

# COGNITIVE SUPPORTS FOR PEOPLE WITH FASD'S:

## NATE SHEETS, FASD BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT

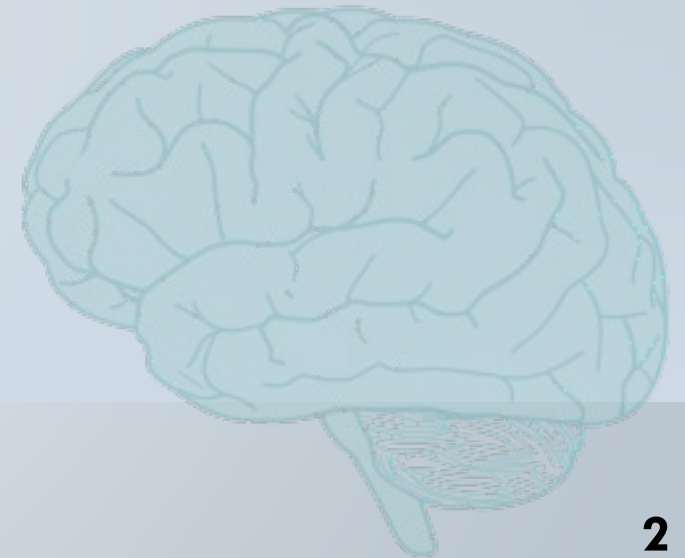




# WHO IS NATE?

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- Behavior consultant and owner of Oregon Behavior Consultation & Cognitive Supports
- In developmental disability field since 2008
  - Specializes in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD's)
  - Experience with all developmental disabilities (e.g. Autism, intellectual disability)
- Co-host of the “It’s a Brain Thing Podcast”
  - [www.OregonBehavior.com/itsabrainthing](http://www.OregonBehavior.com/itsabrainthing)
- Youtube channel:
  - [www.youtube.com/OregonBehavior](http://www.youtube.com/OregonBehavior)

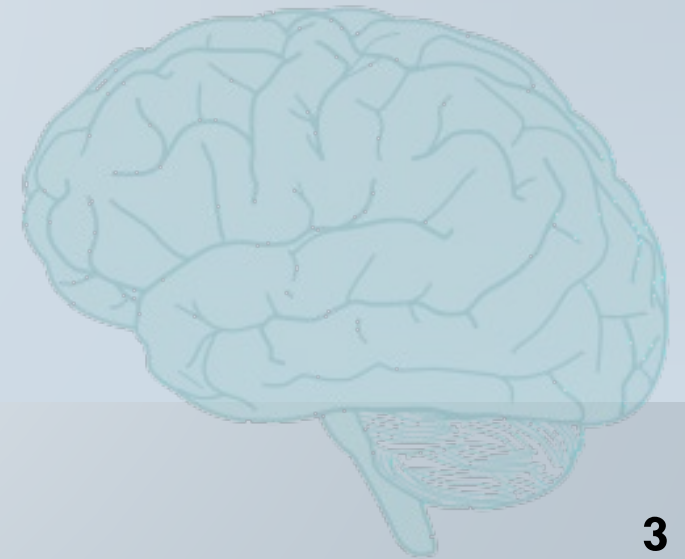




# WHO IS NATE?

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- Experience in:
  - Family homes
  - Foster homes
  - Group homes
  - Schools
  
- Bachelor's degree in Business Administration
  - Imposter Syndrome
  - ADHD



# POSITIVE TRAITS OF FASD'S

People with FASD's can have a wide variety of talents, strengths, and positive traits!

- Good with animals
- Good speakers, expressers
- Good with younger kids
- Friendly
- Motivated to help others
- Successful in childcare, customer service, food services, and caregiving/social work
- Frequently artistically and musically talented



Myles Himmelreich is a motivational speaker and mentor with an FASD.

[www.MylesHimmelreich.com](http://www.MylesHimmelreich.com)



## PEOPLE WITH FASD's ARE AT INCREASED RISK OF:

Systems are neither informed or equipped to support people with FASD's. These systems include:

- Schools
- Mental health programs
- Foster care programs
- Developmental disability programs
- Criminal justice system/courts

- Suicidal attempts (23%)
- Suicidal threats (43%)
- School disruption (43-70%)
- Law enforcement contact (60%)
- Incarceration/in-patient (60%)
- Sexual behavior/offense (65% of males)
- Substance abuse: 53% of males; 70% of females

(Kellerman)

Because FASD is so prevalent...

*In other words, society is neither informed or equipped to support people with FASD's.*



# LACK OF SUPPORT CREATES STRESS

5% of the population + No systems support

= **STRESS!**

A blue, stylized illustration of a human brain, positioned behind the word 'STRESS!' in the equation.

# WHO GETS STRESSED?

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## Person with FASD

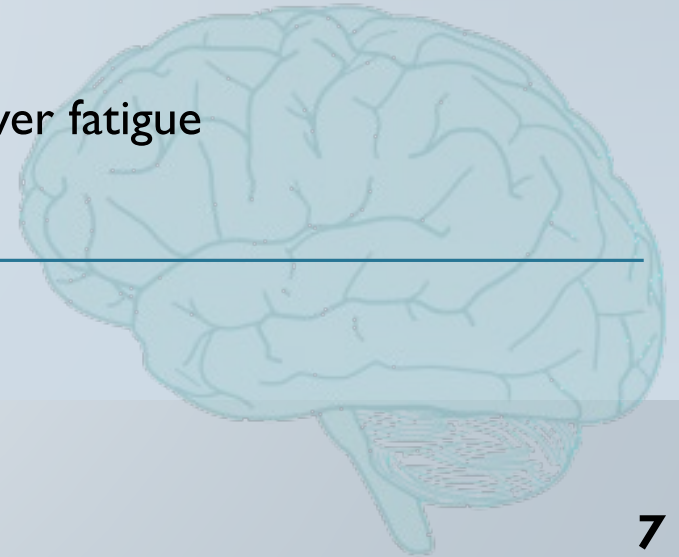
- Continually has behaviors misunderstood and punished in ineffective ways
- Continually held to too-high of expectations
- Loss of relationships due to misunderstanding and lack of support

## Families/Caregivers

- Do not know how to address behaviors
- Few resources during crises, including mental health crises
- Continual pushback, denial of how FASD impacts person's behavior, caregiver fatigue

## Professionals

- Not given effective tools or training for FASD
- Confusing when client seems to get it, but then doesn't change



