

***HARD ISSUES FOR PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS AND
ADULTS WITH FASD
ISSUE #1
PLAYING LIFEGUARD***

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One of the things, if you let it, that parenting adolescents and adults with FASD makes you face is your core values. That can work for you, or against you. It depends on how honest you are with your own personal circumstances, how willing or able you are to grow and change, and how able you may be to adapt. One thing is for sure, refusing to at least consider the possibility that some of our core beliefs may be part of the problems we encounter removes any likelihood that we can structure change in areas we control.

Most of us have not really even thought about what our beliefs are. We simply espouse to the *idea* of values, without ever having elucidated them in a clear, orchestrated manner. You have to do that before you can either defend and retain, or let go of them. And yet we, and the rest of society's systems in which our children are forced to interact, expect our children to be able to follow those values – social rules - which are, at best, small raindrops in a huge pond rippling every which way as the wind blows.

The pond is the value. The accumulating raindrops are the myriad of small things that continue to build and *change* the value over time. The waves are the events and the winds are the circumstances. The rock that then gets thrown into this mixture is the place where that value needs to be used. *Never are things the same twice.*

Those of us who have the ultimate luxury of a brain hard-wired to accommodate being perpetually sea-sick, have at our disposal a boat, a motor, fuel, a set of oars, a bailing bucket, lifejackets, a map, a radio, not to mention boots, a raincoat and an umbrella. We also know how to understand the captain's orders. We know how to follow them. We know how to work the radio and send a mayday if need be.

This is not true for the adolescent or adult with FASD. He has fallen overboard in that pond. He is alone and adrift without a lifejacket, unable to see the shore, trying desperately to keep his head above water. What must it feel like to be so perpetually close to drowning all the time?

If I am dissatisfied with his behaviour, why is it that I feel this way? Are my expectations realistic? Am I asking (demanding?) he do something he is unable to do? And if I am not pleased with his behaviour, then what about mine? How do I handle the situation? Do I throw him a life ring, or a rope, or do I let him

flounder for the shore he cannot see and hope he does not drown? Just because he can sail on a sunny day does not mean he can sail on a stormy day. / I know that, but why doesn't *he* know that? How many times do I have to tell him about storms, anyways?? And why was he out in that boat without permission - *again*? He is always in trouble. I am always on edge, waiting for something to go wrong, because it always does. He never seems to care I might be worried. And he always does "it" again, no matter what he says. And there is *always* a next time.

At the heart of the question for the parent who experiences this behaviour is the struggle with the strong core belief that "*you don't treat people you care about that way*". And the adult child does not – not on purpose. But he does if he does not understand he can't swim.

Once you understand that you are living with someone who does not know he cannot swim (and remember, you can't know what you do *not* know), you begin to grasp the significance of lifeguards. A lifeguard does not ask the drowning man if he wants help, or wait to see if he actually does drown before going to his rescue. He does not refuse to rescue him a second time, and a third time. He does not pass judgment on the person's performance. Rather, he ensures that his own is up the task by continually changing how it is that he performs his job. The lifeguard does not place the person on the "no more service" list because he failed to learn to swim in the allotted teaching time. Instead, he waits and watches, and whenever he is needed, goes to the aid of the non-swimmer using tools that will make the rescue easier on both of them. And then he waits – until the next time.

Lifeguards are found everywhere in society. Beaches, and pools are only the most obvious places. Job sites have first aid attendants. Mechanics inspect public transportation. Weigh scales check trucks. Ski patrols monitor ski hills. Group home staff care for the mentally handicapped. School playgrounds have noon-hour supervisors. Vehicle insurance is mandatory. Apartments, hotels and all public buildings have fire alarms. Immunization is free. Teachers, social workers, doctors, etc. must have criminal record checks. Police are subject to public complaint processes. Defibrillators are placed in malls. Legal aid lawyers are provided to those who cannot pay. Hospitals treat first. Airport security staff check bags. Social workers remove at-risk children. Public health agencies monitor disease. Hospitals have ethics committees. Food handlers wear gloves. Red lights and speed limits control traffic.

Anyone who says he does not personally use lifeguards is fooling himself. The idea of an *individual* lifeguard is merely an extension of what is already available to the rest of society deemed worthy of such services.

The issue, and where it can conflict with our own personal beliefs and definitely with that of society, is *who, exactly, should have a lifeguard?* Why should they

have a lifeguard? What is the role of the lifeguard? How do you lifeguard effectively? How much life guarding should be done? Where and under what circumstances? How does one decide? Who decides? Who should the lifeguard be? Who pays? Who has ultimate responsibility? What happens when the lifeguard goes home? Does providing a lifeguard take away the rights of the individual?

And finally, what happens when there are no lifeguards for those the very most in need? And the answer to that, I think, is obvious. Look around you.