



FASD-CAN

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
Care Action Network

Guidelines for Completing the FASD Developmental Age Profile Worksheet

Mapping the 'Spiky Profile' — Chronological vs. Functional Age

*E rerekē ana te āhua o ia rākau, o ia rākau, engari ka
puāwai kātoa rātou i raro i te tiaki tika.*

Every tree is different, yet they all blossom under the right care.

Background, Purpose & Intended Audience

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong, hidden disability involving brain-based differences resulting from alcohol exposure during pregnancy. It is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This comprehensive guideline has been designed primarily for use by Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs), Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs), and multidisciplinary education support teams for in-depth assessment and Individual Education Plan (IEP) development. It provides a deeper observational framework to help educators identify an ākonga (student) functional developmental age across nine core neurodevelopmental domains and translate those observations into meaningful classroom scaffolding and IEPs.

And for busy kaiako (teachers) and learning support assistants carrying out day-to-day classroom observations, the accompanying *Educator Quick-Start & Calibration Guide* provides a streamlined 3-step reference tool.

One of the key features of FASD is 'dysmaturity'—an uneven, non-linear pattern of development where a person's social, emotional, or cognitive abilities do not match their actual chronological age. Across daily life—at home, in community settings, at work, or at school—we often refer to this uneven pattern of development as a 'spiky profile'.

Traditionally, people assume that a person's skills grow evenly alongside their chronological age. However, for a person with FASD, development is much more varied. They might have an advanced speaking vocabulary (a high spike) but find it very hard to process multi-step instructions, manage personal gear, navigate money, or regulate their emotions (sharp drops).

As FASD is a neurobiological disability, our goal is not to try to get the 'low points' of the profile to match the 'high points'. Instead, we identify and use each person's unique developmental profile to highlight where we can place targeted 'supportive scaffolding'. This allows the person to feel safe, valued, and successful in every environment.





The 3 Lenses: How to Determine Functional Age

Determining a person's developmental age is not about using formal academic or clinical tests. Instead, it is about observing how they manage everyday tasks on their own in classroom and school environments. Look through these three core lenses to help choose the right developmental age bracket:

1. The 'Unprompted' Baseline

Assign the age level at which the ākonga (student) can execute the skill completely independently—without an adult stepping in to guide, remind, or break down the steps.

- *Classroom Example:* A 15-year-old might converse like an adult or comprehend complex science ideas. However, if they require a teacher sitting alongside them to open their workbook, point to question 1, and re-state the first step, their functional age in *Task Initiation* sits at an Early Primary (6–7 years) level.

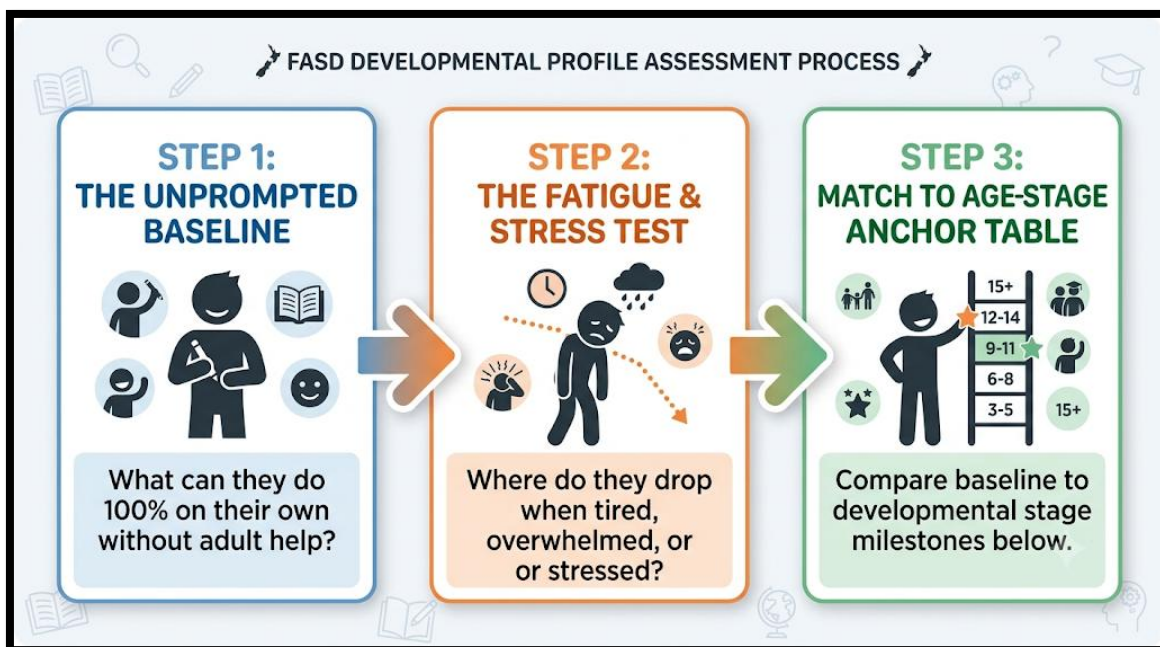
2. The Fatigue or Stress Point

Observe what happens when cognitive energy runs out due to late afternoon fatigue, anxiety, sensory noise, or unexpected stress. Under stress, the FASD nervous system naturally drops back to its true baseline capacity. *Classroom Example:* If a teenager reacts to an unexpected room change with the tears, flight response, or total shutdown typical of a 5-year-old, factor this baseline into their *Emotional Regulation* age selection.

3. Receptive over Expressive Capacity

Always plot the age based on what the person fully comprehends and executes independently, never on what they say. High verbal fluency (using adult vocabulary or television quotes) frequently masks severe underlying gaps in receptive language and processing.

- *Classroom Example:* An ākonga may use sophisticated vocabulary in casual chatter, but if they can only process and follow a single spoken instruction at a time when doing classwork, their *Receptive Language* sits in the early primary bracket.



The 9-Domain Functional Matrix

This profile matrix and educator guide align with the domain structures defined in the **Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024** (Hāpai te Hauora, 2024) and practice principles from **FASD-CAN Aotearoa**.





In the [FASD Diagnostic Guidelines for Aotearoa NZ 2024](#), *Whakakotahitanga*, diagnosticians assess nine neurodevelopmental domains. They are:

1. General Intellectual Abilities (Cognition)
2. Communication
3. Motor skills
4. Memory
5. Attention
6. Executive function
7. Emotional and/or behavioural regulation
8. Literacy and/or numeracy (Academic function)
9. Adaptive/social functioning

FASD-CAN's Developmental Profile Worksheet is developed for your assessment around these 9 neurodevelopmental domains. Below is the detailed observational framework for kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff across all nine domains.

1. General Intellectual Abilities (Cognition)

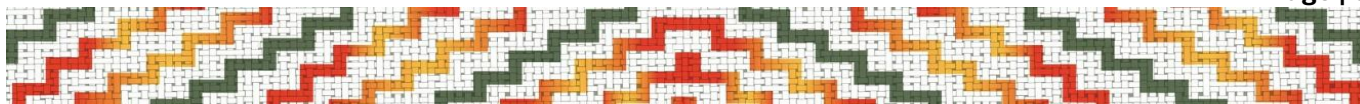
When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Cognition**, the goal is not to perform a clinical diagnostic test or IQ calculation. Instead, it is to observe how the ākonga applies thinking tools, processes information, and reasons through daily learning and environment routines. In the *Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024*, Cognition evaluates global intellectual capacity, including non-verbal reasoning, verbal understanding, fluid reasoning, and processing pace. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across the core cognitive concepts when mapping an ākonga's spiky profile.