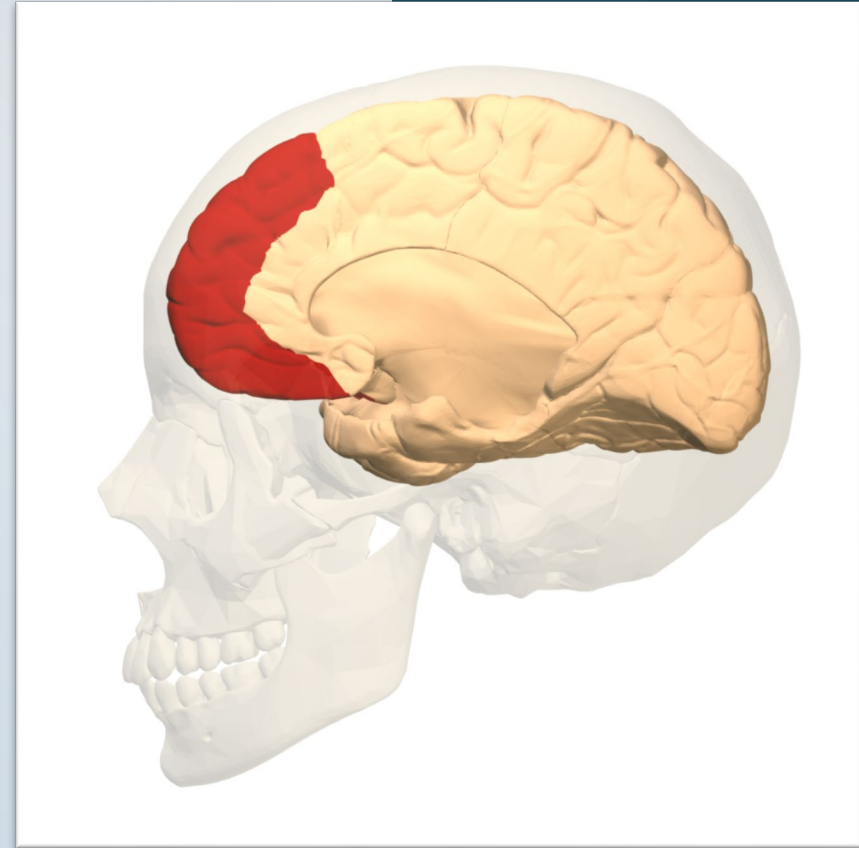
**THE LACK OF SUPPORT FOR THE #1 CAUSE OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY IN THE WORLD IS UNACCEPTABLE, AND CANNOT CONTINUE.**





# FASD Impacts Cognitive Skills

- Processing verbal language
- Executive Functioning Deficits
  - Emotional Regulation
  - Attention
  - Working Memory
  - Planning
- Processing Speed
- Memory issues
  - “Short-term” memory
  - Long Term Memory
  - Memory distortions



IF COGNITIVE SKILLS HELP US TO THINK,  
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE ARE EXPECTED  
TO USE A SKILL THAT WE DON'T HAVE?

**WHAT DO WE SEE ON THE OUTSIDE?**

**WHAT CAN'T WE SEE ON THE INSIDE?**



# WHAT WE SEE (BEHAVIOR)

- From the outside, we see **behaviors:**

- Impulsive behaviors
- “Lying”
- “Stealing”
- Risk-taking
- Inability or refusal to stick to a task/start a task
- Refusal to do schoolwork
- Emotional regulation challenges



# WHAT WE CAN'T SEE (THE BRAIN)

- Slow processing speed
- Not catching all/forgetting what is said
- Brain doesn't think about consequences
- Body moves before brain can think
- Oftentimes desperate to appear "normal"
- Brain "gets stuck", can't process the same way each time



**FASD IS USUALLY AN  
INVISIBLE  
DEVELOPMENTAL  
DISABILITY**





# “YOUR EXPLANATION GUIDES YOUR INTERVENTION”

–DR. ROSS GREENE, THE EXPLOSIVE CHILD

- Punishments
- Rewards
- Lectures
- “Why, why, why?”
- Suspensions
- Displacement
- Arrest



- Proactive
- Accommodation
- Think differently
- Empathize
- Learn
- Work together
- Advocate



