

Challenges of FASD in the Transition to Adulthood

All young people face challenges in moving from adolescence to adulthood. During this transition, young people become more independent and take on adult responsibilities. However, this transition is difficult for those with disabilities such as FASD. Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth (2005) have studied the transition to adulthood in several vulnerable populations. They point out that these young people face additional difficulties. Problems include limitations in their skills, such as cognitive or learning problems, behavioral difficulties, and lack of family support for the transition. In addition, young adults with disabilities “age out” of special education or social service benefits. This occurs at a time when transition services might be most needed.

Osgood and colleagues describe two parts of the transition:

- 1) Moving into adult roles, including work, educational, and social roles; and
- 2) Learning to manage adult life. This aspect includes making housing arrangements, maintaining health, and avoiding negative outcomes such as substance use, mental health problems, and trouble with the legal system.

Young people with FASDs are likely to have problems in a number of areas. When they try to move into adult education and work roles, they may have difficulty due to limited cognitive skills and schooling. Problems with math, memory, or processing information can limit job opportunities. Attention problems and social skill difficulties also may make it difficult to hold a job. This may be especially true for jobs where customer service, attention to detail, or getting along well with others in the work environment are important. Studies of adults with FASDs who have been in clinical treatment show that problem behaviors also may occur; these include involvement in illegal activities or substance abuse.

Support from family and professionals will help adolescents with FASDs move into adulthood. Kathleen Tavenner Mitchell, the Director of the National Organization for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS), suggests two ways others can help ease the transition:

- 1) making use of system supports that are already available; and
- 2) providing as much structure as possible.

Although some services will no longer be available after age 18, she suggests contacting the Department of Disabilities for your state for assistance in finding housing. Family members also can help by checking into programs or classes that are available for job training. They can also check on social groups for young people with disabilities that might be available. Providing structure also may mean providing supervision in some situations. It may be necessary for family members to supervise the young adult in handling money. Family members may need to set up accounts and then make sure that they oversee transactions. Monitoring who the young adults are spending time with and their activities may be helpful in avoiding problem behavior. Ms. Mitchell emphasizes that it is necessary to continue monitoring these young adults while still “letting go.” It is a delicate balance to maintain adequate structure, and, at the same time, to allow them some freedom to act as independently as they are able.

For more information, please see:

Osgood, D.W., Foster, E.M., Flanagan, C., & Ruth, G. (2005). Introduction: Why focus on the transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations? In Osgood, D.W., Foster, E.M., Flanagan, C., & Ruth, G. (Eds.). On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-26.

Mitchell, K.T. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Practical Suggestions and Support for Families and Caregivers. Washington, DC: National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Available from www.nofas.org.