1.1 Capacity for Abstraction & Concrete Reasoning

- **What it means in the classroom:** The ability to move beyond physical, literal details to process non-concrete concepts, metaphors, mathematical symbols, or generalized rules.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Literal Interpretation:** Does the ākonga take figurative language literally (e.g., 'pull your socks up', 'keep your eyes on the board', or sarcastic comments)?
 - **Curriculum Content:** Do they require physical manipulatives (e.g., counters, blocks, visual blocks) long after same-age peers have moved to mental math or abstract algebraic symbols (x , y)?
 - **Rule Application:** Can they apply a general school rule ('no running indoors') across different spaces (library, hallway, hall), or do they treat each room as an isolated situation requiring a separate rule?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who speaks fluently, but requires physical counters for basic subtraction and interprets idioms literally like an 8-year-old, has an **Abstract Reasoning Functional Age** sitting in the middle primary bracket.

1.2 Cause-and-Effect Processing (Consequential Reasoning)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The capacity to connect an action to its natural or logical outcome *before* acting, and to understand why a specific result occurred after an event.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**





- **Predictable Outcomes:** Do they seem genuinely surprised by predictable results (e.g., being startled when a tower of blocks falls after adding a top-heavy piece, or tipping a glass over after bumping it three times)?
- **Connecting Action to Consequence:** When a boundary is crossed or an error occurs, can they explain the link between what they did and what happened next, or do they feel that the outcome 'just happened' to them unfairly?
- **Pattern Recognition:** Can they anticipate what comes next in a multi-step sequence based on previous experience?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who continually acts without anticipating basic physical or logical consequences—and is genuinely bewildered when the expected outcome occurs, operating like a 5-year-old—has a **Cause-and-Effect Functional Age** of around 5 years.

1.3 Cognitive Processing Speed (Mental Pace)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The time required for the brain to take in visual or auditory information, make sense of it, formulate a response, and physically or verbally output an answer.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Response Latency:** How many seconds of quiet pause time (10-15 seconds) do they require after a question or prompt before they begin to process or respond?
 - **Copying & Scanning:** Do they take significantly longer than peers to scan a page, copy text from a board, or locate a specific item in a visual array?
 - **Time Pressure:** Does introducing a time limit (e.g., 'you have two minutes') cause panic, paralysis, or a sharp spike in errors?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who needs prolonged pause time to process basic academic questions and complete visual-scanning tasks at the pace of a 7-year-old has a **Processing Speed Functional Age** in the early primary range.

1.4 Problem-Solving & Skill Acquisition

- **What it means in the classroom:** The capacity to recognize an obstacle during learning, analyse the situation, choose a working solution, and retain new learning strategies across time.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Minor Roadblocks:** What happens when a routine breaks (e.g., a broken pencil tip, a missing worksheet, or a locked door)? Can they generate a Plan B on their own, or do they immediately freeze, guess, or explode?
 - **Rate of Repetition Required:** How many practice attempts or retaught sessions are required before a new cognitive skill or problem-solving strategy becomes consistent?
 - **Generalisation:** Can they take a strategy learned in Science and apply it to a similar task in Social Studies without having to relearn it from scratch?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* If a 12-year-old ākonga completely shuts down or wanders away when their device battery dies—unable to formulate the basic step of finding a charger—their **Problem-Solving Functional Age** is closer to a 5- or 6-year-old.





💡 Core Takeaway for General Intellectual Abilities (Cognition)

When mapping Cognition, always ask: **"Is this ākonga struggling because they don't understand the concept, because their processing speed is overloaded, or because they can't foresee the consequence?"** Distinguishing between these cognitive barriers allows kaiako to adjust the pace, provide concrete visual supports, and explicitly teach cause-and-effect pathways without causing frustration.

2. Communication

Communication is defined as the means by which an individual receives and conveys ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

Considerations for Determining Communication Developmental Age

When educators observe an ākonga with FASD to determine their functional age in **Communication**, the goal is to evaluate how they process, understand, and express spoken and non-verbal language independently during everyday classroom and social interactions.

In FASD, a student's surface-level speaking ability often masks deep processing gaps. Below is a breakdown of what Kaiako/teachers and learning support staff should observe across the three core communication areas when mapping a student's spiky profile.

2.1 Receptive Language (Understanding)

- **What it means in the classroom:** How efficiently an ākonga comprehends spoken language, multi-step directions, abstract vocabulary, and new learning concepts without visual aids.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Instructional Capacity:** How many verbal steps can the ākonga hold and act upon at once? (e.g., 'Open your books to page 12, write the date, and answer question 3' vs. single-step prompts).
 - **Processing Speed:** How many seconds of quiet pause time (10-15 seconds) do they require after a question is asked before they begin to respond?
 - **Masking & Agreement:** Do they nod, say 'yep, got it,' or copy a peer immediately because they were unable to process the verbal stream, rather than asking for clarification?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga may appear fully engaged, but if they routinely shut down or make errors when given more than one verbal instruction at a time, their **Receptive Language Functional Age** sits closer to a 6- or 7-year-old.

2.2 Expressive Language (Speaking & Expressing Thoughts)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The ability to retrieve words, organise thoughts sequentially, explain experiences or reasoning, and state physical/emotional needs under daily classroom pressure.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Superficial vs. Functional Language:** Do they use sophisticated adult phrases or TV catchphrases (high surface fluency), but struggle when asked to explain *why* something happened or retell a narrative in logical sequence?
 - **Word-Finding Under Stress:** When frustrated, tired, or put on the spot, do they struggle to find basic words, substitute incorrect terms, or revert to gestures/emotional outbursts?
 - **Expressing Needs:** Can they initiate asking for help appropriately (e.g., 'I don't understand this problem'), or do they express difficulty through behaviour (e.g., ripping the page, leaving the room)?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who speaks fluently in casual chatter but cannot structure a basic 3-sentence oral narrative or explain a classroom incident without heavy teacher prompting has an **Expressive Language Functional Age** closer to an 8-year-old.





2.3 Pragmatic / Social Communication (Social Language)

- **What it means in the classroom:** Using language appropriately in social settings—reading facial expressions and body language, turn-taking, adjusting tone for different audiences, and recognising non-literal speech.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Non-Literal Interpretation:** Do they take sarcasm, jokes, figure-of-speech phrases, or teasing literally (e.g., getting distressed if a teacher says, ‘You’re driving me crazy today’)?
 - **Conversational Dynamics:** Do they struggle with turn-taking, interrupt frequently, talk at length about hyper-fixated topics without reading peer disinterest, or stand uncomfortably close?
 - **Contextual Tone:** Do they use the same casual or blunt tone with the principal as they do with a younger peer on the playground, struggling to adjust register based on authority or setting?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who misinterprets playful peer banter as personal aggression and routinely interrupts group discussions like a young child has a **Pragmatic Communication Functional Age** sitting around 5 to 7 years.

💡 Core Takeaway for Communication

Always map **Receptive Language** as the true baseline for learning accommodations. When there is a gap between high Expressive Language (what they say) and low Receptive Language (what they understand), educators who assume the student ‘knows better’ risk misinterpreting processing overwhelm as wilful defiance.

3. Motor Skills

Under the Motor Skills domain, clinicians evaluate how the brain plans, coordinates, and executes physical movements. In FASD, motor deficits are neurological rather than behavioural. Physical clumsiness, writing fatigue, or difficulty with physical routines often stem from disrupted brain-body pathways.

Considerations for Determining Motor Skills Developmental Age

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Motor Skills**, the goal is to evaluate how effectively and independently their brain plans, coordinates, and executes physical movements across classroom, playground, and daily routines.

