# “I can’t understand what he is going through, and it saddens me”

*(This article is written by a foster parent of a teenage boy who has Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.)*

I’m currently caring for a young man who came to be with me as an infant.

During the time he has been with me, he has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). FASD is a lifelong disability caused when alcohol consumed during pregnancy passes directly to the growing baby and damages their developing brain.

As a baby, he seemed to be a reasonably happy child. However, I soon started to notice some behaviours that just didn’t add up.

By the time he started school, he had significant learning issues and struggled to complete daily tasks – he was very impulsive and totally unaware of danger, with severe anxiety.

Imagine being a young person and your world is consumed by anxiety. You struggle to do basic maths, you don’t learn from your mistakes, and you have no understanding of the consequences of your actions or behaviour.

At times you are unable to attend school, special events, go shopping or mix with crowds. You can’t sit still for long because your nervous system is damaged. Your memory is damaged, and you struggle to remember basic instructions. You rely on your parents for everyday life skills. You need structure and the same routine every day.

You damage property or people that you don’t mean to. It just happens because you can’t control your feelings or responses. You can’t understand basic concepts and you get so frustrated you again damage property because you live in a world where nothing makes sense, or you’ve forgotten what was said to you.

This is not an ordinary experience of being a young man. But for my foster son, it’s his everyday reality – and will be for the rest of his life.

He once said to me while we were discussing his anger: “You can’t understand what it’s like. You don’t have FASD. I can’t control it.” That was a very powerful comment. It’s true that I can’t understand what he is going through, and it saddens me.

All of this means I had to begin caring for him in a unique way. The way I describe it is that he requires me to be his external brain every day.

That has increased in intensity over the years, which means my days can be exhausting and at times very emotionally draining. I need to be available to support him through each day. Caring for a child with FASD also means constantly having to fight for services and educate professionals about FASD.

People ask me why I’m doing this when it’s such hard work.

My answer is I care for a boy with a great sense of humour who makes me laugh. I know him better than anyone. I also know he needs me, needs this level of care and support like many others with FASD, but it didn’t have to be this way.

All the daily struggles that my young foster boy goes through each day, and for the rest of his life, are preventable.

Alcohol is the only product that causes FASD. Proper warning labels, community education and support can all help prevent this from happening to other children in the future.