



## FACT SHEET

# Rhythmic Interventions for Young People with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

### Attention Deficits

Estimates place co-occurring attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and FASD as high as 80%. Rhythmic activities (repetition) has been used by educators across the centuries to improve focus and attention, & musical participation has been linked to improved memory and focus (Chan, Ho & Cheung, 1988). Rhythmic music activities necessitate an 'in the moment' experience or 'Flow' involving a heightened level of attention.

### FASD & Trauma

Many children presenting with FASD come from home environments where stressful events are common. Trauma symptoms are commonly found alongside those of FASD, in particular those related to heightened anxiety and poor emotional regulation (Crawford, 2007). The use of rhythmic drumming at slow tempos that mimic the mother's heartbeat (80-100bpm) has been shown to impact and restore homeostasis to systems over-sensitised by stress and anxiety. Exercises can be introduced that utilise changes in tempo to replicate changes in emotional intensity, allowing clients to practice emotional control in a safe context.

### Presenting Issues for Children with FASD

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a non-diagnostic umbrella term. FASD covers the full range of possible birth defects and/or developmental disabilities that can be caused by exposure to alcohol in utero. It has been suggested that as many as 2% of all Australian babies may be born with some form of FASD and that in some indigenous communities the rate exceeds 6% (Harris & Bucens, 2003).

FASD is a serious lifelong disability affecting individuals and communities. Young people with FASD need support from birth and throughout their lifespan, with a strong focus on maximising the strengths & potential of each individual. School aged children need appropriate support throughout their schooling experiences, to facilitate successful learning. Young people with FASD typically present with learning difficulties that include attention problems, hyper activity, & memory retention issues. These children also have difficulties understanding and expressing language. As well, they often struggle with social and emotional problems, exacerbated by sensory perception difficulties that lead to anxiety & stress (Crawford, 2007). Learning is difficult for these children and those supporting them often face unpredictable and inconsistent behaviour. However, over 75% of young people with FASD do not have an intellectual disability & with the right support, many go on to lead productive lives.

### Language Development

Many children with FASD struggle with language development, particularly those facing the additional challenge of learning a secondary language. Musical training sharpens the brain's early encoding of sound leading to improvements in the ability to distinguish between rapidly changing sounds, & enhancing auditory discrimination. This has an impact on the cortical processing of both language sounds and patterns leading to improvements in both language acquisition and literacy (Hallam, 2005).

### Balance & Coordination

Significant delays in motor skills, balance and coordination problems are common for many young people presenting with FASD. Rhythmic exercises, particularly those that include cross body movement, can help develop these areas as well as fine motor skills (Schlaug, et al, 2005). Rhythmic exercises can also be used to focus on body awareness and grounding, leading to improvements in physical stability.

### Engagement & Positive Relationships

A key issue in the progress of a young person with FASD is the quality of the relationship they develop with those that support them, including their teachers. This relationship requires a high level of commitment and trust and a focus on recognising strengths and empowering the individual (Crawford, 2007). Because of the developmental challenges exhibited by people with FASD and, in particular, problems with communication, this can be a challenging process. Rhythmic music activities offer support staff and families a proven method of cementing trust and connection through a fun, shared activity.

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