In FASD, motor deficits are neurological rather than behavioural. Beneath high energy or verbal enthusiasm, physical clumsiness, writing fatigue, or difficulty with physical routines often stem from disrupted brain-body pathways. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across three core motor areas when mapping a student's spiky profile.

3.1. Fine Motor & Graphomotor Control (Handwriting & Tool Use)

- **What it means in the classroom:** How efficiently an ākonga uses small muscle groups in their hands to write, draw, use scissors/tools, handle cutlery, button clothing, or manage zippers.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Writing Mechanics & Endurance:** Do they hold pens with an awkward or overly tight grip? Does writing for more than 3-5 minutes cause hand cramping, tremors, or rapid cognitive/physical fatigue?
 - **Tool & Material Handling:** Do they struggle with scissors, craft items, science lab gear, or cutlery during lunchtime without adult assistance?
 - **Digital vs. Manual Output:** Is there a significant gap between their rich oral ideas and the sparse, messy, or minimal text they produce on paper?
- **Determining Functional Age:** *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga in high school who speaks articulately but grips a pencil like a toddler, produces illegible text, or experiences severe physical hand exhaustion after two short sentences has a **Fine Motor Functional Age** closer to a 6- or 7-year-old.





3.2 Gross Motor, Balance & Spatial Awareness (Proprioception)

- **What it means in the classroom:** Large muscle coordination, balance, navigating physical environments, and calibrating physical force (understanding where their body is in space).
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Force Modulation:** Do they routinely apply too much force without intending to—such as slamming doors, pressing too hard on paper until lead breaks, or knocking over water bottles and desks?
 - **Spatial Navigation:** Do they frequently bump into doorframes, trip over bags, knock into peers in lines, or invade others' personal space because they misjudge distances?
 - **Physical Activity & PE:** Do they appear clumsy, struggle with bilateral coordination (e.g., catching/throwing, jumping with both feet), or avoid group sports due to motor difficulty?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 12-year-old ākonga who continually trips over quiet classroom obstacles, knocks over desks when walking through the room, and struggles with basic balance exercises like a young child has a **Gross Motor/Proprioceptive Functional Age** closer to a 5- or 6-year-old.

3.3 Motor Planning & Praxis (Sequencing Physical Actions)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The brain-body pathway required to conceive, organize, and carry out a multi-step physical sequence smoothly without freezing or getting lost.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Complex Physical Routines:** What happens when they need to execute sequential physical tasks (e.g., getting into PE gear, packing up an art station, or assembling a project)? Do they stall, put shoes on the wrong feet, or freeze midway?
 - **Visual-Motor Integration (Copying):** Do they struggle to copy notes from a whiteboard to paper, continually losing their place or taking excessive time to translate visual text into hand movements?
 - **Imitation:** Can they watch a physical demonstration (e.g., a gym routine, a dance step, or how to hold a tool) and replicate it, or do they need hands-on, step-by-step physical guidance?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who takes 20 minutes to change into PE gear and put their shoes on—frequently putting items on backwards or standing frozen surrounded by clothing—has a **Motor Planning Functional Age** sitting in the early primary school bracket (around 6 years).

Core Takeaway for Motor Skills

Motor challenges in FASD are **neurological, not behavioural**. When an ākonga refuses to complete a written assignment, drops gear, or appears 'lazy' in PE, evaluate whether their brain is experiencing motor fatigue or a breakdown in motor planning. Providing alternative output options (e.g., speech-to-text, visual checklists for changing gear, ergonomic grips) prevents physical overwhelm and protects their self-esteem.

4. Memory

Under the **Memory** domain clinicians evaluate how an individual encodes, stores, and retrieves information over time. In FASD, memory impairments are often 'retrieval' failures rather than 'storage' failures. Information learned one day may be inaccessible the next, creating an 'on/off' pattern that can be mistaken for refusal or laziness.

Considerations for Determining Memory Developmental Age

When educators observe student with FASD to determine their functional age in **Memory**, the goal is to evaluate how reliably their brain encodes, stores, and retrieves information during everyday school routines and learning tasks.





In FASD, memory impairments are often 'retrieval' failures rather than 'storage' failures. Information learned one day may be inaccessible the next, creating an 'on/off' pattern that can be mistaken for refusal or laziness. Note that while clinical guidelines categorise working memory under Cognition or Executive Function, classroom observation of memory focuses on how information is stored, recalled, and supported over time. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across three core memory areas.

4.1 Verbal vs. Visual & Spatial Memory (Retention Modality)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The contrast between an ākonga's ability to retain spoken information (verbal memory) versus visual cues, diagrams, physical locations, or spatial maps (visual memory).
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Auditory Retention:** Can they remember a message, an assignment deadline, or a rule given verbally, or does spoken information fade almost immediately?
 - **Visual & Spatial Recall:** Do they easily remember visual layout details (e.g., where equipment is stored, chart layouts, map paths) even if they cannot recall spoken instructions?
 - **Modality Discrepancy:** Do they rely on visual schedules and physical object cues to remember what comes next in the school day?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who immediately forgets spoken directions given two minutes prior, but reliably follows a picture-based schedule like a 6-year-old, has a **Verbal Memory Functional Age** sitting around 6 years.

4.2 Free Recall vs. Cue-Assisted Recognition (The Retrieval Pathway)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The difference between retrieving stored information completely unprompted ('free recall') versus identifying the correct answer or routine when provided with visual cues, choices, or hints ('recognition').
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Unprompted Retrieval:** When asked open-ended questions (e.g., "*What are the three steps for this experiment?*" or "*What did we read yesterday?*"), do they draw a complete blank or say "*I don't know?*"
 - **Response to Cues:** When given a hint, multiple-choice prompt, or visual anchor, do they immediately recognise the correct answer (e.g., "*Oh, step one was heating the water!*")?
 - **Environmental Navigation:** Do they need visible labels on trays and desks to locate items that peers retrieve automatically from memory?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who cannot state classroom rules when asked directly, but easily identifies them on a visual wall-chart and explains them like a 7-year-old, demonstrates a **Free Recall Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

4.3 Learning Efficiency & Fluctuation ('On/Off' Memory)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The speed and consistency with which an ākonga consolidates new skills into long-term storage, and how reliably that memory pathway remains open across different days.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Rate of Repetition Required:** How many practice attempts or retaught sessions are required before a skill (e.g., spelling rules, login steps, math formulas) becomes familiar?
 - **Day-to-Day Consistency:** Do they demonstrate full mastery of a routine on Tuesday, but appear genuinely bewildered by the exact same task on Thursday?
 - **Impact of Fatigue:** Does memory performance drop significantly in the afternoon or at the end of the school week as cognitive fatigue sets in?





- **Determining Functional Age:**

- *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who requires constant daily re-teaching for basic classroom routines, showing the same retention inconsistency as a 5-year-old starting school, has a **Memory Consolidation Functional Age** of 5 to 6 years.

4.4 Confabulation ('Neurological Gap-Filling')

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to evaluate **Confabulation** for their developmental profile, the goal is to understand how their brain fills in memory gaps or language processing breakdowns during daily school interactions.

