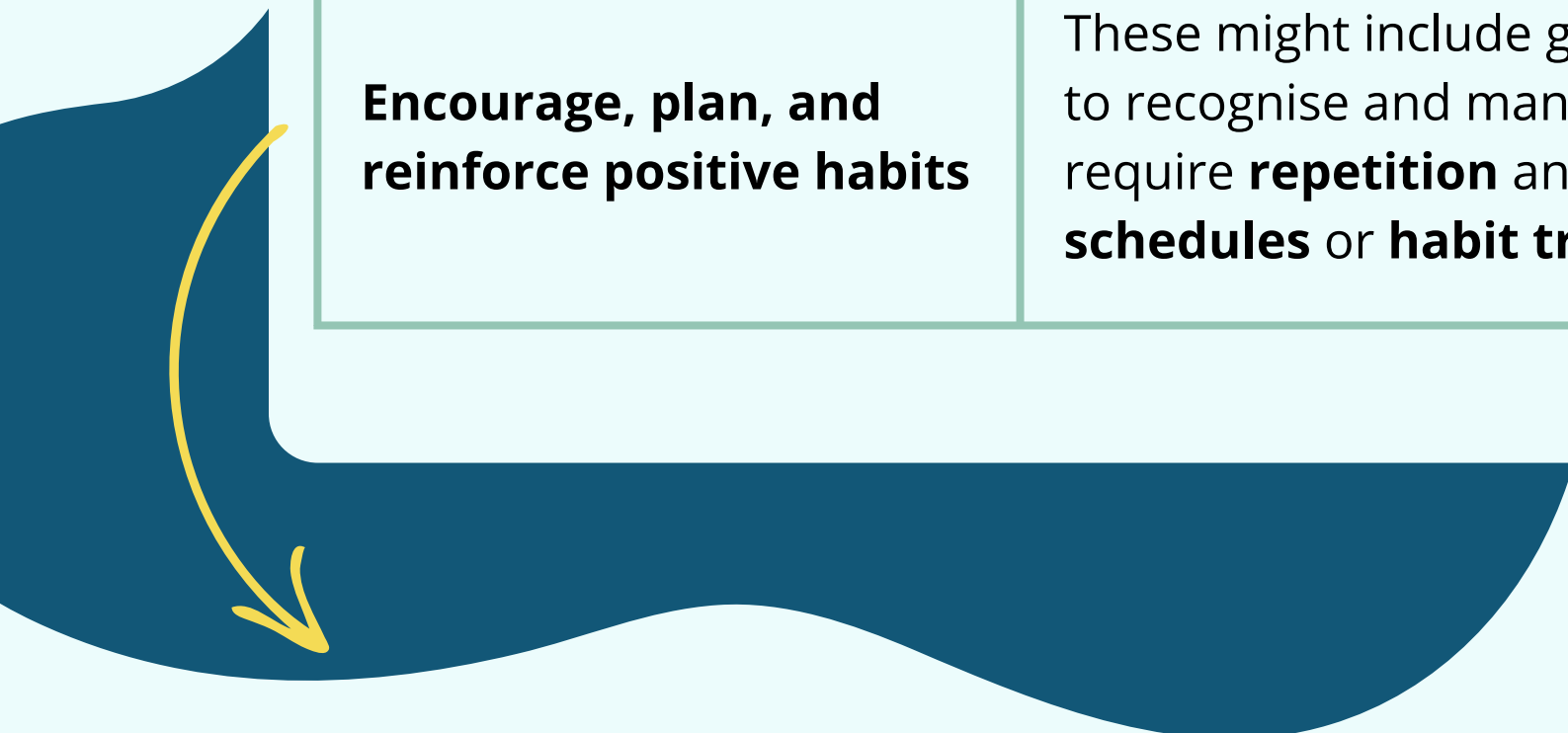
As young people with FASD often have a disrupted educational experience, lower rates of engagement and academic achievement compared to their peers, **reducing the additional effects of mental health challenges** is incredibly important.

Secondary school teaching and support staff can support adolescents with FASD by **fostering a protective and supportive school environment** and **doing their best to know and understand the student** in order to provide the safety required for effective learning. Teaching and support staff are also well-positioned to **identify potential mental health concerns** and **refer students** to the appropriate services. This may include referral to staff equipped to provide pathways to a formal diagnosis.

There are also general principles that are best practice in supporting young people with FASD. These include things like **routine, repetition** and **consistency**, and you can read about them on our **What is FASD** page. These principles should always underpin approaches to working with students with FASD and be applied in conjunction with the specific strategies below to support mental health and promote wellbeing.