# COGNITIVE SUPPORTS™

LINKING COGNITIVE SKILLS TO BEHAVIORS & SKILLS

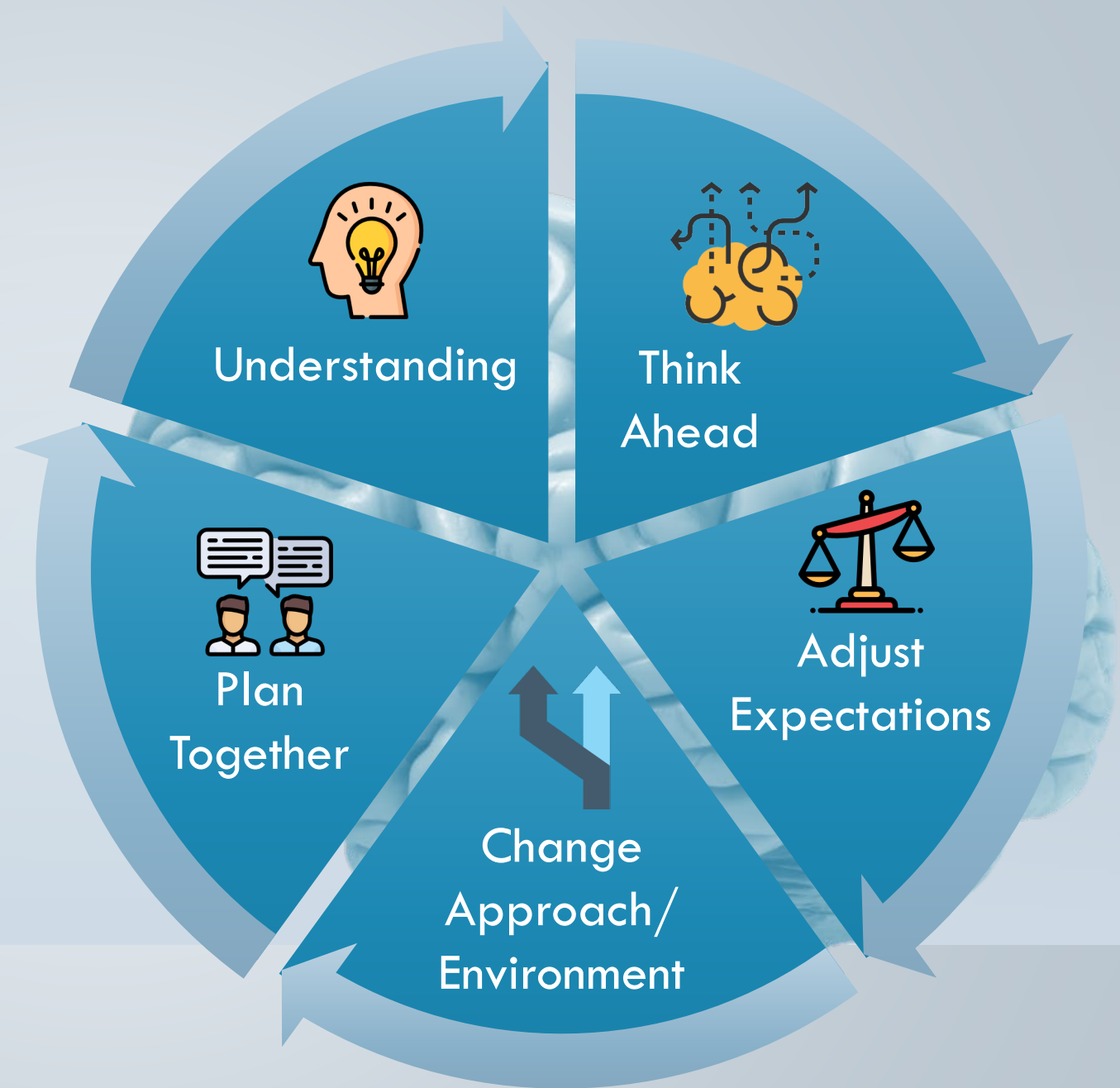




# COGNITIVE SUPPORTS

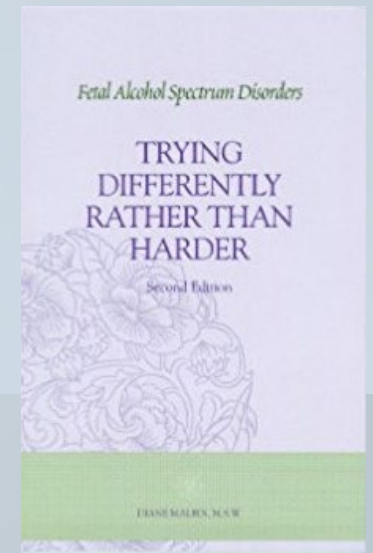
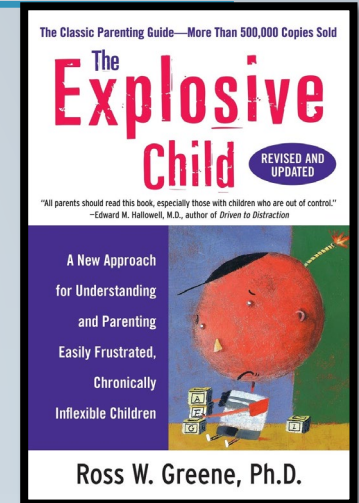
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1. Providing a support or intervention with a *specific* cognitive skill in mind.



# WHERE DOES COGNITIVE SUPPORT COME FROM?

- Collaborative Problem Solving
  - “The Explosive Child” (Ross Greene)
  - Behaviors are the result of “lagging skills”
  - Talking about behaviors (“Plan B”) allows us to identify the person’s concerns and solutions
- Neurobehavioral Model
  - “Trying Differently Rather than Harder” (Diane Malbin)
  - FASD's are the result of neurobiological brain changes caused by alcohol
  - We need to adjust expectations and remember how FASD's impact the brain, and make sure our solutions work with a person’s cognitive skills set



A photograph of three people sitting on a bed or couch, engaged in conversation. On the left, a young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt, is smiling and looking towards the center. In the middle, a young girl with long brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt, is seen from the back, looking towards the right. On the right, an older woman with short grey hair, wearing a light-colored top, is smiling and looking towards the young woman. The background is a bright window with white curtains. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark grey filter.

IT'S ABOUT MORE  
THAN  
"BEHAVIOR"

While we are mostly talking about how to address challenging behaviors today, Cognitive Supports help a person learn *many* things and do better in more environments. It is about helping people live *life*, not a way to control children or their behaviors.

# HOW NATE THINKS (BRACE YOURSELVES!)

“I am the parent/adult” is bogus

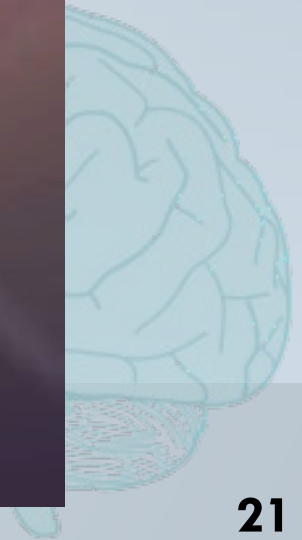
- A child needs to have buy-in, just like an adult would
- We constantly correct and punish children while not noticing/tolerating/ignoring adult behaviors
- In “the real world”, adults have the right to make their own decisions. Telling kids that they will have to listen “in the real world” isn’t exactly true.



Is this your current approach/value/worldview? Think about what would change if you “treated” your kid like an adult when addressing their behaviors and support needs?



# JEALOUSY OR...?



# JEALOUSY OR...?

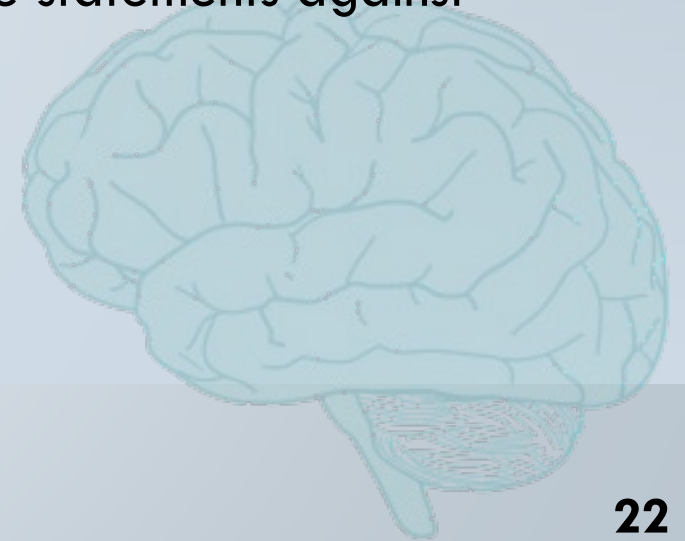
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## Traditional Interpretations

- Sees sibling get attention, and wants attention for herself
- Doesn't like seeing other people be successful, and so she escalates due to jealousy

## Cognitive Skill Interpretations

- Compliments are “out of nowhere”, and she struggles to adjust to unexpected events (Transitions & Adjusting)
- She misinterprets compliments toward her siblings as negative statements against her (Perception)



