

Policy Webinar Report

Optimizing Employment Opportunities and Outcomes for People with FASD

January 28, 2022



Meaningful and fulfilling employment can help people develop a positive identity, self-esteem and self-worth. For people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), consistent employment can also be a protective factor against some secondary outcomes associated with FASD. People with FASD have many strengths, skills, and abilities to bring to their workplace. However, there are a number of challenges and barriers to people with FASD entering and succeeding in the workforce. This publicly accessible webinar brought together a researcher, a person with FASD, an FASD service provider, and an employer, to discuss how we can optimize employment opportunities and outcomes to encourage success for those with FASD in the workplace.

The following report provides an overview of the event and potential policy considerations. The Canada FASD Research Network (CanFASD) is honoured to support efforts to improve the outcomes of individuals with FASD through this webinar series. This event was sponsored by the Canada Northwest FASD Partnership and led by the Province of Alberta.

A recording of the webinar can be found at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmpMmMku2ys>.

Hosted by Darren Joslin, CanFASD Board Member

Darren retired from the Government of Alberta with 31 years of service in the Social Services and Health sectors. His work has focused on a number of areas including FASD, mentorship, and youth homelessness. Darren was the Co-Chair of the FASD Cross-Ministry Committee during the development and initial implementation of Alberta's FASD 10-Year Strategic Plan. As a member of the Canada Northwest FASD Partnership he was involved in the establishment of the Canada FASD Research Network.

Webinar Summary

“Employment serves many goals. It provides an income, opportunities to connect with others, a way to develop oneself, and can increase self-esteem and quality of life. Employment offers a socially valued role, which can be especially meaningful to individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). For individuals with FASD, employment can act as a protective factor against adverse outcomes, including poverty. Fortunately, with appropriate supports, individuals with FASD have the ability to obtain and maintain employment.” (Makela et al., 2019)

I. Employment Research

Presented by Dr. Aamena Kapasi, CanFASD Research Fellow

Aamena is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Alberta working on the Substance Use and Addictions in FASD Populations study for her post doctoral research in partnership with CanFASD. Aamena completed her M.A in Counselling Psychology at the University of Western Ontario, and her Ph.D in School and Clinical Child Psychology at the University of Alberta. Aamena has been conducting research in the area of FASD since 2013 and her research is focused on supports and interventions for individuals with FASD. She has a passion for both research and clinical work and children, youth, and families.

Research Overview

Employment can be a protective factor against adverse outcomes for individuals with FASD; it can reduce poverty and dependency. Individuals with FASD can be valuable employees demonstrating curiosity, creativity, gregariousness, tenacity, friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, and embracing structure and routine. However, cognitive, emotional and behavioural difficulties can make it difficult to obtain and maintain employment.

Due to cognitive differences in working memory, impulsivity, attention and language, employers may see:

- Lateness or missed shifts
- Forgetfulness
- Incomplete tasks
- Mistakes in task completion
- Getting stuck in one way of doing things
- Recklessness or dangerous situations
- Strong emotions under pressure
- Very slow to complete tasks
- Messy work
- Inconsiderate of others

Employers might conclude that the individual is:

- Disinterested
- Lacks motivation
- Lazy
- Careless
- Mean
- Not desiring employment

Instead of an individual with brain differences

- Who is struggling to do the best they can
- Who wants to succeed
- Who often cares very much about doing well

The Employment Success Study (Kapasi et al., 2019) asked adults with FASD for their employment success stories so we could learn from their successes. Two key questions informed the survey:

- Under what conditions are people with FASD successful in their employment?
- What kinds of positive employment impacts are being achieved by adults with FASD?

Research Results:

Conditions of Success:

- Finding the right fit
 - Understand the client strengths and needs in the context of requirements of the job (e.g., level of consistency, structure, job stress, expectations)
- Using relational supports
 - A whole team that supports the success of employment that help to solve issues such as transportation, meals, relationships, weather requirements etc.
- Identifying as having FASD
 - Not everyone discloses their diagnosis, but those that did found it beneficial as others were better able to understand their challenges
- Responding to challenges
 - Proactive, reframing situations, using accommodations when needed

