

THE FORT: for kids living with FASD

Fact Sheet

ABOUT THE FORT

- **The Fort** is one of five classes that make up the Encompass Learning Section 23 school program located at Carizon Family and Community Services in St. Agatha.
- **The Fort** class is operated in partnership with Waterloo Region District School Board.
- **The Fort** is a pilot Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder class for students ages 8–12 years that has been operating since September 2013.
- **The Fort** provides a specialized environment designed to meet the needs of children living with FASD. It is uniquely equipped and structured to meet the social/emotional, sensory and learning needs of the children.
- The classroom was designed based on successful models in Alberta and Manitoba.
- A multi-professional team supports the children through various aspects of the program; including a teacher, child and youth workers, and a child and family therapist.
- Therapeutic components of the program include mindfulness training, music therapy, animal assisted therapy with a National Service Dog, individual therapy and family support.
- Four students have participated in **The Fort** class since September 2013.



The name “**The Fort**” was chosen to reflect a classroom that is a safe place, guided by the needs of the students where students can learn and have fun together because they are understood and supported. The name also echoes its French derivative “forte” - meaning strong point.



THE IMPACT

Fort Parents tell us:

- they are experiencing less stress
- they appreciate the small class size and curriculum modifications
- they are thankful for staff’s understanding of their child & their focus on positive interactions
- their children are attending school every day; are happier, less anxious, enjoying positive peer relationships and are experiencing greater academic achievement.

Fort Students tell us:

- they like their friendly & understanding teacher
- they like the routines and physical surrounding
- they don’t get kicked out of class
- they like the class size and shortened school day.

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THE FORT IS DESIGNED TO:

- Minimize environmental stimuli (fewer bright colours placed strategically in the classroom, light filters, noise-cancelling headphones, etc.) recognizing that children with FASD can be particularly sensitive to and have difficulties processing sensory input.
- Provide predictable and consistent structure recognizing the difficulties these children can experience with memory, comprehension and generalizing.
- Ensure adjusted academic and behavioural expectations, recognizing the impact of prenatal exposure to alcohol on learning, self-regulation, executive functioning, and social/emotional functioning.
- Engage parents in ongoing dialogue to share information in order to develop everyone's understanding of the students' unique strengths and needs.
- Recognize and reduce the challenges parents and caregivers experience on a daily basis when raising a child living with FASD (e.g., promoting consistent school attendance, students are referenced using positive language, family therapy support is offered).

NEXT STEPS:

- **The Fort** will continue into year two of the pilot project in September 2014.
- **The Fort** will continue to be geared towards students with FASD ages 8-12 years old, living in Waterloo Region.
- A part-time children's mental health worker will be added to the Encompass Learning team from September 2014-June 2015. This will allow us to provide support to all classrooms, as assigned, including **The Fort**.
- We will be increasing the number of children in the program to six beginning in September 2014. Due to the pilot nature of the program, we will be using internal processes to identify candidates and fill these spots.

QUESTIONS?

Internal staff should speak with their Manager with any questions.

WRDSB staff should contact Jennifer Macpherson at jennifer_macpherson@wrdsb.on.ca

Community members are welcome to contact Lesley Barraball, Director of Children's Mental Health Services at lbarraball@carizon.ca

"[my child] lost a full academic year before coming to the new classroom. He is now fully engaged in modified activities and is catching up"

"He attends school every day and we don't have to fear that he'll be sent home. That was heavy on him and was leading to a hatred of school. His renewed enjoyment helps everything as it is not a chore to get him to go - he likes it."

"It's been a positive experience and [my child] really enjoys going to school this year. I feel really blessed that he is in this classroom as the curriculum can be adapted to meet his needs and meet the level that he is at. I know that he is not getting lost in the shuffle like he did in the "regular" classroom and he is actually learning"

"This is something that families of children who have FASD really need in this area... There really isn't another appropriate place of learning that suits his needs and I'm sure he is not the only one".

"Being able to work without having my hand fused to the phone has been such a huge relief and stress reducer"

"I am thrilled that [my child] is receiving the care and supervision he needs and is staying in school, developing positive relationships and is fully engaged in his education"