# APPLYING A COGNITIVE SUPPORT

## **Interpretation**

Planning when  
something is  
unexpected

## **Cognitive Support**

Tell her ahead of time

## **Is it working?**

Less escalated

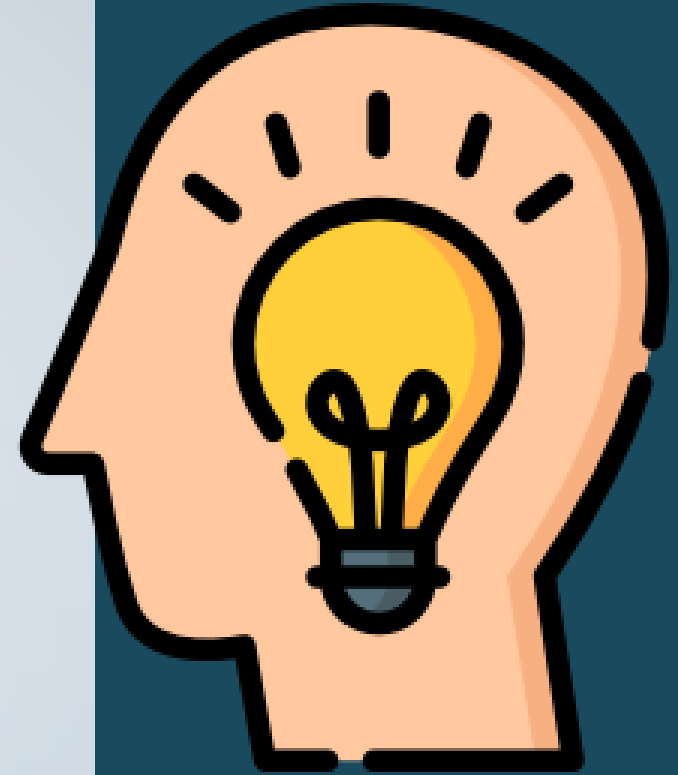


YouTube



# Understanding

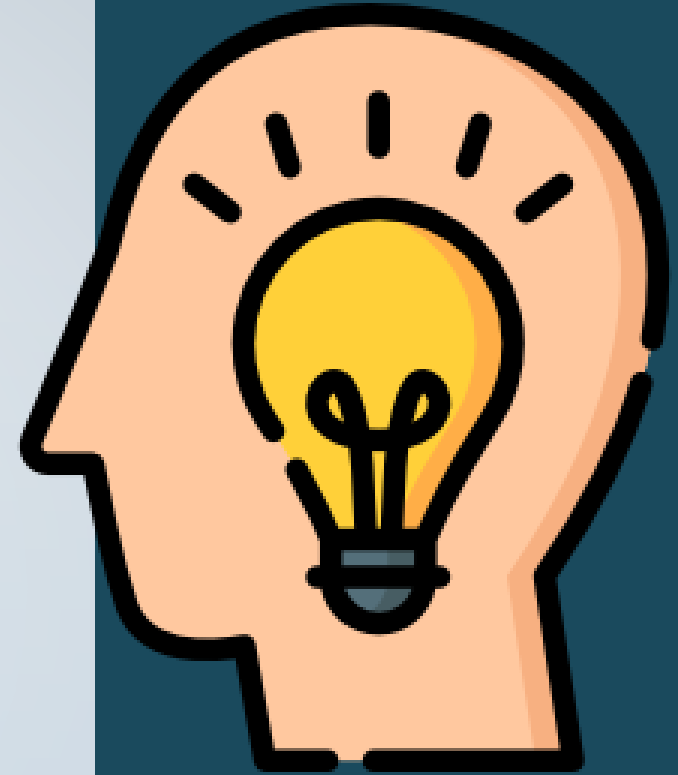
- Understanding *why* behaviors happen is important to coming up with *effective* interventions.
- In order to effectively use Cognitive Support, you have to spend time learning about cognitive skills!
- This workshop is one step in your ongoing understanding.
- Any professionals/supports working with a person with an FASD must have a basic understanding.





# Understanding

- One of the ways Nate tries to understand cognitive skills deficits is through empathy.
  - We imagine what *our* life would be like without a particular cognitive skill.
  - We ask ourselves how we would like or need people to respond to *us*.
- We then consider if our current responses reflect what we would want or if it would help the skill



# UNDERSTANDING COGNITIVE SKILLS

Our supports *must* take a person's cognitive skills into account!

The more you learn about the skills, the easier the process gets

The Oregon Behavior Consultation Cognitive Tasks & Skills List can be a starting point for assessing and learning about skills

**Cognitive Skills and Task List**  
For an explanation, visit [www.oregonbehavior.com/skills](http://www.oregonbehavior.com/skills)

Name of focus person: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Who filled out this list? \_\_\_\_\_  
What is your role? \_\_\_\_\_

Please note: the examples provided are just one way in which each skill plays out. Think about the skill before reading the example.

Rate the person on each skill.  
Unless otherwise noted, rate the person on how they do with the skill when they are doing well.  
5- Always a Strength  
4- Sometimes a Strength  
3- It Depends/Inconsistent  
2- Sometimes a Struggle  
1- Always a Struggle  
N/A- Doesn't apply/Don't know

| Executive Functioning Skills/Tasks                                      | Examples  | Rating |
|---|---|--------|
| 1 Holding attention to complete an everyday task                        | Diana listens to her teacher explain long-division                                      |        |
| 2 Ignoring distractions   | Anne can't focus on things she is familiar with, such as chores                         |        |
| 3 Impulse-control/thinking before doing                                 | Anne sees a bird outside & spaces-out while studying                                    |        |
| 4 Thinking before answering a question                                  | Before she can stop and think, Anne breaks a plate over Gilbert's head                  |        |
| 5 Making short-term plans mentally and following through                | Mariella realizes Anne said yes, but she didn't fully understand the question           |        |
| 6 Considering several solutions, not just the first that comes to mind  | Even though Gilbert knows what he wants to do, he considers his father's ideas          |        |
| 7 Seeing patterns and making predictions of outcome/consequence         | Anne knew that she needed to tell her umbrella with her to school, just in case         |        |
| 8 Independently realizing when a change of plan is needed               | Even though Gilbert knows what he wants to do, he considers his father's ideas          |        |
| 9 Organizing everyday items, toys, or workspace                         | Ruby looks outside and takes her umbrella with her to school. She just needed more time |        |
| 10 Solving problems independently, if given enough time                 | After finishing the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time       |        |
| 11 Understanding and appreciating a differing opinion or view           | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 12 Changing mind about problem/plan after time to think                 | When she needs help, Anne seeks out Mrs. Lynde's advice and uses it                     |        |
| 13 Adjusting to changes in the plan once fully understood and calm      | Anne keeps her books very organized without the help of adults                          |        |
| 14 Transitioning from one task or more tasks                            | After finishing the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time       |        |
| 15 Moving back and forth between two or more steps                      | When she needs help, Anne seeks out Mrs. Lynde's advice and uses it                     |        |
| 16 Initiating verbal directions with three or more steps                | Anne keeps her books very organized without the help of adults                          |        |
| 17 Following verbal directions with three or more steps                 | After finishing the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time       |        |
| 18 Understanding abstract or non-visualized concepts                    | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 19 Thinking hypothetically about situations                             | When she needs help, Anne seeks out Mrs. Lynde's advice and uses it                     |        |
| 20 Holding multiple variables in mind and manipulating them             | Anne keeps her books very organized without the help of adults                          |        |
| 21 Keeping calm when frustrated, anxious, or overstimulated             | After finishing the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time       |        |
| 22 Using coping skills when frustrated with no more than one prompt     | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 23 Keeping coping skills when behavior around unfamiliar/special people | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 24 Temporarily changing behavior around unfamiliar/special people       | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 25 Identifying deeper cause of an emotion, such as anger                | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |
| 26 Applying information learned in one circumstance to another          | Anne finishes the project herself after 2 extra days. She just needed more time         |        |

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Please take a few minutes and fill out the OBC Cognitive Skills & Tasks List for your child, a client you know well, your spouse/partner, or yourself!

Read the skill and answer **BEFORE** reading the example.