- **What Confabulation Means in the Classroom:** Confabulation is often described as '**honest lying**' or '**neurological gap-filling**'. It is not deliberate deceit, manipulation, or calculated dishonesty. Instead, when an ākonga experiences a retrieval failure in explicit memory or experiences receptive language overload, their brain automatically bridges the missing information with plausible details, past memories, television plots, or whatever seems logical in the moment.
 - **Neurological Gap-Filling:** The ākonga cannot access the true memory of an event (e.g., "*What did you do yesterday?*" or "*Where is your jumper?*"). Rather than experiencing the discomfort of drawing a complete blank, the brain automatically fills the gap with an invented or misattributed detail.
 - **Masking & Protecting Self-Esteem:** When an ākonga does not understand a complex verbal instruction or feels put on the spot, they may confabulate compliance ("*Yes, the teacher said I could do this instead*") to protect their dignity and avoid standing out among peers.
 - **Time & Context Confusion:** Memories from weeks ago, movies, or stories heard from others are spliced into current events because the brain's internal timeline and context tracking are disrupted.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe**
 - **Plausibility & Conviction:** Does the ākonga tell the invented story with total sincerity, confidence, and detailed emotion? (Because they genuinely believe the confabulated memory in that moment, their body language and tone mirror someone telling the absolute truth).
 - **Triggers for Gap-Filling:** Does confabulation increase during times of cognitive fatigue, open-ended questioning ("*Why did you do that?*"), or when asked to recall past schedules and multi-step agreements?
 - **Inconsistency Across Audiences:** Does the story change each time it is retold, not out of calculated cover-up, but because the brain generates a new 'bridge' every time the memory gap is accessed?
 - **Response to Confrontation:** When presented with factual proof that contradicts their story, do they become genuinely confused, distressed, or defensive—as opposed to showing the guilt or calculated negotiation typical of intentional deceit?
- **Determining Functional Age:** Young children naturally mix fantasy, wishes, past experiences, and reality because their memory structures and narrative boundaries are still developing. In an older ākonga with FASD, frequent confabulation reflects a functional memory retrieval and processing age that sits in early childhood.
- **Example:** A 15-year-old ākonga is asked why they did not hand in their assignment. Instead of saying "*I forgot,*" they deliver a compelling, highly detailed story about how their dog ate the paper and their family had to go to the vet. When checked with whānau, none of the events occurred. The ākonga was operating with the memory gap-filling profile of a 5-year-old who blends desire, imagination, and missing memory details to satisfy an immediate social expectation. Their **Confabulation / Memory Retrieval Functional Age** sits around 5 years.

💡 Core Takeaway for Educators in terms of Confabulation

Confabulation is a **neurological bridge, not a moral failure**. Confronting or punishing an ākonga with FASD for 'lying' creates profound confusion and shame, as their brain experienced the fabricated memory as real.





To support an ākonga who confabulates:

- **Avoid 'Trap' Questions:** Instead of asking "Did you do your homework?", check visually or rephrase to a supportive directive: "Let's open your book to page 4 together."
- **Provide Memory Scaffolds:** Use visual schedules, photo anchors, and written checklists so their brain does not have to rely on unstable explicit memory pathways.
- **Verify Quietly:** Confirm details with whānau or colleagues without publicly challenging the ākonga's narrative.
- **Preserve Dignity:** Gently pivot to the factual step needed right now, rather than demanding an admission of dishonesty.

Core Takeaway for Memory

In FASD, memory challenges are **access failures, not storage or attitude failures**. When an ākonga insists they 'forgot' or 'never learned' something taught yesterday, assume the neural pathway to that memory is temporarily offline due to fatigue or stress. Providing visual reference cards, wall anchors, and recognition prompts bypasses retrieval blocks without causing shame.

5. Attention

When educators observe a student with FASD to determine their functional age in **Attention**, the goal is to evaluate how effectively and independently they can focus, filter out distractions, and process incoming streams of information during everyday learning routines.

In the *Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024*, the Attention domain focuses on foundational attentional processing rather than complex executive controls. Beneath high restlessness or 'tuning out', an ākonga is often experiencing severe sensory overload or cognitive fatigue rather than choosing to ignore the lesson. Below is a breakdown of what Kaiako/teachers and learning support staff should observe across the three core attention concepts when mapping a student's spiky profile.

5.1 Sustained Attention (Sustained Focus & Mental Endurance)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The length of time an ākonga can independently maintain active cognitive focus on a task, lesson, or conversation without needing continuous adult redirection.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Unprompted Focus Duration:** How many minutes can they remain focused on a structured, non-preferred learning task before their attention wanders (e.g., 2-3 minutes vs. 15-20 minutes for same-age peers)?
 - **Novelty vs. Routine:** Can they maintain focus only when a task is high-interest, hands-on, or brand-new, but quickly drop focus during familiar, repetitive, or paper-based activities?
 - **Fatigue Trajectory:** Does their ability to focus rapidly decline as the school day progresses or during times of heightened cognitive effort?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who can only maintain unprompted focus on a written task for 3 minutes before wandering or fidgeting—requiring continuous individual adult prompts to refocus like a 5-year-old—has a **Sustained Attention Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

5.2. Selective / Focused Attention (Distractibility & Sensory Filtering)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The capacity to screen out irrelevant background sensory input—such as lawnmowers outside, hallway movement, flickering fluorescent lights, or peer whispers—to stay engaged with the teacher or task.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Distractibility Threshold:** Does every minor noise, visual shift, or background movement in the classroom immediately pull their eyes and mind away from their work?





- **Sensory & Visual Overload:** Do they become irritable, restless, or shut down in visually busy or noisy settings (e.g., assemblies, gym classes, or shared open spaces)?
- **Filtering Capacity:** Can they stay focused on a task while the teacher speaks to another group, or does any competing auditory signal break their focus entirely?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga in a modern learning environment who is unable to tune out ambient classroom chatter and loses their place every time someone walks past, operating like a 6-year-old in a busy space, has a **Selective Attention Functional Age** around 6 years.

5.3 Basic Attentional Capacity / Immediate Span (Information Intake Limit)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The raw amount of basic visual or auditory information an ākonga can take in at a single moment before their attentional channel overflows and drops the rest.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Single vs. Chunked Input:** How many items, numbers, or words can they hold in immediate awareness from a single glance or hearing before dropping the beginning of the message?
 - **Multi-Source Breakdown:** What happens when they have to process visual and auditory information simultaneously (e.g., looking at a board while listening to teacher instructions)? Do they drop one channel completely?
 - **Immediate Overflow:** Do they frequently miss the end of a spoken sentence or visual list, acting only on the first or last thing they registered?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who can only take in a single short unit of spoken information at a time before their immediate attention channel overflows—operating like a 5-year-old who misses everything after the first item—has a **Basic Attentional Capacity Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

Core Takeaway for Attention

Attentional challenges in FASD are **neurological, not behavioural**. An ākonga who loses focus, gets easily distracted, or experiences attentional overflow is struggling with brain-based filtering and capacity limits. Providing movement breaks, low-distraction seating options, reduced visual/auditory noise, and chunked single-step delivery helps regulate their attention without causing shame.

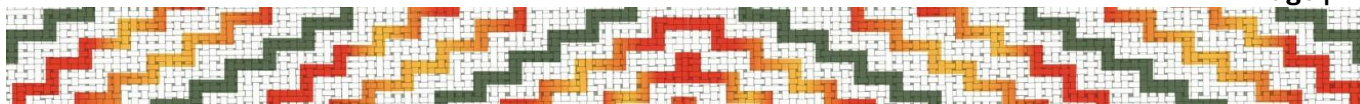
6. Executive Functioning

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Executive Functioning**, the goal is to evaluate how effectively the brain acts as an 'action manager'—translating what the ākonga knows into organized, goal-directed physical and mental execution in daily classroom routines.

In the *Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024*, Executive Functioning coordinates task execution, impulse suppression, set-shifting, and real-time self-monitoring. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across these eight core executive concepts when mapping a student's spiky profile.

