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## Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Often Mistaken for Other Disorders

Fetal alcohol syndrome can be baffling to diagnose despite a cluster of symptoms.

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At age 8, Chris couldn't sit still in school, had problems with simple math and was small for his age. His teacher thought it was [attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADHD). But Chris' doctor had another hunch.

[Fetal alcohol syndrome](#) (FAS) is a condition you may be born with if your mother drank alcohol during [pregnancy](#). Symptoms can start in infancy and follow the person throughout life.

Children with this syndrome may have problems ranging from speech delays to [vision](#) troubles. Teens with FAS are more likely than other children to drop out of school or get suspended. They also have a higher risk of mental health problems, trouble with the law, substance abuse and poor judgments regarding sexual behavior.

There is no cure for fetal alcohol syndrome. Treatment started at a young age, though, can help get the [child's development](#) more on course.

### Often unrecognized

One of every 1,000 children is born with fetal alcohol syndrome. The condition can be baffling to diagnose despite signs that something is wrong. Kids with FAS typically have a hard time in school and trouble getting along with others. The syndrome is often mistaken for ADHD because some of the symptoms are similar.

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Other times, the behavior problems are shrugged off as "bad parenting."

Stigma may also get in the way of a diagnosis. Mothers may not want to admit to a doctor, teacher or counselor that they drank while pregnant . Others don't realize that a few beers might have mattered. In some cases, a woman may not have realized she was pregnant yet when she was sharing a bottle of wine with a friend.

### **Getting a diagnosis**

The Centers for Disease Control issued guidelines for diagnosing fetal alcohol syndrome in 2005. A child with FAS will have abnormalities in all three of these areas:

- Growth and development
- Facial features
- Central nervous system

Children who only have symptoms in one or two of these clusters may have a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. This is a milder form of the syndrome.

Not every child born to a mother who drank during the pregnancy will get FAS. If you think your child might have it, though, see that he or she gets examined by someone with training in this syndrome. A specialist can often recognize the condition at a glance through subtle facial features linked to FAS.

Getting a formal diagnosis is important because your child may then be eligible for services such as speech therapy , counseling or special education.

### **Possible red flags**

Children with FAS usually have a mix of problems. They will have symptoms from each of the following groups.

#### ***Growth and development***

- Slow growth before birth
- Small for age in height and weight
- Poor coordination
- Vision or hearing problems
- Speech and language delays
- Mental retardation
- Heart, kidney or bone ailments
- Dental abnormalities
- Deformed joints, limbs or fingers

#### ***Damage to the brain***

- Hyperactivity
- Short attention span
- Small head size
- Poor memory
- Learning disabilities

- Poor reasoning and judgment skills
- Sleep and sucking problems as a baby
- Lack of social skills
- Aggression
- Poor impulse control
- Antisocial behavior, such as lying or stealing
- Mental health problems including ADHD, depression, anxiety or
- conduct disorder

#### **Facial characteristics**

- Smooth ridge between nose and upper lip
- Thin upper lip
- Small eye openings

#### **What you can do for your child**

Early treatment can lessen the effects of FAS over the child's life. The best results have been reported from interventions started before a child's sixth birthday.

A child with FAS may outgrow certain facial features and put on weight. But the social, behavioral and learning issues do not go away.

A child with FAS may benefit from:

- Medication that may reduce symptoms
- Behavior therapy
- Special education classes
- A parent who receives training on how to address the child's special needs

Children with FAS also need to be closely monitored. They should see a professional regularly who can check on their progress and development.

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