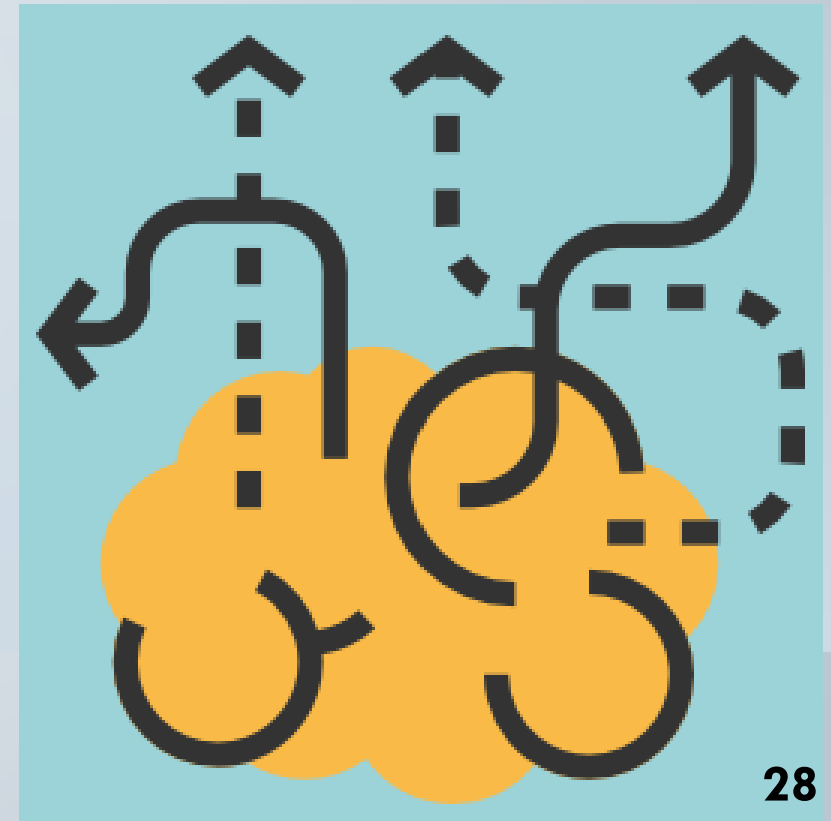


# THINK AHEAD

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Thinking ahead is about more than planning out activities ahead of time. In order to think ahead effectively, we must consider:

- What activities are planned?
- Which cognitive skills do the activities demand?
- What is the person's ability to do the skills demanded?
- What supports need to be put in place to support the skills they struggle with?
- How do we implement the supports practically and consistently?



Thinking  
of time.

**These questions take time to answer!**

**That means that you need to give yourself time to think about them every day!**

- What activities are planned?
- Which cognitive skills do the activities demand?
- What support persons or things do the skills demanded?
- What supports are needed to help them support the skills they struggle with?
- How do we implement the supports practically and consistently?



# Adjusting Expectations

- FASD is a brain-based developmental disability.
- Like *all* disabilities, we will need to make accommodations.
- Like all disabilities, it would be unethical to punish someone for showing symptoms of their disability.
  - For FASD, that is *behavior and cognitive skill deficits*
  - Even systems who “get” this still engage in traditional approaches or punishments.



# “LET IT GO!”

Not everything can be addressed at once. We must consider what is and isn't a priority. Consider adjusting expectations when:

- The expectation is not being met due to disability
- The expectation is too cognitively-demanding
- The expectation causes stress, even minor stress
- The expectation is not entirely necessary for health, safety, or quality of life



# COMMON THINGS TO LET GO:

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- Homework:
  - If homework causes stress, it's not worth it
- School:
  - Consider shortened school days, modified work, adjusted workload, and many accommodations based upon cognitive supports
- Family traditions/expectations:
  - Holiday demands
  - Sports/family traditions





# THE DANGER OF TOO HIGH OF EXPECTATIONS

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- Too high of expectations leads to *stress*. And ongoing stress is *traumatic*. It can lead to mental health conditions such as PTSD and anxiety.
- Factors that increases chances of a person being held to too high of expectations:
  - Invisible disability (most FASD's)
  - Good talker/expresser
  - Skill strengths in some areas or on some days



It is normal to feel as if adjusting expectations is *wrong*

- Society pressures us to increase demands and punishment
- Professionals continually suggest things that do not work
- People will think our approach is doing more harm than good
- We can question ourselves—and that's OK!



Adjusting expectations helps us  
respect a person's  
*neurodiversity, individuality, and autonomy.*



# TABLE DISCUSSION

**1) Why and how do we (as parents and professionals) struggle with adjusting expectations?**

**Consider: systems, values, communication among team members, etc.**

**2) What is something *specific* you need to think about in terms of your expectations? How might adjusting your expectations change things?**



# CHANGE APPROACH/ENVIRONMENT

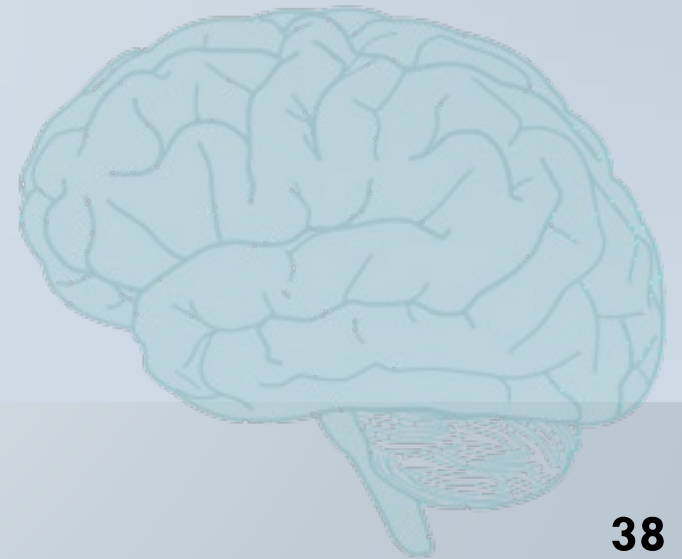
- Most of the strategies we implement involve *us* changing the way we do things in order to accommodate or provide cognitive supports.
- It's best if all supporters implement changes at the same time, and consistently.
- Make only 2-3 changes at a time, and track if it works



# CHANGING OUR APPROACH IS HARD!

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- It doesn't come naturally, and naturally goes against our own impulses.
- That is why practicing helps!



# TABLE DISCUSSION

What are your unhelpful impulses and responses when your child/client engages in a behavior?

Brainstorm practical ways to avoid (or practicing avoiding) your impulses and previous responses (practicing, roleplaying, etc.)



# PLAN TOGETHER/PROACTIVE CONVERSATIONS

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- This is the *last* part of the Cognitive Support process that should be put in place.
- BUT! Once you get this in place, it will be the *most effective* way to address difficulties or challenging behaviors.
- It will also be a great way to teach skills.





# PROACTIVE PLANS

- Identify the issue **BEFORE** the situation activity





## WHEN MIGHT AN ISSUE ARISE?

- Going to the grocery store
- Going to school
- Sleepovers
- Church
- Being asked to do a chore
- Being told to stop playing video games
- Going to bed
- Waking up



# All the time!

# PLAN TOGETHER PROCESS

- Identify the issue **BEFORE** the situation activity
  - Ask the person to have a conversation



# PROACTIVE PLANS

Ask person if they have any solutions

- Use their solution, even if you know it won't work!
- Don't offer solutions until they've had time to think about it! (minutes, hours, days)
- Make a plan together
  - Include a prompt, if necessary





# PROMPTS!

Prompts can be used to:

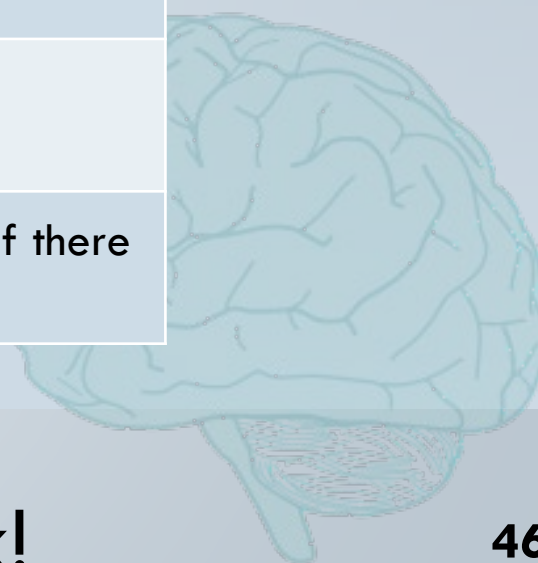
- 1) Remind someone of a proactive plan
- 2) To address behaviors in the moment

# IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

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## DON'T CORRECT—PROMPT!

| Correcting   | VS. | Prompting  |
|--|-----|--|
| “Stop doing that!”                                       | VS. | “Think about what you’re doing.”                         |
| “You said that you would go outside when you get upset!” | VS. | “Think about the plan.”                                  |
| “Don’t you see why that won’t work?”                     | VS. | “Can we stop and think to see if there is a better way?” |



After you have prompted, don't talk!