Strategy	Reasoning
<p><b>Approach behavioural concerns with empathy and a FASD-informed lens</b></p>	<p>Young people who are struggling with their mental health may be more likely to act out. This is especially true for those with FASD who struggle with emotional regulation. <b>Punishments (such as class exclusion) can have a negative impact</b> on the mental health of a young person with FASD, as it can raise feelings of exclusion and being ‘othered’. <b>Use positive reinforcement, and clear verbal communication</b> to address behavioural concerns. Consequences are rarely a successful means of management.</p>
<p><b>Promote and teach emotional regulation</b></p>	<p>All adolescents will benefit from building skills to regulate their emotions. As young people with FASD often struggle with emotional regulation, having regulation strategies to rely upon can help to reduce negative emotions. For example, the <b>STAR strategy (Stop and breathe, Think, Act and Reflect)</b> is a useful tool to help a young person self-regulate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Enact quiet spaces</b> for students to use if they are feeling overwhelmed. Adolescents with FASD often experience sensory processing difficulties, which can impact emotional regulation. Its important students have the opportunity to move away from overwhelming sensory experiences which may help them self-regulate, calm down, and refocus. Other sensory strategies that may assist with emotional regulation include <b>listening to music, body exercises or stretching, or a drawing/colouring activity.</b></li> <li>• <b>Mindfulness strategies</b>, such as a <b>“body scan” activity</b> that guides a young person to focus their breath and attention on different parts of their body may also be useful to help adolescents with FASD practice emotional regulation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build a safe and FASD-informed school environment</b></p>	<p>For young people with FASD or other neurodevelopmental conditions, inclusion is a strong protective factor for good mental health. A safe, respectful and inclusive learning environment acknowledges the unique needs of all children and allows for a sense of belonging within the school environment. Many individuals with FASD struggle with planning, organisation, impulse control, and sensory sensitivities which can impact their ability to focus and regulate emotions. <b>Providing visual schedules, quiet breakaway spaces or noise-cancelling headphones, breaking tasks into small steps, and offering regular check-ins</b> can help students stay on track and enhance the learning environment.</p>
<p><b>Promote resilience</b></p>	<p>Bullying and social exclusion are common for young people with FASD, which can negatively impact their mental health. Educators can support resilience by <b>encouraging social skills development, fostering peer-mentorships and encouraging collaborative activities.</b></p>
<p><b>Encourage, plan, and reinforce positive habits</b></p>	<p>These might include good sleep patterns, regular exercise, and learning to recognise and manage emotions. For students with FASD this may require <b>repetition and clearly structured planning, such as visual schedules or habit trackers.</b></p>



Strategy	Reasoning
<p><b>Be aware of the signs and symptoms of common mental health conditions</b></p>	<p>Positive Choices have developed a <b>guide to common mental health conditions</b> and their related symptoms, however it's important to note that symptoms of common mental health conditions may present differently in adolescents with FASD due to social, emotional and cognitive differences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beyond Blue have developed resources for teaching and support staff to monitor and promote students' mental wellbeing. Their <b>BETLS Observation Tool</b> helps educators <b>monitor the behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social behaviours of students.</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Recognise help-seeking behaviours and offer support</b></p>	<p>A young person might reach out for external support in direct or indirect ways. This is known as help-seeking behaviour. Responding to help-seeking is incredibly important and can significantly improve the outcomes for a student struggling with their mental health. Young people with FASD may benefit from a <b>pre-planned framework</b> that guides them on how to recognise they need help, who and when to ask, and what to say. This can be <b>reinforced using visual aids or role-play scenarios</b>. The framework might include a <b>Who, What, When and How</b>. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Who:</b> "When I am feeling ____ [sad, angry, scared, alone, worried, etc], I need to talk to [teacher or learning support person]."</li> <li><b>What:</b> Ask [teacher or learning support person] if you can talk to them privately. E.g. "Can I talk to you privately?"</li> <li><b>When:</b> Make sure that there are no distractions, and that [teacher or learning support person] has time to talk. This might be after class or during a break.</li> <li><b>How:</b> "I need to talk to you about how I have been feeling. Lately I often feel _____[sad, angry, scared, alone, worried, etc]. I need someone to ____ [listen, help, etc]."</li> </ul>
<p><b>Refer young people to appropriate supports</b></p>	<p><b>Foster an open channel of communication</b> with parents and caregivers, and other community networks, to <b>gain an understanding of existing support systems</b> surrounding the young person. If a young person appears to be struggling, they may need extra support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider finding a quiet moment to talk and <b>open the dialogue about connecting them with further support</b>. Ask them how you can help them and <b>follow up at a later date</b>.</li> <li>Young people with a diagnosis of FASD may have an existing support team or mental wellbeing plan. If a FASD diagnosis hasn't been made, educators can still engage with caregivers and the appropriate support staff to ensure the student receives the opportunity of a formal diagnosis and the specialist therapeutic interventions that can follow.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Develop and support achievable learning goals</b></p>	<p><b>Tailoring the learning plan</b> of a young person with FASD (or other neurodevelopmental conditions) can help to ensure that they are setting and achieving goals that are relevant and achievable. For example, a student who has difficulty with mathematics might benefit from an <b>individualised, strengths-based assessment plan</b> that will motivate them to develop their skills, without provoking unnecessary distress over results. A strength-based approach recognises students' strengths—whether in art, music, or hands-on learning—and can boost self-esteem and engagement. These, in turn, can improve mental health.</p>

## Further Resources

- BeyondBlue – [What is Mental Health?](#)
- BeyondBlue – [How to Talk to Someone You're Worried About](#)
- [BeYou](#) – Free, evidence-based tools and professional learning modules created by Beyond Blue for educators to support young people's mental health
  - [Disability Inclusion Guide](#)
- NCCD – [Classroom adjustments: Mental health](#)
- Positive Choices – [Where to get help](#)
- South Australia Department of Education – [Supporting children and students with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder \(FASD\)](#)
- VicGov – [Mental Health and Wellbeing Toolkit for Educators](#)

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