6.1 Inhibition & Impulse Control

- **What it means in the classroom:** The brain's 'brakes'—the capacity to pause before acting, suppress immediate physical or verbal urges, delay gratification, and resist tempting distractions.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Verbal & Physical Urges:** Do they call out answers immediately, interrupt others constantly, touch equipment before instructions finish, or grab items directly from peers?
 - **Action Pause:** Can they stop an ongoing physical action when given a stop cue, or does their body continue moving on momentum despite knowing the rule?
- **Determining Functional Age:**





- *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who routinely grabs objects from classmates' hands or blurts out every thought without pausing to raise their hand, acting with the immediate urge-driven control of a 5-year-old, has an **Inhibition Functional Age** around 5 years.

6.2 Task Initiation & Activation

- **What it means in the classroom:** The brain's ability to cross the bridge from receiving an instruction to physically and mentally starting the work without stalling, freezing, or needing repeated individual adult prompts.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Start-Up Delays:** When given a direction (e.g., "Open your workbooks to page 4"), do they sit motionless, stare blankly, chew their pencil, or wander off, not out of refusal, but because their brain cannot sequence the initial 'start' signal?
 - **Prompt Dependency:** Can they begin a familiar daily routine unprompted, or do they require a continuous adult presence to prompt step one?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who sits immobile for 15 minutes after a lesson begins—unable to initiate writing until a teacher sits alongside them to physically hand them a pen and open their book like a 5-year-old—has a **Task Initiation Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

6.3 Mental Flexibility & Set-Shifting

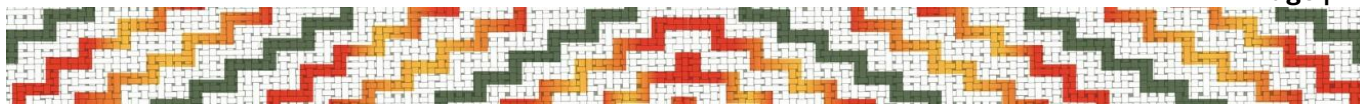
- **What it means in the classroom:** The ability to pivot smoothly when plans, routines, or rules change, switch focus between different tasks, and adapt when an initial attempt fails.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Transitions & Routine Shifts:** What happens when an unexpected change occurs (e.g., relief teacher, rainy day timetable, or moving from Art to Maths)? Do they get 'stuck' (perseverate), argue, or experience distress?
 - **Divided Attention / Switching:** Can they alternate attention between looking at the whiteboard and writing in their book, or does switching focus cause complete loss of orientation?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who experiences extreme distress or shuts down completely when a planned gym session is moved indoors due to rain, demonstrating the rigid inflexibility of a 6-year-old, has a **Mental Flexibility Functional Age** sitting around 6 years.

6.4 Planning & Organisation

- **What it means in the classroom:** Setting a goal, mapping out the logical order of steps needed to achieve it, estimating required time, and keeping track of physical gear and materials.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Material Management:** Is their desk, locker, or bag in constant disarray? Do they routinely lose pens, books, PE gear, or devices within minutes of receiving them?
 - **Task Sequencing:** When asked to complete a multi-step task (e.g., a science experiment or poster project), can they order the steps logically, or do they jump straight to the final step without doing the prep work?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who cannot organize their school bag or sequence a basic 3-step project without step-by-step adult scaffolding, managing gear like a 7-year-old, has a **Planning & Organisation Functional Age** in the primary range.

6.5 Self-Awareness and Personal Insight

- **What it means in the classroom:** Understanding one's own strengths, limits, personal boundaries, and safety needs in both academic and social environments.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**





- **Recognising Capacity & Help-Seeking:** Can they recognize when a task is beyond their current skill level and ask for help, or do they mask, act out, or shut down when overwhelmed?
- **Social & Safety Self-Awareness:** Do they understand personal physical space, age-appropriate relationships, and potential safety risks when interacting with peers, adults, or online spaces?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who overestimates their independent capabilities, fails to recognize when they are in physical or social danger, and lacks basic personal space awareness like a 7-year-old has a **Self-Awareness Functional Age** in the primary bracket.

6.6 Working Memory (in Execution)

- **What it means in the classroom:** The active mental 'workbench' used to hold visual or spoken directions in mind while simultaneously working on or carrying out the task.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Instruction Retention in Real Time:** When given a 2-3 step spoken instruction (e.g., "Get your ruler, rule a line under the heading, and write today's date"), do they drop step two and three as soon as they pick up the ruler?
 - **Mental Manipulation:** Can they keep a number or word in mind while doing something else with it, or does any added processing step cause the original information to disappear?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 12-year-old ākonga who can only hold a single instruction in mind at a time before their mental workbench overflows—requiring each step to be re-stated individually like a 5-year-old—has a **Working Memory Functional Age** sitting at 5 years.

6.7 Novel Problem Solving & Strategy Selection

- **What it means in the classroom:** The ability to generate a 'Plan B' when faced with an unfamiliar, unscripted, or unexpected roadblock during learning.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Minor Roadblocks:** What happens when a routine task encounters a small glitch (e.g., a broken pencil tip, a locked door, or a missing worksheet)? Do they generate a simple alternative solution, or do they immediately freeze, guess randomly, or abandon the task?
 - **Strategy Adaptation:** If a strategy isn't working (e.g., using the wrong tool or method), do they try a different approach, or do they repeat the exact same failing action over and over?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who abandons their work entirely and wanders away because their pen ran out of ink—unable to generate the basic solution of borrowing another pencil—has a **Problem Solving Functional Age** of around 6 years.

6.8 Self-Monitoring & Metacognition

- **What it means in the classroom:** Metacognition is 'thinking about one's own thinking'. In execution, it is the real-time capacity to monitor one's own work progress, check for accuracy while performing a task, detect errors, and adjust strategies mid-task before handing work in.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Error Detection:** Do they notice obvious mistakes (e.g., skipping half a page, writing off the line, or missing a giant step in a routine), or do they hand work in immediately without looking back over it?
 - **Quality Calibration:** Can they evaluate whether their work meets basic task criteria, or do they assume every completed task is 'done' regardless of quality or accuracy?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who rushes through a task in 30 seconds, skipping half the instructions and leaving errors uncorrected, unable to self-reflect or check their work like an 8-year-old, has a **Self-Monitoring Functional Age** sitting around 7 to 8 years.





💡 Core Takeaway for Executive Functioning

Executive function challenges in FASD represent a **breakdown in the brain's logistics system, not a refusal to try**. An ākonga who fails to initiate, loses gear, reacts rigidly to changes, or forgets multi-step directions is experiencing cognitive fatigue and structural brain differences. Providing external scaffolding—such as visual schedules, step-by-step checklists, chunked instructions, and co-regulation—acts as their external 'executive brain' while protecting their dignity and self-esteem.

7. Emotional / Behavioural Regulation

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Emotional and Behavioural Regulation**, the goal is to evaluate their nervous system's capacity to process stress, maintain emotional equilibrium, and return to a calm baseline during daily school routines.

In the *Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024*, Emotional and Behavioural Regulation is maintained as a dedicated diagnostic domain. In FASD, emotional dysregulation is a neurological response to cognitive overload, sensory saturation, or perceived threat—not a deliberate choice to be disruptive. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across these eight core regulatory concepts when mapping a student's spiky profile.