# WHY PROMPT?

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- ▶ We can't expect the person's brain to remember the plan (or what they wanted to do) in the moment.
- ▶ This is about *processing and thinking*. Once there is a prompt, the goal is to **step back** and let the rest of the thinking process happen. That is how skills are built over time!



# WHY PROMPT?

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- ▶ It encourages the brain to think!
  - ▶ How many behaviors could be prevented the person could improve in their ability to stop and think about what they are doing?
  - ▶ Overtime, thinking may improve independently
- ▶ Successful plans means skills can be built
  - ▶ Practice makes “perfect”





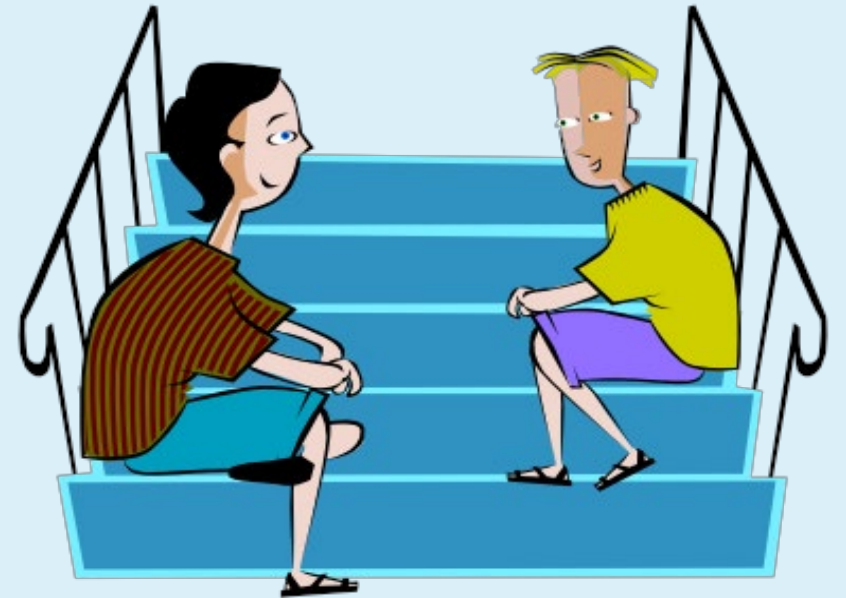


# TYPES OF PROMPTS

- Remember Receptive Communication challenges!
- Try a visual prompt:
  - Picture
  - Signal
  - Object
- Expect resistance at first if the issue involves escalation. Immediate refusal is common. **Do not respond!**

# PROACTIVE PLANS

- Identify the issue BEFORE the situation activity
- Ask the person to have the conversation
- Ask person if they have any solutions
  - Use their solution, even if you know it won't work!
  - Don't offer solutions until they've had time to think about it! (minutes, hours, days)
- Make a plan together
  - Include a prompt, if necessary
- Practice the plan





# PRACTICE THE PLAN!

Whenever possible, we want to practice plans

Practicing removes the need to use Abstract Thought, Planning, and various other skills





# PRACTICE THE PLAN!

Physically practicing when movement is involved makes following the plan easier in the moment

Practicing allows the person to know **WE** will be doing (being quiet!) so that it is not a surprise in the moment

Practicing helps us, too! (Running away example)



## COMING BACK TO THE CONVERSATION

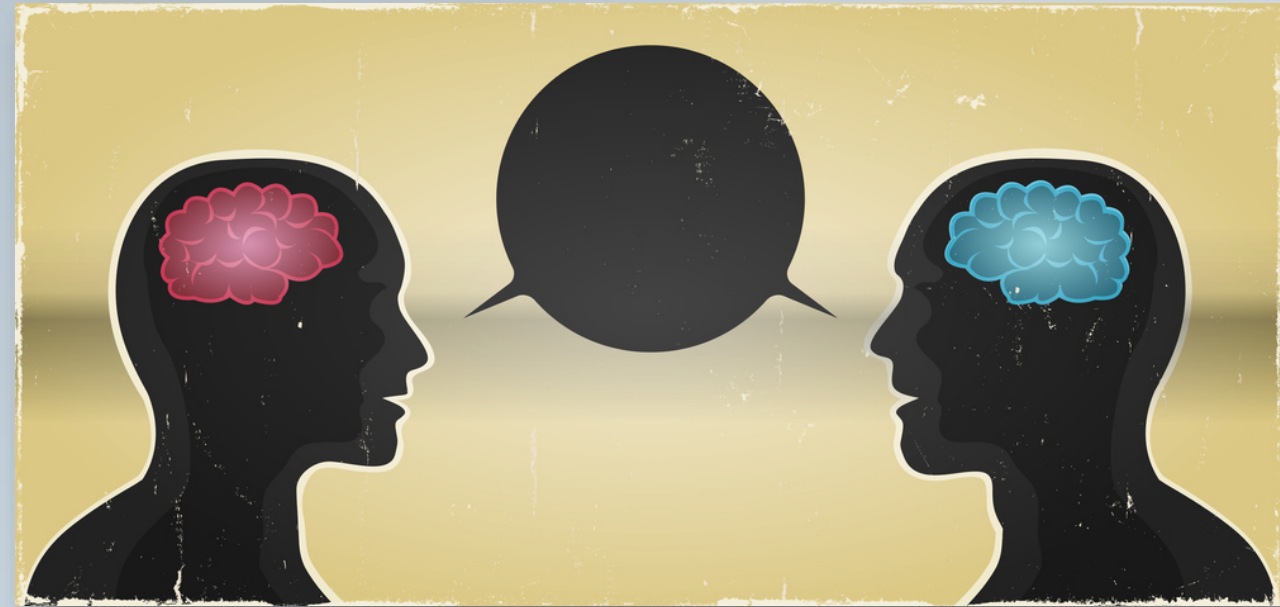
- **Do not expect everything to work the first time!**
- Come back to the plan if successful!
- Be gentle, reassuring
- Make another plan the way you did before, or try the plan again



