



FASD: What Police Officers Should Know

Talking about Law Enforcement? Give FASD A Seat at the Table.



Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs) are a group of diagnosable medical conditions that can occur in a person who was exposed to alcohol before birth. Effects are lifelong and can include mental health conditions, learning disabilities, sensory issues, and physical manifestations such as heart defects, hearing and visual impairments, and more.

Possible Indicators of FASD in Law Enforcement Settings

Desire to please	Predisposed to chattiness, compliance, and gullibility
Decision-making	Impulsive & inconsistent decisions (e.g., waiving of legal rights)
Memory Problems	Short- & long-term memory deficits, suggestibility, & and false confessions
Social Awkwardness	Social inappropriateness (e.g., laughing/smiling at unseemly topics), poor boundaries, immaturity, both verbal /nonverbal communication deficits
Sensory Challenges	Exacerbated negative behaviors in response to sensory input
Affect	Flat affect, no remorse, or lack of understanding the severity of offense
No perceived gain from crime	Illogical, offensive behavior or conduct

Considerations:

Individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are often misunderstood as being deliberately defiant. However, people with FASD often struggle with focusing, providing coherent responses, managing emotions, or appearing intoxicated even without substance use. Neglecting to recognize these deficits can lead to serious consequences, especially when dealing with law enforcement.

D.E.A.R: Interviewing Approach

Direct Language	For people who struggle with abstract thinking, using clear and direct communication, avoiding suggestions, jargon, analogies, or sarcasm, and using open-ended questions while allowing more time for processing can reduce the chances of suggestibility and confabulation.
Engage Support System	Without adequate support, they may give false statements when stressed, emphasizing the need for support systems to protect them.
Accommodate Needs	Individuals may have sensory processing challenges and function at a developmental level younger than their age; law enforcement should speak calmly, avoiding physical contact and sudden gestures.
Remain Calm	Individuals with FASD may have difficulty managing emotions and stress, potentially leading to erratic behavior or worsening existing impairments, so law enforcement should prioritize staying calm and patient in interactions with them.

*"Why don't we slow down when we're talking to everybody, why don't we use more simple terms when we're talking to everybody as police officers? Those that need that extra support, they're getting it, those that don't- **who does it hurt?**"*

-Captain Brian Holloman

Elkhart County Sheriff's Office, IN

Jerrod Brown, Amy Jozan, and Megan Carter, "Interview Considerations – Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: A Beginner's Guide for Criminal Justice Interviewers," Police Chief Online, July 6, 2022.

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