

Support wellbeing and minimise distress

A suggestion for implementing the strategy
'Key areas to support' from the Guide: [FASD and learning](#)

-
- Includes:**
- Harness and value strengths
 - Recognise student distress
 - Build networks of support
 - Recognise and respond to distress
 - Manage difficult times
 - Reconnect and restore

Inclusive Education

From

Guide: [Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and learning](#)

Strategy: [Key areas to support](#)

Suggestion: [Support wellbeing and minimise distress](#)

Date

01 July 2026

Link

inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder-and-learning/support-wellbeing-and-minimise-distress

Harness and value strengths

A strengths-based approach avoids defining ākongā by their difficulties or impairments. This video shows how nurturing strengths, and providing the right supports, can lead to success for students with FASD.



Video hosted on Youtube <http://youtu.be/-4SENPA-qQo>

Closed Captions

Source:

[FASD Hub Australia](#)

https://youtu.be/-4SENPA-qQo?si=J_JKAPJcFryIudOb

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Recognise student distress

Distress can present as visible behaviours to others. It is a form of communication and it serves a purpose. When you understand its purpose, you can understand the factors that lead to distress and how to respond.

Distress is an expression of an unmet need or want. It occurs when the level of stress exceeds ākongā ability to cope and recover without support.

Source:

[Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga
https://parents.education.govt.nz/primary-school/your-child-at-school/using-physical-restraint-in-schools/](https://parents.education.govt.nz/primary-school/your-child-at-school/using-physical-restraint-in-schools/)

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Build networks of support

Due to the impacts on the brain, ākongā with FASD may need support to maintain their safety and wellbeing, especially in unstructured times such as break and lunch periods.

Ideas for providing appropriate supports might include:

- Check in with students regularly.
- Prepare a routine for break times.
- Make sure the student has access to safe supervised areas, such as the library, during unstructured time.
- Appoint peer buddies and role models who can support the student in the playground.
- Ensure that all duty teachers are aware of the student's needs and how to best support them.
- Ensure students know how to get help if they need it.
- Have a 'silent mentor'. This could be a teacher who informally checks in two or three times a week during break times.
- Where possible or necessary, have a senior student or adult walk to and from school with them.
- Ensure that people, such as relievers, aides, bus drivers and sports coaches, know how to support them.

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Recognise and respond to distress



Source:

Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga

<https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/behaviour-services-to-help-schools-and-students/minimising-physical-restraint-in-new-zealand-schools-and-kura/>

[View full image \(70 KB\)](#)

Recognise the signs that students are becoming overwhelmed or struggling. Respond with the kind of support ākonga need to feel settled again. Restore connections and support integration back into the classroom and peer activities.

Manage difficult times

There will be times when ākongā feel overwhelmed. Guide ākongā through these challenging situations, while being calm and confident.

Notice the signs that ākongā are becoming anxious, for example tapping, rocking and fidgeting

- Remind ākongā of any self-management and relaxation strategies they know.
- Remove unnecessary demands and/or redirect the student to another activity.
- Connect with ākongā using verbal and non-verbal techniques.

Slow down and communicate calmly and simply

- Maintain a low, calm tone of voice.
- Communicate simple, concise messages and limit the amount of words used.
- Use supportive phrases such as “I’m here to help. When you are ready, we can...”.
- Actively listen, for example nod and repeat key phrases.
- Validate student emotions “I can see you are feeling frustrated.”

Be mindful of your body language

- Approach ākongā from the side, rather than front on. This is less confronting.
- Maintain a calm presence and provide reassurance.
- Keep an appropriate distance, close enough to let ākongā know you’re there, but making sure they don’t feel trapped.
- Use appropriate eye contact. Direct eye contact can be challenging and intimidating.

Create a safe space and get support

- Create space and use silence and non-action as an opportunity for ākongā to gather their thoughts. Pause, observe and prepare for any further action that may be needed.
- Ask other ākongā to move away or leave the classroom if necessary. Be aware how this may impact others.
- Use your school’s agreed process for getting support.

Reconnect and restore

Support ākongā to feel safe and calm after a challenging situation. Proactively protect the tapu and mana of ākongā and others involved in the challenging situation.

Take into account the impact of perseveration, which can be a characteristic of people with FASD.

Perseveration means ākongā can get stuck or fixated in a thought pattern or an action and find it difficult to move on.

Give ākongā extra time and space to settle

- Students with FASD are likely to need extra time to recover from distress.
- Extend time in alternative spaces and doing alternative activities.
- Reduce demands for extended periods.

Immediately after the situation

- Monitor the wellbeing of ākongā, kaiako and anyone else who may have been affected by the situation.
- Use karakia, waiata, and calming strategies ākongā might know or have in their support plan.
- Offer ākongā food or drink.
- Make sure that someone with a solid connection with the ākongā can stay nearby.

Support ākongā to re-engage with classroom activities

- Provide a warm, welcoming environment.
- Gently and discreetly support ākongā to re-engage with classroom activities.
- Facilitate activities and include peers.
- Suggest things you know they enjoy and can do.
- Reduce learning demands.
- Use restorative practices.

Consider next steps for teachers

- Take time to reflect on the situation.
- Debrief with school leaders or colleagues.
- Connect with parents, whānau and caregivers.
- Plan what needs to happen next.
- Reflect on any environmental factors that could be improved.
- Reflect as a team on the school's policies and practices.

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