



# TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 10

## **Confabulation and FASD: Understanding the Difference Between Lying and Memory Gaps**

**By BARB CLARK, AUTHOR OF *RAISING KIDS AND TEENS WITH FASD: ADVICE AND STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR FAMILY TO THRIVE!***

### **WHAT IS CONFABULATION?**

Confabulation happens when someone unintentionally fills in missing pieces of memory with details that feel true — but aren't accurate. These “made-up” details can sound convincing because they're told with confidence, yet they are not lies in the intentional sense.

For individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), confabulation is a brain-based symptom, not a behavioral choice. It results from how prenatal alcohol exposure impacts memory, information processing, and cause-and-effect reasoning.

### **WHY CONFABULATION HAPPENS IN FASD**

Prenatal alcohol exposure alters the structure and function of several brain areas responsible for memory and reasoning, especially:

- The hippocampus, which stores and retrieves memories.
- The frontal lobes, which manage impulse control, organization, and self-monitoring.

As a result, people with FASD may:

- Genuinely believe the version of events they describe, in the moment.
- Struggle to distinguish between things they experienced, things they heard, or things they imagined.
- Attempt to “fill in the blanks” to answer questions, avoid embarrassment, or please the person asking.

This isn't manipulation — it's a neurological coping mechanism. Confabulation is common in people with dementia, including Alzheimer's, and we readily recognize it as brain-based. We should extend that same understanding to individuals with FASD.

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## CONFABULATION IS ANXIETY-BASED

Confabulation is most likely to happen when their anxiety is high.

1. When they are in trouble or think they are in trouble
2. When they are trying to socially fit in somewhere
3. When they are trying to remember or understand something

## HOW CONFABULATION DIFFERS FROM LYING

### Confabulation

Unintentional and brain-based

Often told confidently because it feels true

No clear motive to deceive

Common in memory or cognitive disorders (like FASD, TBI, dementia)

### Lying

Intentional and purposeful

Often told hesitantly or defensively

Usually has a motive or goal (avoid trouble, gain something)

Common in typical development when making a choice

It's important to note that calling confabulation "lying" can harm trust and relationships — especially for youth who already experience frequent misunderstanding and shame. How can we tell when it is confabulating or lying? It truly doesn't matter, handle it in the same connected way.

## REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Scenario:

A caregiver asks, "Did you turn in your homework yesterday?"

Child or adolescent with FASD replies: "Yes, I turned it in."

In reality, the youth *intended* to turn it in, *thought* about turning it in, and may even *remember* handing it over — but never did. Their brain filled in the missing details to complete the story. The answer isn't a lie; it's the student's perceived truth. They are maybe remembering turning in homework three weeks ago.

## WHAT CONFABULATION CAN LOOK LIKE

- Providing inconsistent versions of the same event.
- Making up stories that sound believable but aren't accurate. Sometimes, the stories are not believable at all.
- Insisting something happened that didn't, or denying something that did.
- Becoming frustrated or defensive when challenged ("That's not what happened!").

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## SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO CONFABULATES

### 1. Stay Curious, Not Confrontational

Instead of saying, *“That’s not true,”* try:

*“Hmm, I remember it a little differently — let’s figure it out together.”*

Gentle curiosity prevents shame and keeps communication open.

### 2. Avoid Questions You Already Know the Answer To

If you already know what happened, don’t ask questions like *“Did you take that?”* or *“Did you hit him?”* — this sets the person up to confabulate. Their brain may try to fill in gaps or avoid trouble, even when they don’t mean to lie. Instead, calmly describe what you know happened and focus on what needs to happen next.

### 3. Teach About Confabulation in Simple Terms

You can help the child or teen understand what’s happening in their brain by saying something like:

*“Because of the way your brain works, sometimes it can trick you or confuse you. It might make you think something is true when it isn’t. You can let us help you when that happens — otherwise people might think you’re lying, and we know that’s not what’s really going on.”*

This kind of conversation builds self-awareness and teaches that you’re a safe person to help sort things out.

### 4. Use Neutral Questions

Avoid rapid-fire questions that rely on recall (e.g., *“Why did you do that?”*). Try supportive prompts instead:

*“Tell me what you remember about what happened.”*

### 5. Support Memory Gaps

- Use visual reminders (schedules, photos, checklists).
- Review events together daily.
- Write down or record key information immediately after activities.
- Repeat and rehearse routines so information moves into long-term memory.

### 6. Build Trust

Repeated accusations of *“lying”* can damage relationships and increase anxiety. When trust is strong, individuals feel safer admitting when they’re unsure.

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## 7. Educate Others

Teachers, therapists, and case workers often misinterpret confabulation as dishonesty. Sharing this brain-based perspective helps shift blame from the individual to the neurological differences that drive the behavior.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Confabulation is a memory-related symptom, not a character flaw.
- It is common among people with FASD due to brain differences affecting memory and reasoning.
- Compassionate, brain-based responses can prevent conflict and strengthen relationships.
- When we replace “lying” with understanding, we open the door to connection, trust, and healing.

### HELPFUL RESOURCES

#### Websites

- FASD United: [www.fasdunited.org](http://www.fasdunited.org)
- Proof Alliance: [www.proofalliance.org](http://www.proofalliance.org)
- FASD Mosaic: [www.fasdmosaic.com](http://www.fasdmosaic.com)

#### Books

- *Raising Kids and Teens with FASD* by Barb Clark
- *Embracing Hope* by Carl Young and Joel Sheagren
- *Trying Differently Rather than Harder* by Diane Malbin