

Language Guide

Promoting dignity for those impacted by FASD



Looking After Each Other
A Dignity Promotion Project

This guide is intended to provide alternative words or phrases for those commonly used in society. We propose these be used in an effort to promote the dignity of those with FASD and their families.

People with FASD

Instead of:	Please Use:	Why?
Suffering with	Person/Individual with FASD	Many people who have FASD find these words offensive because they imply that they are not living happy, productive lives. People with disabilities would like others to focus on their strengths and positive attributes. People with FASD don't perceive themselves in these negative ways and aren't looking for people to feel sorry for them.
Damaged by		
Living with FASD		The FASD community has removed "living with" to reflect the language used to describe other disabilities/conditions.
FASD kids		The FASD community prefers to use "person first" language. This means that you talk about a person that has a disability (as well as many other traits) rather than presenting the disability as the whole of who they are. Another example would be "a person with an addiction" rather than an "addict".
(Innocent) Victims Or Injured		These words imply that there has been a perpetrator and is very negative towards mothers. Many people with FASD do not blame their mothers, and they don't want others to. Birth mothers do not seek to harm their children. This language jeopardizes both women's willingness to seek help and children's future relationships with their mothers.
Afflicted by	Affected by/Impacted by	This presents a more neutral tone to their disability. The term afflicted presumes that the person does not lead a happy, productive life.
External brain	Support person /circle /network /coach	The term external brain was created many years ago to give people an understanding that someone with FASD may require coaching at times to help with certain brain functions, like memory or problem solving. However, it has since been rejected by some as offensive because it implies that they need a whole new brain to be "normal". A support person is a more accurate and neutral term.
Mentally disabled	Cognitive or neurodevelopmental disability Note: terminology will be dependent on the province or territory.	This language is used in the United States, and can be found in their literature, but is not seen as acceptable in Canada as a way to describe people who may have cognitive challenges.

Women who drank during pregnancy

Instead of:	Please Use:	Why?
Admitted to alcohol use	Confirmed alcohol use	The term admitted implies that this is a confession of wrongdoing and has a moral judgement overtone. The term confirmed is neutral.
Alcoholics/addicts Or Women who choose to drink	Women who use alcohol or drugs	Research tells us that women do not intentionally seek to harm their unborn children. Some women may be unaware of their pregnancy when drinking heavily. Some women have addictions and mental health challenges and find quitting extremely difficult despite pregnancy. Some women have abusive partners who pressure them to drink while pregnant. Shaming women with these words does not promote prevention efforts, but rather makes women afraid to seek services that may help them.
Don't care about their children Or Bad parents	Parents or Caregivers	
Poor Choices Or Irresponsible Or Child abusers	There is no replacement language. Do NOT use these terms.	

Topic in general

Instead of:	Please Use:	Why?
100% preventable	Preventable Use with caution: think carefully about the context and audience in which the term preventable is being used as it can have negative impacts.	100% preventable oversimplifies a complex issue. While theoretically possible, totally eradicating alcohol use during pregnancy, like all other alcohol related harms such as addiction, is not a likely reality. This oversimplification removes all context in a woman's life and defines the issue as a single, easy choice. In turn, this erodes society's understanding and compassion for an issue with multiple factors for many women.
"Just one drink" can cause FASD	It is safest not to drink during pregnancy	There is no clinical evidence that one drink during an entire pregnancy causes significant harm. There is also no clinical evidence proving lower levels of alcohol use during pregnancy to be safe. This is why Canada supports the message that "it is safest not to drink during pregnancy".
Focussing the majority of the story on the challenges of FASD	A balanced approach or focus on how supports or adaptations have made good things possible	The public understands that people with FASD have challenges. A continual focus on this creates a belief that these challenges are the main attributes of people with FASD.
Focussing on facial differences	Focus on the cognitive or neurodevelopmental disability. Note: terminology will be dependent on the province or territory.	Anyone diagnosed with FASD has a neurodevelopmental disability; the impact of this can range from person to person. Only a small percentage of individuals with FASD have any physical signs. Focus on physical features implies that someone with those has a more severe form of FASD which is not true.
FAS, pFAS, ARND, FAE	FASD	As of 2015, there are only two diagnostic categories for Canada (2015); FASD with facial features and FASD without facial features. The term FASD is understood to encompass any alcohol-related diagnosis from the past. The other acronyms will no longer be used for diagnostic purposes.
Secondary disabilities	Secondary challenges/impacts/risks	This term was created in the US several decades ago to describe the adverse life experiences that were documented to occur for individuals with FASD at a disproportionate rate (mental health issues, addictions, criminality, poor school engagement etc.). New science is suggesting that mental health concerns and addictions may be a primary part of the FASD disability. Other challenges, while concerning, are not biologically driven and should not be termed a disability (eg. homelessness) nor are they specific to FASD; concerns like school drop out and criminality are more likely to occur for any individual who is not provided adequate supports and understanding.
FASD is caused by maternal alcohol use/maternal alcohol exposure	FASD is caused by prenatal alcohol exposure/when a developing baby is exposed to alcohol	When describing or defining FASD, the least stigmatizing approach is to move emphasis away from the behaviour of the birth mother and shift that emphasis to the substance of alcohol.