

# **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the Foster System: A Personal Mission for Systemic Change**

By Amelia Hernandez

The behavioral effects of my three adopted siblings' Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are not something a person can fully understand through a single interaction. If I were one of those social workers, I too would have been alarmed by the sight of a ten-year-old girl digging through a cafeteria trash can for a candy wrapper, hoping it still held something sweet. I would likely have assumed she came to school without lunch and was so hungry that she began eating off her classmates' trays. I would have thought this was a textbook case of child neglect—one that warranted removal from the home.

What I wouldn't have realized, and what most social workers likely wouldn't either, is that this little girl had thrown away her entire reusable lunch bag because, sometime between preparing her requested peanut butter sandwich and the school's lunch bell, she decided she no longer liked peanut butter sandwiches. In fact, they now made her feel sick. This decision had nothing to do with hunger or neglect—it was just one of many irrational shifts in mood, preference, and sensory perception that can occur with FASD. This additional perspective allows me to understand why my family has received at least one CPS case investigation per year since officially adopting three of my siblings who have been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Situations like this are often misread because too few people truly understand the disorder or its complex presentation.

That's why I'm going to become a social worker who does understand the various displays of FASD and the possible behaviors it explains. According to the National Institute of Health, "Chasnoff et al. have shown evidence that in the United States up to 80% of children with FASD in the general population, or referred for foster care or adoption, are undiagnosed, and 7% are misdiagnosed" (Koren et al.). Hundreds of thousands of children are struggling—not only because of their neurodevelopmental challenges but because the adults around them don't know how to help. Foster and adoptive parents are often unequipped to manage the emotional dysregulation, delayed language development, or illogical reasoning that come with FASD.

Without the right training and resources, these families become overwhelmed, and many children are left to cycle through the foster system without the support they desperately need.

My parents had to jump through countless hoops just to find a diagnosis that truly explained my siblings' behavior. Their symptoms were repeatedly misattributed to other conditions like ADHD or Borderline Personality Disorder. Time and time again, doctors prescribed medications that had little or no effect—or created new problems entirely. I watched my mother explain the same concerning behaviors to different specialists, only to be met with dismissive tones or oversimplified solutions: “It’s probably just the medication,” they’d say. “Take them off it.” And then she’d have to explain that removing the medication would only bring back the symptoms it had managed to suppress. Few professionals took her seriously, and even fewer had meaningful suggestions.

FASD is a widespread but often invisible condition that carries painful consequences for both the individuals who live with it and the people who love them. As a future social worker, I will use every available tool to ensure these children receive the support, diagnosis, and resources they need. And if those tools or programs don’t yet exist, I will fight to create them—making them accessible to foster parents, adoptive families, and biological caregivers across the country. Every child, regardless of their diagnosis, deserves a chance to thrive. And every family navigating the world of FASD deserves an ally who listens, understands, and acts with compassion and knowledge. I will be that ally.

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## **Works Cited**

Koren, Gideon, and Asher Ornoy. “Institutionalized Children and the Risk of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD); A Primer for Clinicians, Adoption Staff and Parents.” *Global Pediatric Health*, vol. 8, 2021, doi:10.1177/2333794X21989556.