

Eight Keys to Remember in the Classroom

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I remember thinking, "What a beautiful child," when three-year-old Abby was placed in our home as a foster child. The caseworker explained that she had some behavior problems and a few learning disabilities, but that was to be expected because of the six foster placements prior to us. We did not consider her to be much of a challenge. After all, we had done a pretty good job with our three birth sons. The caseworker went on to explain all she needed was love, security and stability. "No problem," I thought to myself, "we can provide that."

After truly believing that for four exhausting years, I finally had to admit there was something different about this child. Her memory only lasted as long as the object was in front of her. She was an emotional time bomb waiting to go in any direction with no rational reason attached to her behavior. She did not seem to learn through experience and logical thinking escaped her. Yet, she was so loving and she could not be separated from me for any length of time.

By 1990, the frustration level in our home had reached an all time high. It was about this time I tuned into a TBS channel and saw a program on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. I could not believe what I was hearing. They were describing my daughter! This was to be the key to our future.

I made an appointment at Children's Hospital, where Abby was diagnosed as having FAS. Try, if you can, to imagine experiencing grief and joy in the same moment. There was a reason for her behavior and learning disability! But there is no fix and the potential for a "normal" life was not to be expected for her.

Determined to make a difference for Abby, I started calling agencies to find out about what programs Abby could qualify for. After all, I had just been told that FAS/E was the number one cause of mental retardation in the U.S. But I was to learn there was NO HELP available. NOTHING! Even our state's own, very large health department transferred my call eight times and on the last one, a voice asked, "F-A- What?" I was stunned by the lack of awareness among not only the general public, but by the professionals as well.

In my search for answers, I finally met some wonderful parents with information which would make our world livable again. Working together, the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Family Resource Institute was formed. Through this nonprofit organization, we endeavor to educate the public and professionals regarding the reality of FAS/E. Understanding and working with these children on a daily basis, without any knowledge of FAS/E, can be a very frustrating and exhausting task. To understand a child prenatally exposed to alcohol, you must understand that each child's specific type of damage is different, depending on many factors.

Over fifty percent of the children and adults with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome have an IQ above 70. They do not qualify for special education programs and, if FAS/E has not been recognized, they are often misdiagnosed or labeled as ADD, ADHD, or just plain lazy and stubborn.

So what can educators do?

Find out all you can about FAS/E. Hold a workshop in your school. Children with this disability can learn. They just learn in a different manner. The major keys we have found to unlocking educational doors for Abby and others with her disability, include the following:

- * We have found that our children benefit from early specific motor and mental stimulation. Programs for early intervention, with realistic expectations adjusted to their specific strengths and weaknesses, work well.
- * Structure! Structure! Structure!
- * Classrooms should have as little stimuli as possible. Our children have trouble filtering out unnecessary stimuli, which we find very easy to do everyday.
- * Use concrete learning methods. Abstract thinking is very difficult. Most children with FAS/E will learn from something they can see, feel or touch.
- * Only one command or task should be given at a time. Talk over any change in the schedule ahead of time, as transitions are very difficult. Our children find security in knowing what to expect next. They do not adjust easily to change.
- * Don't be disappointed if what you teach them today is not with them tomorrow. It is not a reflection of your ability, but it is a reflection of their disability.
- * Be practical. Help them learn vocational and life skills. Teach math with a calculator and time with a digital watch. Use a timer to help set the boundaries for activities.
- * The reward system works wonders, but the rewards need to be immediate. A sticker or positive recognition means more to our children than the promise of \$500 at the end of a good semester.

Each day we emphasize the successes Abby achieves. We find failure to be only a starting point towards success.