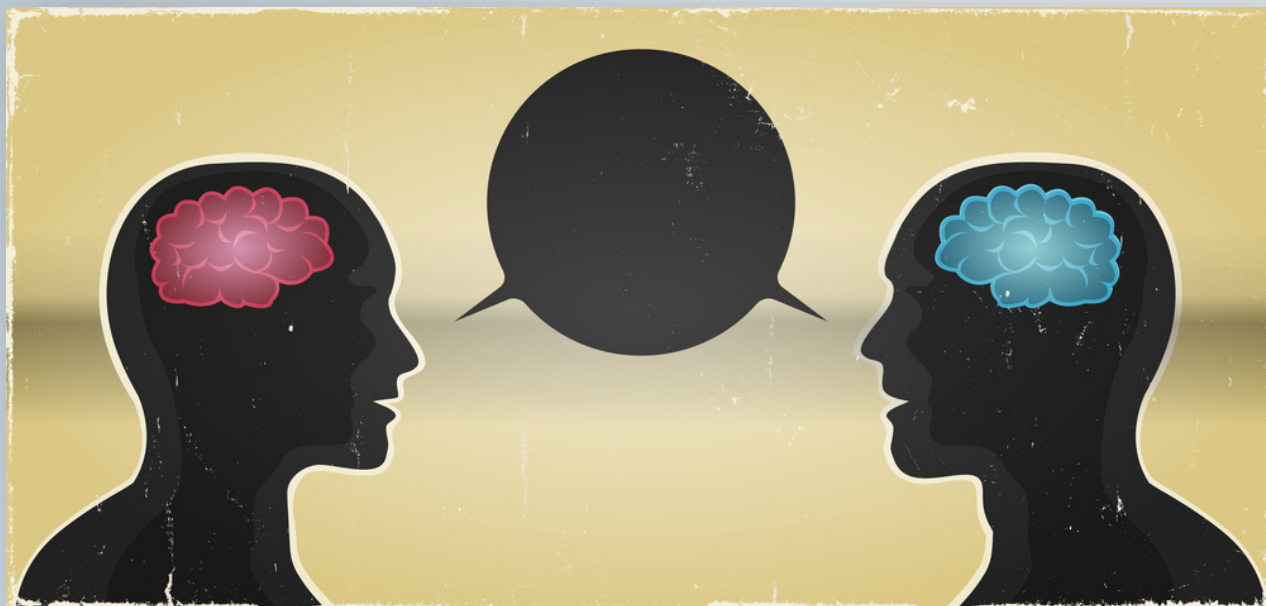
# WHEN PLANS DON'T WORK

## It's a brain thing!

- While Planning together, the person with an FASD will probably not mention cognitive skills specifically—it's your job to think of them while Planning Together!



# WHEN PLANS DON'T WORK



Think about the Cognitive Skills Filter in the moment the person was “supposed” to follow the plan. Did they have the cognitive skills needed? If not, what is a solution to support those skills?



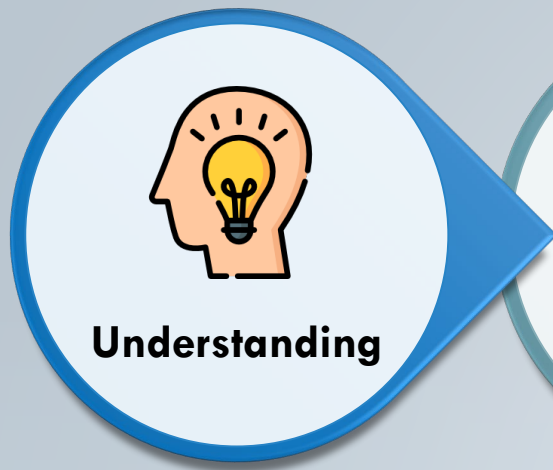
## REMEMBER!

We can't always have a plan for every situation, which is why the rest of the Cognitive Support process is crucial.

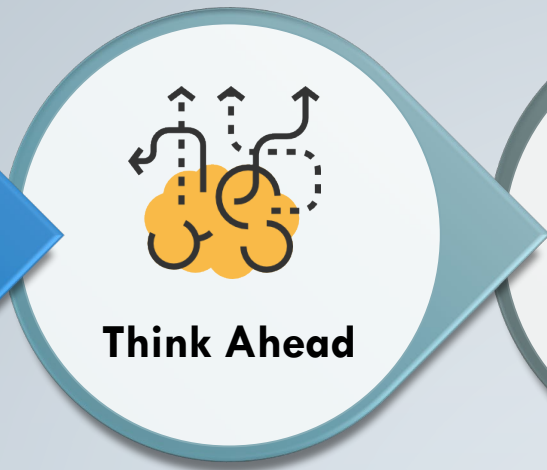
**What could Jennifer struggle with while she is at the community center today?**







Mary knows Andrew struggles with transitioning off of TV, with changes to his routine, and with emotional regulation due to FASD and anxiety.



Mary knows the interview is happening, so she starts planning. Simply telling Andrew about the interview doesn't fix the skill struggles



Mary puts the visual on top of TV  
She wakes up early to devote attention to Andrew  
She has an alternative plan is ready



This whole Plan is an adjusted expectation from traditional parenting methods!  
Mary does not expect Andrew to comply "because she's the mom"



Mary gives Andrew time to think of his own solutions to the problem  
She keeps the intervention positive  
She makes a clear plan & includes a non-verbal prompt  
She has Andrew read it right before starting