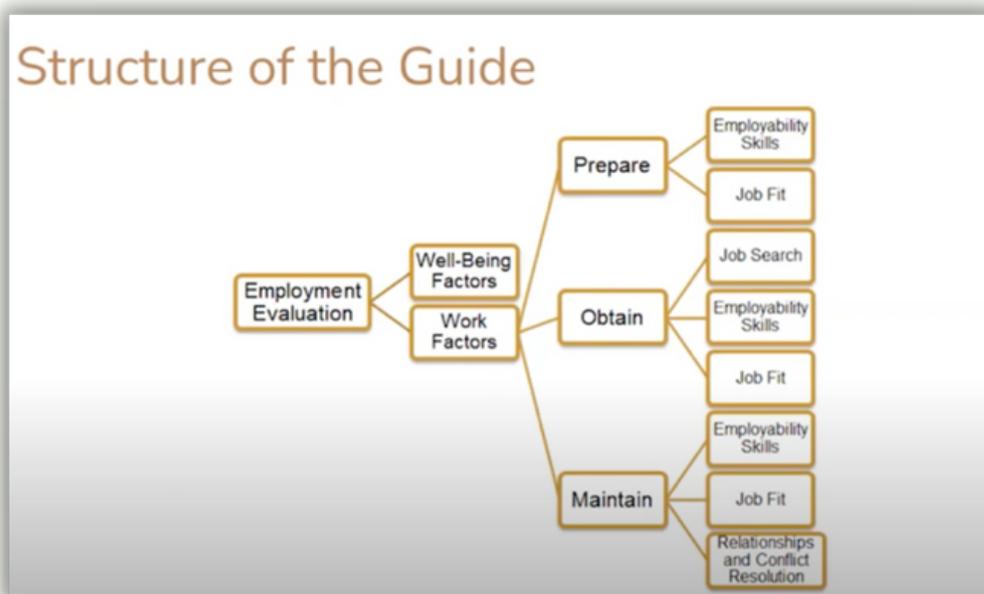
Impacts of Employment:

- Increasing autonomy through remuneration
 - Individuals with FASD liked being paid and found the independence that money gave them valuable
- Building self-esteem
 - Feeling valued, proud, finding strengths on the job, and building relationships in a positive way
- Developing social connections
 - Building relationships with co-workers and customers in a positive way was rewarding
- Becoming advocates for FASD
 - Helping others to understand the disability was a positive experience

Research Outputs:

Employment Guide: <https://canfasd.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/Guide-for-Employment-Professionals-Supporting-Employment-in-Adults-with-FASD.pdf>

- A checklist guide of important factors to consider
- Uses a Supported Employment Model
 - Focuses on creating a good fit between the employee's abilities and the work environment
 - Provides individualized guidance to individuals with disabilities
- Piloted the guide with community agencies and received feedback



The employment guide can be used as a record, checklist, to monitor progress, to create action plans, for reflection and for continuity of care. Activities within the guide include looking at employability skills, job fit, recommendations for a job search, relationships and conflict resolution.

Key Messages:

- Individuals with FASD can find employment success
 - It is not about if, it is about how
 - There needs to be a general understanding of the client's life circumstances and stability including priorities such as health and housing so supports are in place and can enable employment success
- Shared responsibility of the individual with FASD, the organizations, and the community
- Providing resources to employment professionals working with individuals with FASD will increase opportunities for success.

II. Employee with FASD

Presented by Blair Charters, FASD Advocate

Blair is 42-years-old and lives in Red Deer, Alberta. He has been employed as a Prep Cook at Tacoloft in Red Deer, Alberta, for almost two years. Prior to that he worked at Earl's Restaurant in Red Deer for 20 years. Blair has been a Public Speaker for nine years and hosted speech nights in Red Deer for five years, encouraging others to share their journeys. He has also been a speaker at many FASD Day events as well as two Youth Mental Health Workshops. Blair received both a Central Region as well as a Provincial Leadership award from Persons with Developmental Disabilities in 2014, and a Premiers Council award of Excellence for Public Awareness of Disabilities in 2016 for his advocacy. Blair continues to be a wonderful advocate as he shares his story with messages of positivity and hope.

Key Messages:

- Relationships are important
 - Having people around you at work that understand your needs is so helpful
- Routines make things easier
 - “Hygiene is routine” and “routine is hygiene”
 - Routine helps you think ahead about what needs to be done and is acceptable
 - You may need help to establish the routine
- Talk to the people about your needs
 - Tell people about your disability even if it is difficult because it will work out better when the boss or coworkers understand you
- What motivates me is to remove the word “can’t” from my vocabulary

III. Employment Agency

Presented by Lisa Murphy, Executive Director at the Lakeland Centre for FASD (LCFASD)

LCFASD (www.lcfasd.com) has operated a supported employment program for adults with FASD since 2012. Through this program they have learned about the challenges and strategies to support individuals in employment situations. Lisa has worked in the field of FASD for over 18 years. Her history with the Centre has included advocating and coordinating services for children, complex youth, and adults diagnosed with FASD and their families, consultation and data collection. As Executive Director, Lisa oversees the day-to-day operations of the Centre and its FASD Prevention, Diagnostic and Intervention programs.