7.1 Frustration Tolerance

- **What it means in the classroom:** The nervous system's capacity to absorb minor setbacks, unexpected obstacles, learning errors, or delays without immediate emotional collapse or anger.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Roadblock Reactivity:** How do they react when a pencil lead breaks, a device fails to load, or they make a minor spelling mistake? Do they take a deep breath and retry, or do they immediately rip the paper, throw equipment, or burst into tears?
 - **Waiting & Delays:** Can they tolerate waiting 2–3 minutes for teacher assistance, or does turn-taking and waiting cause rapid emotional escalation?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who tearfully crumples their paper and stomps away because they made a single pencil error—reacting with the immediate frustration profile of a 4-year-old—has a **Frustration Tolerance Functional Age** sitting in the early early-childhood bracket.

7.2 Anxiety & Stress Response

- **What it means in the classroom:** Physiological reactivity to perceived demands, novel situations, or sensory input, activating fight, flight, freeze, or fawn survival states.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Somatic & Physiological Signs:** Do they demonstrate physical signs of high stress (e.g., rapid breathing, fidgeting, muscle tension, stomach aches, hiding under desks, or bolting from the room) when faced with routine academic tasks?
 - **Hypervigilance:** Are they constantly scanning the classroom for potential threats, changes in teacher tone, or peer judgements rather than focusing on learning?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who panics, freezes, or bolts from the room when asked an unexpected question in front of peers, demonstrating the self-preservation panic of a 5-year-old, has an **Anxiety Response Functional Age** around 5 years.

7.3 Irritability and Rapid Mood Changes

- **What it means in the classroom:** The baseline vulnerability of the nervous system, where minor environmental stimuli cause rapid escalation into annoyance, snapping, or moodiness.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Escalation Speed:** Does their mood shift instantly from cheerful to defensive without an obvious major trigger?





- **Sensory / Cognitive Fatigue:** Does irritability spike significantly during times of noise, unstructured time (e.g., lunch breaks), or at the end of the school day as cognitive energy drains?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who snaps aggressively at peers over accidental desk bumps or minor whispers—unable to filter minor irritations like an easily overwhelmed 5-year-old—has an **Irritability Functional Age** sitting around 5 years.

7.4 Meltdowns & Overwhelm

- **What it means in the classroom:** Total neurological collapse occurring when incoming demands exceed processing capacity, resulting in complete loss of conscious behavioural control.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **System Overload:** When overwhelmed, do they experience complete neurological meltdowns (explosive outward distress) or shutdowns (catatonic-like withdrawal/mutism)?
 - **Recovery Time:** How long does it take for their autonomic nervous system to return to a safe baseline after an episode (10-15 minutes vs. hours of lingering exhaustion)?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who experiences full physical meltdowns with screaming and weeping when a routine changes unexpectedly—requiring extensive recovery time like a toddler experiencing a sensory tantrum—has a **Meltdown Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

7.5 Co-Regulation Needs

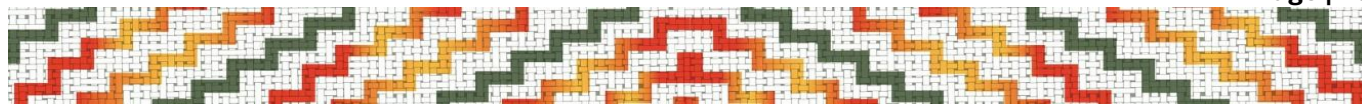
- **What it means in the classroom:** The degree to which the ākonga relies on a calm, grounded adult presence to help soothe, structure, and reset their nervous system, compared to self-soothing independently.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Independent Self-Soothing:** Can they use self-regulation strategies independently (e.g., going to a quiet space, taking deep breaths, using fidget tools), or do they require an adult to sit alongside them, lower their voice, and co-regulate them?
 - **Adult Proximity:** Does the presence of a trusted adult keep their emotional state steady during challenging tasks?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who cannot de-escalate independently when upset, requiring a dedicated support adult to physically ground and calm them like a 4- or 5-year-old, has a **Co-Regulation Functional Age** sitting around 5 years.

7.6. Internal Mood State & Affective Volatility

- **What it means in the classroom:** Pervasive underlying emotional tone, including persistent sadness, internalised shame, rapid mood swings, or emotional exhaustion.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Affective Shifts:** Do they experience extreme, unpredictable swings between high enthusiasm and deep apathy or despair within the same school period?
 - **Shame Sensitivity:** Does constructive feedback trigger intense internalised shame or statements like "I'm stupid" or "Everyone hates me"?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 12-year-old ākonga whose internal mood shifts rapidly from total exuberance to deep tearful despair over minor social cues, managing internal emotions like a 6-year-old, has an **Internal Mood Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

7.7 Oppositional & Reactive Behaviour

- **What it means in the classroom:** Defensive refusal, 'no' responses, or argumentative behaviour driven by threat perception, fear of failure, or severe processing fatigue rather than deliberate malice.





- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Defensive Masking:** When faced with a task that exceeds their cognitive capacity, do they say "No, I'm not doing that," or act out to hide the fact that they cannot read or process the material?
 - **Threat Response:** Does demands-based language (e.g., "You must do this now") immediately trigger defensive opposition?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who instinctively responds to instructions with rigid, knee-jerk refusal ("You can't make me!") to shield themselves from cognitive failure, acting like a defiant 6-year-old, has an **Oppositional/Reactive Functional Age** sitting around 6 years.

7.8 Rule-Breaking Under Stress

- **What it means in the classroom:** The breakdown of adherence to school and classroom rules when cognitive, sensory, or emotional stress overwhelms self-control pathways.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Rule Maintenance under Pressure:** Can they follow established rules when calm, but completely disregard them (e.g., leaving class, shouting, crossing boundaries) as soon as stress levels rise?
 - **Intentionality:** Is rule-breaking a deliberate attempt to seek negative attention, or is it a direct reflection of brain fatigue and loss of impulse control under pressure?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* An 11-year-old ākonga who knows school rules well when calm, but completely abandons them and runs through the school grounds when stressed, acting with the boundary regulation of a 5-year-old, has a **Rule-Breaking Functional Age** of around 5 years.

Core Takeaway for Emotional/Behavioural Regulation

Emotional dysregulation in FASD is **neurological overload, not bad behaviour**. When an ākonga displays oppositional refusal, meltdowns, or extreme anxiety, their nervous system is signalling that the environment or task has exceeded their processing capacity. Providing **co-regulation, reducing demands, and offering low-sensory safe spaces** acts as an external nervous system scaffold, preserving their dignity and allowing them to return to learning.

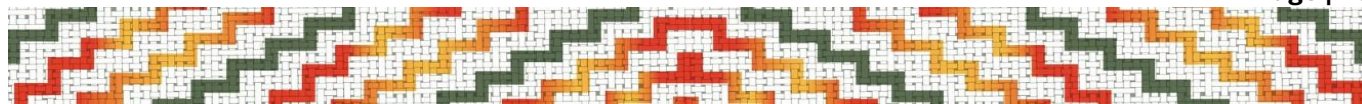
8. Literacy and/or Numeracy (Academic function)

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Literacy and/or Numeracy**, the goal is to evaluate how effectively they can independently apply reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical skills during daily learning tasks and real-world routines.

In FASD, surface-level academic performance (such as mechanical reading aloud or memorized math facts) often masks significant gaps in functional comprehension, abstract reasoning, and practical application. Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across these core academic areas when mapping an ākonga's spiky profile.

8.1 Reading: Decoding vs. Functional Comprehension

- **What it means in the classroom:** The contrast between an ākonga's ability to mechanically pronounce written words on a page (decoding) versus their actual working comprehension of what the text means.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Surface Decoding vs. Deep Meaning:** Can they read aloud fluently with good expression, but draw a complete blank when asked to summarize the passage or answer inferential 'why' questions?
 - **Text Complexity & Sentence Length:** Does reading comprehension break down rapidly as sentences become longer, more abstract, or multi-clause (due to working memory limits)?





