

## Employment and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Strategies for Success

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*Courtney R. Green, PhD, and Jocelynn L. Cook, PhD, MBA*  
*Canada FASD Research Network*

### **Issue:**

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the most common type of developmental disability in North America. Although a large majority of individuals with FASD do not have any visible signs of their disability, they all have some kind of permanent brain injury that impacts their daily life; in particular, the ability to find meaningful employment.

### **Background:**

There is limited specific information in the literature about individuals with FASD and the implications of FASD on employment, although many studies do recognize that individuals with FASD have employment-related challenges [1-3]. Competitive and fulfilling employment can help develop a positive identity, self-esteem and self-worth. It can be a protective factor against some secondary disabilities associated with FASD, as well as reducing poverty and dependency. However, the cognitive and behavioural difficulties, as well as some socio-economic and preconceived negative expectations associated with FASD make it challenging to join and stay in the workforce [4]. Some of these include difficulty paying attention and/or sitting still for long periods of time, impulsive behaviour, trouble remembering everything employers think they should, tiring easily from having to think and concentrate harder than others and being slow to perform activities. The lack of understanding among employers and co-workers regarding the cognitive and behavioural challenges associated with FASD can also be problematic, putting pressure on the individual and creating expectations that may not be feasible.

Although individuals with FASD have challenges, it is important to note that they also have many strengths, skills and abilities and can contribute significantly to society. For example, some common traits for individuals with FASD include curiosity, creativity, gregariousness, tenacity, friendliness, helpfulness and generosity [5]. Many also are very artistic and perform extremely well in environments where routines are well established. In fact, one recent paper suggested employers that understand the challenges and adapt their processes, interactions and expectations so they are

manageable by individuals with FASD create a win-win situation solution, allowing the employee to overcome some difficulties and performing paid work that provided value and self-esteem by performing tasks that contributed to the business [4].

For those working with individuals who have an FASD, both as employers and as co-workers, it is important to understand the challenges and, wherever possible, provide appropriate accommodations that will increase the likelihood for success. For example, deficits in communication and information processing can make it difficult for individuals with an FASD to secure employment. Using complicated jargon, acronyms and speaking too quickly without pausing, can cause anxiety and frustration for the individual with FASD and they may engage in coping mechanisms such as pretending to understand, avoiding a task, retreating or quitting. These behaviours can be difficult in the workplace, but if the challenges are understood, and responses include respect and patience, a rewarding and successful workplace experience can result. Advocacy, education and counseling are key to finding and keeping secure employment for individuals with FASD.

### **Considerations:**

#### **Supported Employment: A Model for Success**

A supported employment model, focused on identification of a good ‘fit’ between the employee’s abilities and work environment, is a good model to maximize an individual with FASD’s vocational success. “Supported Employment” involves providing individualized guidance to individuals with disabilities about employment, which departs from traditional employment models that involve lengthy periods of assessment and prevocational training [6]. Supported employment first places employees in paid positions that meet their interests and abilities, and then provides them with supports and training as needed for job success. The integration of supports, including informal and formal communications, is an asset to the employee’s success. It is important, in this model, for employers to recognize the specific needs of their employees with disabilities and to identify support strategies that will ensure their success in the workplace. By adhering to the “Supported Employment” model, employers will not only gain a greater appreciation for the issues and challenges facing individuals with disabilities, they will also learn how to recognize the many strengths they can bring to the workforce. This model teaches employers how to integrate individuals with disabilities into the workplace effectively, respectfully, and with the maximum potential for success.

### **Recommendations:**

- Employers should be encouraged to hire and support individuals with FASD in the workforce.
- Employers should be knowledgeable about the challenges and strengths of their employees with FASD and should set feasible goals and expectations.
- Employers should be made aware of the “Supported Employment” model.
- Co-workers should be provided with some training related to the implications of

- working with individuals with FASD.
- Early job skills training should be accessible for individuals with FASD based on their strengths and interests.
  - Job site coaching and support should be available to provide opportunities for positive reinforcement and reminders to stay on task.
  - Support people who are interested in ensuring the success of the individual and who can help with transitions and anxiety should be identified as “go to” people on the job site who can advocate and support the individual, and answer questions.

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