The LCFASD Employment Program:

- Serves the most complex of individuals with FASD who may be experiencing homelessness, substance use, parenting challenges, mental health concerns, transportation needs, justice involvement, etc.
- Support clients to find and keep a job relevant to their talents
- An Employment Coordinator works with employers to understand the needs of each employee with FASD
- Those that are not ready for employment participate in a pre-employment group once a week.

Supports for the Individual:

- Exploring employment interests including identifying skills and abilities
- Building work readiness skills
- Accessing identification, social insurance number, banking information
- Connecting individuals with appropriate employment and hands-on learning opportunities
- Pre-employment group focuses on building employment readiness and social skills

Supports for the Employer:

- Lunch and learn opportunities to understand the unique needs of clients
- Customized training tailored to needs of clients
- Develop together, strategies for successful employment

Some barriers to Employment for this population:

- Brain differences such as memory issues, difficulty understanding social cues and structures

- Social difficulties such as justice involvement (e.g., getting to probation appointments or court), organizing appropriate childcare, unhealthy relationships that are difficult to manage at work, and difficulties in understanding the concept of employment or volunteering
- Difficulties connecting to opportunities including finding consistent transportation when no public transportation is available (e.g., rural areas), maintaining communication by having a working cell phone, and lack of permanent housing (i.e., having transient lifestyle)

Navigating challenges:

- Understanding the unique abilities and needs of each person
- Prioritizing what needs to be done first – housing before employment, justice or health needs that need to be addressed first
- Employer training
 - One person designated to give direction
 - Limited people in the environment to reduce distractions
 - Keep tasks same each day/consistency/routine
- 'Make mine a Mocktail' campaign offers work experience for individuals connected to LCFASD

IV. Employer

Tara Baker, Founder, Community Lunch Box Society

www.communitylunchbox.ca

Tara founded the Community Lunch Box Society in 2004, a non-profit all-inclusive, volunteer run organization in Whitecourt, Alberta. Tara is a frontline worker supporting individuals with disabilities, and employs individuals with FASD through the society's bottle sorting and food security programs.

Key Messages:

- Meet employees where they are at, manage difficulties right away
- Modify support as needed, for example, moving from written instruction to pictorial
- Set standards and accountability (e.g., such as filling out their own timesheets)
- Routine and schedules
- Celebrate all the wins
- Create customized employment, part time can be meaningful employment
- Recognize transportation needs of those that do not drive
- Find out individual strengths. For example, one employee could not count juice boxes but could count bottles and cans; do not assume.
- Encourage people to be themselves—it's okay to be proud of your successes
- Advocate for people to be employed and supported

Policy Considerations

- Individuals with FASD should be considered for employment in the context of their larger social situation, which may be challenged by a variety of factors including lack of stable housing, limited access to transport, troubling relationships, use of substances, and lack of parenting support. Asking direct questions to individuals with FASD seeking employment will assist the support program in finding the best fit.
- Providing support for pre-employment support programs may be useful in determining interests, skills and strengths, understanding of employment expectations, managing social situations at work, and building a foundation of knowledge and support to improve outcomes.

- Promoting the use of evidence-based tools and training for employment professionals working with individuals with FASD will increase opportunities for success.
- Engaging employment professionals in solution-focused problem solving for individualizing strategies based on their client's unique strengths and challenges is important.

Additional Resources:

Suggested Pre-reading for participants:

- [FASD as a unique disability](#)
- [An Employment Guide for Professionals working with Individuals with FASD](#)

Resources:

[CanFASD Employment resources](#)

[LCFASD Employment Supports](#)

[NEAFAN – hiring someone with FASD](#)

[Assisted Employment – FASD One Ontario](#)

[Welcoming Employees with FASD - Regina](#)

[Understanding Employment Success – Dr. Kapasi et al](#)

[FASD: a practical guide for employers - NWT](#)

<https://patches.com.au/fasd/>

CSS launched a new Service Delivery searchable database which may be of interest. It can be found at

<https://www.alberta.ca/lookup/esd-search.aspx>

References

1. Kapasi, A., Makela, M. L., Flannigan, K., Joly, V., & Pei, J. R. (2019). Understanding employment success in adults with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 51(3), 377-393.
2. Makela, M., Kapasi, A., Joly, V., Pei, J., & McFarlane, A. (2019). An enhanced employment guide for employment professionals working with individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. PolicyWise for Children & Families in collaboration with the Canada FASD Research Network and the University of Alberta. Available from: <https://canfasd.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/An-Enhanced-Employment-Guide-for-Employment-Professionals.pdf>.