- **Functional Reading:** Can they independently read and follow written instructions, visual safety signs, timetables, or recipes in a real-world setting without adult guidance?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who decodes high school level text fluently, but cannot answer basic comprehension questions or follow written 2-step directions without adult guidance—demonstrating the functional reading comprehension of an 8-year-old—has a **Reading Comprehension Functional Age** sitting around 8 years.

8.2 Writing: Thought Translation & Motor Output

- **What it means in the classroom:** The capacity to organize thoughts sequentially, retrieve appropriate vocabulary, and physically translate ideas into written text on paper or screen.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Oral vs. Written Gap:** Is there a striking gap between their expressive oral language (rich, detailed spoken stories) and their written output (one short, simple sentence)?
 - **Graphomotor Fatigue:** Does the physical act of handwriting consume so much cognitive energy that they lose track of what they wanted to say?
 - **Structure & Sequence:** Can they structure paragraphs with a logical beginning, middle, and end, or does their writing lack coherent narrative flow?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who speaks articulate stories but produces only a single, minimally punctuated line after 30 minutes of writing effort—struggling with writing execution like a 6-year-old—has a **Functional Writing Age** in the early primary bracket.

8.3 Spelling: Phonemic Awareness & Visual Memory

- **What it means in the classroom:** The ability to retain and retrieve sound-letter relationships and visual word patterns when spelling words in independent writing tasks.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Phonetic vs. Irregular Patterns:** Do they spell purely phonetically (spelling words exactly as they sound, e.g., 'wuz' for 'was' or 'fren' for 'friend') because visual memory for irregular words fails?
 - **Day-to-Day Inconsistency:** Can they spell a list of words correctly on Friday's spelling test, but spell those exact same words incorrectly in a free-writing task on Monday?
 - **Cognitive Fatigue Impact:** Does spelling accuracy drop sharply toward the end of a writing session as working memory and processing energy drain?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who relies entirely on phonetic guessing and displays the inconsistent spelling patterns of a 7-year-old starting primary school has a **Spelling Functional Age** sitting around 7 years.

8.4 Mathematical Skills: Abstract Numeracy, Money & Time

- **What it means in the classroom:** Understanding numerical concepts, moving beyond concrete counting objects, managing practical currency, and grasping time and schedule concepts.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Concrete vs. Symbolic Math:** Do they rely on physical counters or finger-counting long after same-age peers have moved to mental strategies and abstract mathematical symbols (+, -, x, ÷)?
 - **Practical Money Handling:** Can they count physical notes/coins, understand value differences, calculate change, or manage a budget in canteen or real-life settings?
 - **Time & Schedule Concepts:** Do they struggle to read analog clocks, estimate how long 15 minutes feels like, or calculate elapsed time on a bus schedule?
- **Determining Functional Age:**





- *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who struggles to calculate change for a \$5 note at the school canteen and cannot read an analog clock—operating with the practical numeracy and time understanding of an 8-year-old—has a **Numeracy Functional Age** sitting at 8 years.

💡 Core Takeaway for Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy and numeracy difficulties in FASD represent **neurological processing barriers, not a lack of effort.**

- **Scaffold the Writing Gap:** Use speech-to-text tools, visual mind maps, and scribes to decouple rich thinking from physical writing mechanics.
- **Support Functional Numeracy:** Provide concrete manipulatives, visual calculators, digital visual timers, and step-by-step visual guides for real-world math tasks.
- **Target Comprehension:** Never assume that fluent reading aloud equals understanding. Always verify comprehension with visual or active checking tasks.

9. Adaptive / Social Functioning

When educators observe an ākonga (student) with FASD to determine their functional age in **Adaptive & Social Functioning**, the goal is to evaluate how effectively and independently they apply practical, social, and conceptual skills in daily life routines across school, playground, and community environments.

In FASD, an ākonga may present with strong verbal fluency or academic decoding, yet experience profound vulnerabilities in practical self-care, social judgement, and independent community navigation.

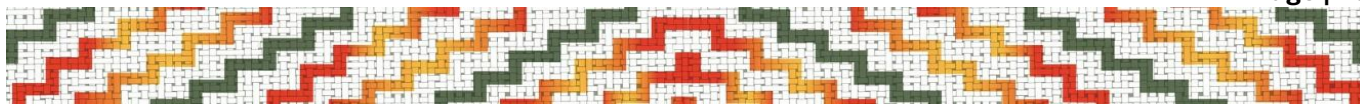
Below is a breakdown of what kaiako (teachers) and learning support staff should observe across these 10 core adaptive concepts when mapping an ākonga's spiky profile.

9.1. Personal Care

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Managing basic bodily needs, physical hygiene, eating habits, changing for PE, dressing appropriately for weather, and maintaining personal tidiness without adult supervision.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Hygiene & Grooming:** Do they notice or care if their clothing is inside out, unbuttoned, dirty, or unzipped? Do they wash hands or blow their nose independently?
 - **Weather-Appropriate Clothing:** Do they put on a warm jacket on a freezing winter day, or do they wander outside in a short-sleeved shirt without recognising their body's temperature needs?
 - **Meals & Snacking:** Can they open lunch packaging, use cutlery, and eat at an appropriate pace without spilling or eating non-food items?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who requires step-by-step adult prompting to zip their jacket, tie their shoes, and wipe their face after eating—managing self-care like a 5-year-old—has a **Personal Care Functional Age** sitting around 5 years.

9.2 Health & Safety

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Recognising physical hazards, exercising caution near roads, machinery, or strangers, reporting injuries or feeling unwell, and adhering to basic safety rules.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Hazard Awareness:** Do they walk blindly into traffic, stand too close to swings, or touch hot/sharp objects without anticipating danger?
 - **Reporting Pain or Illness:** Can they accurately identify and report physical discomfort (e.g., *"My stomach hurts"*) before becoming distressed or acting out?
 - **Self-Preservation in Play:** Do they engage in high-risk playground behaviour (e.g., jumping off high structures) without evaluating safety risks?
- **Determining Functional Age:**





- *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who runs impulsively across busy car parks or playground equipment without checking for hazards, showing the safety awareness of a 6-year-old, has a **Health & Safety Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

9.3 Travel & Transport

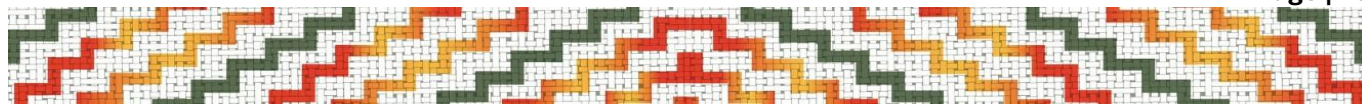
- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Navigating school grounds, moving between different classrooms, walking or taking the bus to school, crossing roads safely, and spatial orientation in new environments.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **School Campus Navigation:** Do they routinely get lost or wander when moving from the classroom to the library, hall, or bathrooms?
 - **Public & School Transport:** Can they safely wait at a bus stop, get off at the correct stop, or navigate a short walking route independently?
 - **Spatial Orientation:** Do they become disoriented when routines or walking paths are slightly altered?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who cannot find their way back from the school office to their classroom without an adult escort or peer guide operates with the spatial travel navigation of a 6-year-old, giving them a **Travel & Transport Functional Age** sitting around 6 years.