# SKILL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

USING COGNITIVE SUPPORTS PRACTICALLY  
IN EVERYDAY LIFE



# ESSENTIAL STRATEGY #1

LESS TALKING, MORE THINKING



**Verbal communication is the least-effective way to pass information along to a person with an FASD.**

# STRATEGY #2

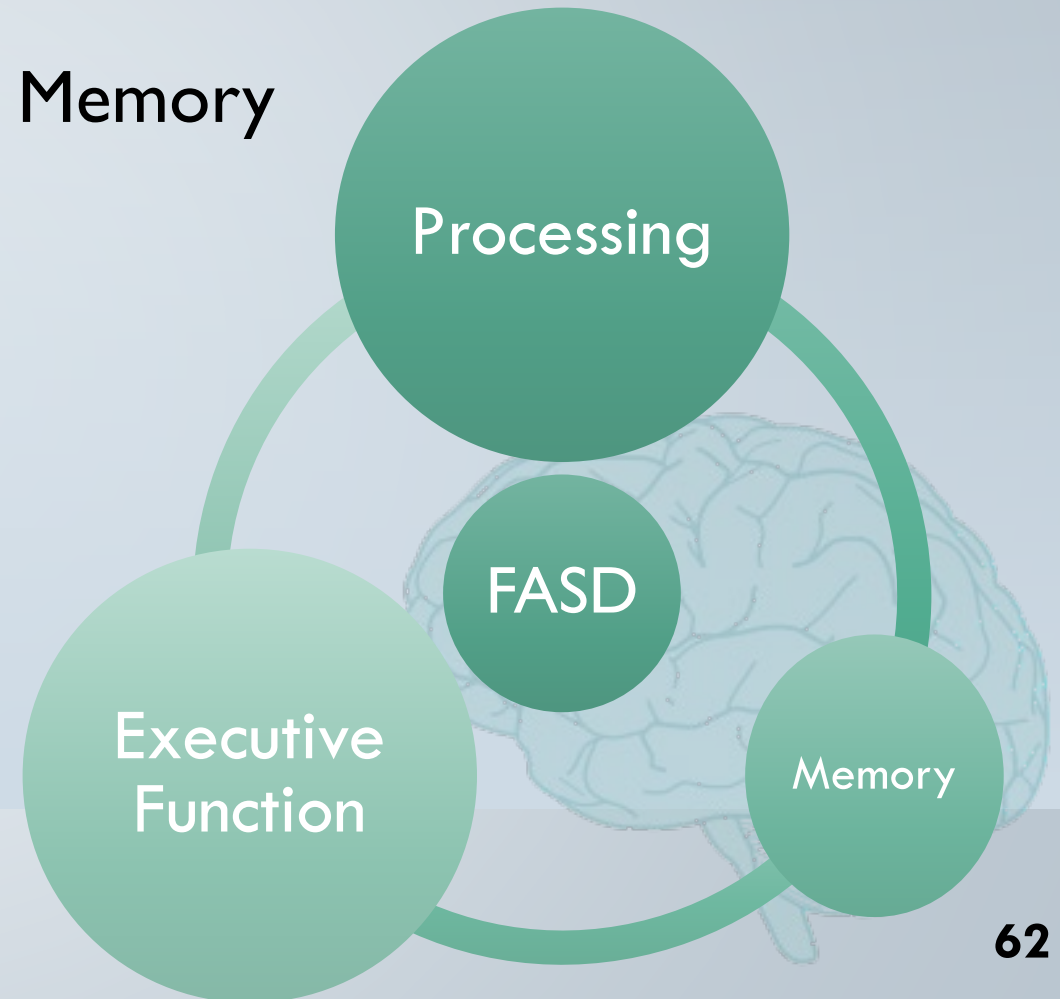
## VISUALS



# Visuals are the best support for *everyone!*

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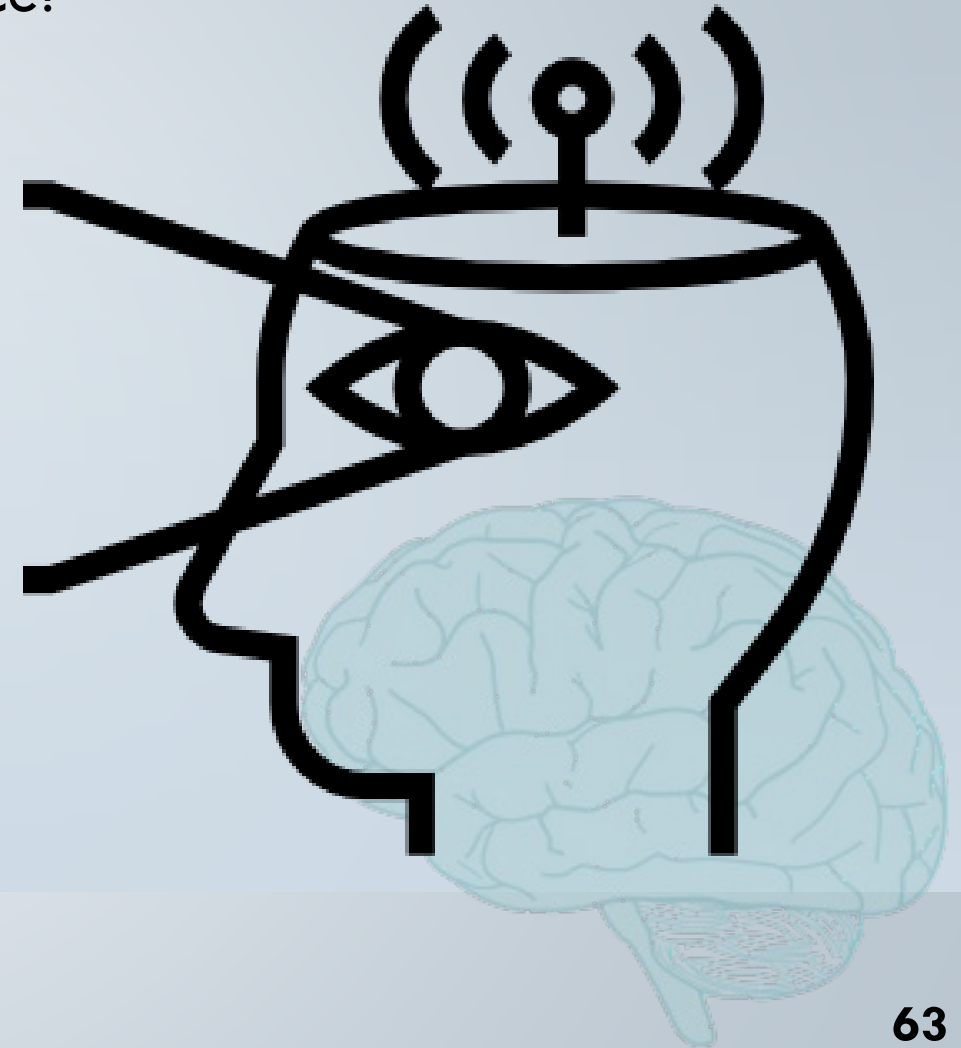
- Visuals support many skills at once
  - Processing, Executive Functioning, and Memory
- We often resist visuals:
  - They frequently don't work
  - They take time to make
  - The person doesn't buy-in



# STARTING PLACES—VISUALS

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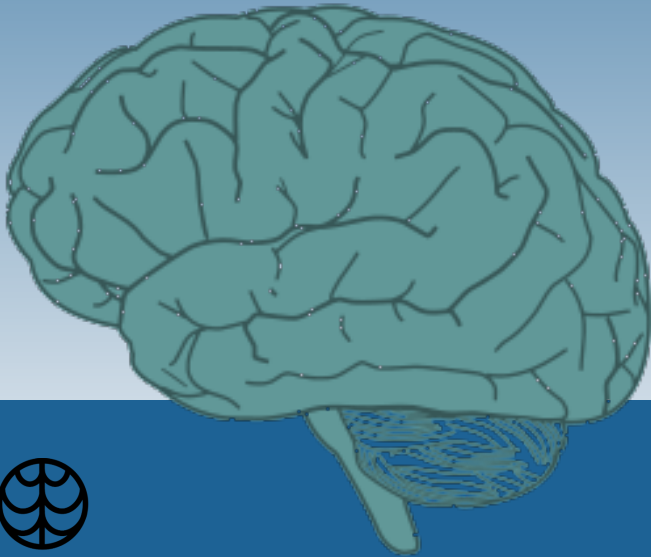
- Visuals support many different cognitive skills at once!
- Visuals can be simple!
  - “Notes”
  - Laminated piece of paper/dry erase marker
- Think of what the visual is supposed to do:
  - Remind
  - Prompt to transition
  - Remember
  - Organize
  - Be mindful/regulate
- Use visuals to help you avoid verbal communication!



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We should always be asking ourselves:

“Should I be talking or should I be  
showing?”





# FINAL THOUGHTS

When parents and caregivers interpret behaviors as being the result of struggling cognitive skills, we can start to think of solutions that take those skills into account.

When we assume behaviors are intentional and willful, there is little we can do to proactively work around the skill. We may end up resorting to punishments, arguments, and power struggles.

Research suggests that parents who understand the brain-based reasons for behaviors are more likely to use proactive strategies and feel more successful in their parenting





# The Building Up! Workshop

Advanced Cognitive Supports for children and adults with  
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs)



Presented by Nate Sheets, FASD Behavior Consultant

[www.buildingupworkshop.com](http://www.buildingupworkshop.com)



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