

Dysmaturity

Dysmaturity refers to the gap between the chronological and developmental ages in different domains (e.g. expressive language, social maturity etc.) due to the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure (Malbin); the term “uneven maturation” is also sometimes used to describe this condition.

Dysmaturity is not simply immaturity; rather it refers to widely varying levels of maturity in different modalities, such as expressive language and language comprehension; social and self care skills; and awareness and regulation of emotions. The IQ of persons with FASD is most often within the normal range, yet they do not have the ability to meet many of society’s age based social and academic expectations. Since FASD is usually not outwardly visible, the effects of dysmaturity on persons with FASD can be puzzling to themselves and to those around them.¹

Dysmaturity is a classic sign of FASD described by Clarren, Malbin and Streissguth. A person with FASD will simultaneously exhibit behaviours common to people of different ages. For example, someone with FASD might be 18 years of age, sound like a 22 year old (expressive language), act like a 6 year old in a social and moral sense, read like a young teen and understand time and money at about the same level as a 12 year old. People with FASD tend to catch up to themselves as much as they are going to by their early to mid-thirties.²

Dysmaturity can be defined as being “socially or developmentally younger than chronological age” (Malbin, 2002, pp 22). Children and adolescents with FASD often display behaviours which are seen as “inappropriate for their age”, but which may actually reflect their *developmental* age. Unfortunately, the goal of most parenting and professional interventions focus on helping children “act their (chronological) age”. The interventions may be ineffective and/or inappropriate and may become the source of frustration for children and adolescents with FASD. It takes children with FASD longer to grow up. If they are supported developmentally, frustration may be prevented (Malbin, 2008, pp 37).

¹ White Crow Village, “Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Primary Characteristics”, 2007-2008, http://www.whitecrowvillage.org/what_is_fasd.html, June 2010.

² FASD Justice Committee of FASD ONE, “Glossary”, 2007-2010, http://fasdjustice.on.ca/component/option.com_glossary/Itemid,144/, June 2010.