9.4 Routines & Schedules

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Following the rhythm of the school day, transitioning between timetable periods, preparing equipment for the next subject, and managing daily home-school items.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Bell/Timetable Transitions:** Do they move smoothly when the bell rings, or do they sit blankly at their desk, unaware that lunch or the next class has started?
 - **Packing & Gear Management:** Can they independently unpack their bag in the morning and pack the correct books and lunchboxes at the end of the day?
 - **Predictable Routines:** Do they rely entirely on visual boards or adult reminders to know what happens next?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who sits immobile when the period changes and needs a support worker to pack their bag and guide them to every class—executing daily routines like a 6-year-old—has a **Routines & Schedules Functional Age** in the early primary bracket.

9.5 Interpersonal Relationships

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Forming age-appropriate peer connections, maintaining personal physical space, understanding social hierarchies, and interacting appropriately with peers versus adults.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Age Affinity:** Do they gravitate toward playing with much younger children on the playground, or do they treat adults like peers (excessive familiarity)?
 - **Personal Space Boundaries:** Do they stand uncomfortably close to peers, hug acquaintances unexpectedly, or touch others' personal items without asking?
 - **Peer Reciprocity:** Can they engage in back-and-forth social chatter, or do they dominate conversations with hyper-fixated personal topics?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who prefers playing tag with 6-year-olds at lunchtime and hugs teachers or visitors like family members demonstrates the interpersonal boundaries of a 6-year-old, placing their **Interpersonal Functional Age** around 6 years.





9.6 Social Problem Solving

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Resolving minor playground disputes, negotiating game rules, managing disappointment when losing a game, and finding constructive solutions to peer misunderstandings.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Conflict Resolution:** When a peer takes a toy or cuts in line, do they use words to negotiate, or do they immediately push, cry, or run away?
 - **Game Rules & Fairness:** Can they compromise during group games when rules are contested, or do they insist on rigid adherence to 'their' rules?
 - **Perspective Taking:** Can they understand why a classmate might be upset by an accidental bump or comment?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 12-year-old ākonga who bursts into tears or throws equipment whenever they lose a game or face minor peer disagreement—resolving conflict like a 5-year-old—has a **Social Problem Solving Functional Age** sitting around 5 years.

9.7 Social Responsibility

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Respecting school and community property, understanding rules of fair play, helping others, and taking ownership of actions within a group context.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Property Care:** Do they handle school equipment, library books, and peers' belongings with care, or do they drop, break, or misplace items without concern?
 - **Group Contribution:** Do they participate in shared responsibilities (e.g., tidying up art gear, keeping the classroom clean) without continuous individual adult supervision?
 - **Accountability:** When an accident happens, do they acknowledge their role, or do they blame external objects/others (*"It broke itself"*)?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 13-year-old ākonga who abandons shared tasks, damages equipment without intent, and cannot grasp their responsibility in group tidying—acting with the social responsibility of a 5-year-old—has a **Social Responsibility Functional Age** around 5 years.

9.8 Gullibility & Naivety

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Vulnerability to peer pressure, misinterpreting teasing or malicious intent as genuine friendship, being coaxed into breaking rules for others, and online/social safety risks.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Peer Manipulation:** Are they easily convinced by older or more dominant peers to break rules, steal, or act inappropriately (*"If you take that, we'll be your friend"*)?
 - **Detecting Sarcasm & Deceit:** Do they take peer jokes, sarcasm, or fake promises literally, unable to detect when they are being mocked or set up?
 - **Trust Boundaries:** Do they trust strangers or online acquaintances immediately without assessing potential danger?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 15-year-old ākonga who eagerly agrees to perform dangerous or rule-breaking acts on the playground because peers told them to, completely missing the malicious intent like a 7-year-old, has a **Gullibility Functional Age** sitting around 7 years.

9.9 Money Management

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Practical handling of physical cash/cards, purchasing food at the canteen, understanding prices, calculating change, and budgeting for small real-world items.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**





- **Currency Value:** Do they understand the relative value of coins and notes (e.g., knowing a \$20 note is worth more than a \$2 coin)?
- **Canteen Purchases:** Can they choose an item, hand over money, wait for change, and check if the change is roughly correct without adult assistance?
- **Financial Safeguarding:** Do they leave money unattended or hand cash away to peers without realizing its value?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 16-year-old ākonga who hands a \$20 note to the school canteen for a \$2 snack and walks away without waiting for change—unable to manage practical money transactions like an 8-year-old—has a **Money Management Functional Age** sitting in the primary bracket.

9.10 Time Concepts (in Daily Living)

- **What it means in the classroom & kura:** Grasping the passage of time in practical routines, estimating how long a task will take, pacing oneself during activities, and meeting daily deadlines.
- **What Kaiako Should Observe:**
 - **Time Awareness:** Do they have a realistic feel for time (5 minutes vs. 1 hour), or do they continually express surprise when time is up?
 - **Pacing Tasks:** Can they pace their work during an exam or art project, or do they spend the entire period on step one, oblivious to the remaining time?
 - **Calendar & Future Events:** Do concepts like "*next Tuesday*" or "*in three weeks*" hold practical meaning, or do they only operate in the immediate present?
- **Determining Functional Age:**
 - *Example:* A 14-year-old ākonga who cannot gauge the difference between 10 minutes and 2 hours and requires constant visual timers to manage simple task transitions operates with the practical time understanding of a 6-year-old, giving them a **Time Concepts Functional Age** around 6 years.

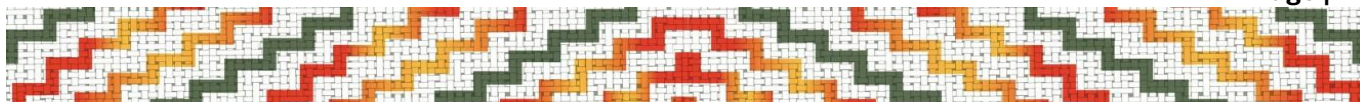
💡 Core Takeaway for Adaptive and Social Functioning

Adaptive and social difficulties in FASD stem from **brain-based differences in processing, memory, and executive control—not lazy or wilful behaviour**. When an ākonga displays social naivety, poor hygiene, disorganisation, or canteen money struggles, their nervous system is signalling that environmental demands exceed their current functional capacity. Providing **visual checklists, social scaffolding, explicit safety prompts, and direct adult support** safeguards their wellbeing and dignity while enabling them to participate meaningfully in school life.

🔧 The FASD KiSSSSSS Communication Strategy

When communicating across domains with lower functional age scores, anchor practice in these six core pillars:

- **Keep it Short:** Limit verbal explanations to brief, punchy sentences.
- **Simple:** Use concrete, everyday language. Strip out abstract idioms, sarcasm, or metaphors.
- **Same:** Use identical keywords for repeating routines (e.g., always say "put on your shoes").
- **Slow:** Speak deliberately. Incorporate a **10-to-15-second processing pause** after speaking before expecting an answer or action.
- **Specific:** Give clear, singular instructions. Say "Put your jacket on the hook" instead of "Clean up your stuff."
- **Show:** Always accompany verbal instructions with visual prompts, picture checklists, or physical modelling.





Educator Disclaimer

This developmental functional age profile is an educational observation and accommodation guide designed to assist kaiako, learning support staff, and school teams in understanding an ākonga's functional developmental age within daily school environments. It is a practical tool to inform classroom adaptations, environmental scaffolding, and individual learning plans. **This document is not a clinical diagnostic instrument, formal psychometric assessment, or medical evaluation, and cannot be used to diagnose FASD or replace clinical assessment under the *Aotearoa FASD Diagnostic Guidelines 2024*.**

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