



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 12

Explaining an FASD Diagnosis to Your Child or Teen

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

A Caregiver's Guide to Building Understanding, Confidence, and Hope

WHY IT MATTERS

Children and teens often feel that something about them is different — even if no one has said it out loud. When caregivers talk openly about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), it helps reduce shame, builds trust, and gives the young person language to describe their experience. A diagnosis isn't something to hide — it's a key to self-understanding and support.

WHAT FASD MEANS (in kid-friendly terms)

“Your brain grew differently before you were born. That means some things are harder for you, but it also means your brain has special strengths.”

Children don't need all the medical details. Keep it simple, positive, and honest:

- Their brain works differently — not worse.
- It's not their fault and not their birth mom's fault.
- Everyone's brain has strengths and challenges.

WHY TIMING AND TONE MATTER

- Choose a calm, quiet moment when you can focus on connection.
- Avoid discussing the diagnosis during a conflict or emotional moment.
- Keep it ongoing, not a one-time conversation — understanding grows over time.

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KEY MESSAGES TO COMMUNICATE

“You’re not broken.”

Explain that their brain was affected before they were born — they didn’t do anything wrong. Use examples: “Just like some people wear glasses to help their eyes, your brain sometimes needs extra tools or support.”

“You have strengths, too.”

Highlight what they do well: creativity, humor, kindness, music, sports, helping others.

“Your brain may need more help with memory, but you have the biggest heart.”

“Everyone needs help sometimes.”

Frame support as normal by talking about everyone’s brains in the family (adults also!) — their strengths and the areas where each person needs extra help.

“I use a planner so I don’t forget things — you use a checklist. Everyone has strategies that work for them.”

SAMPLE WAYS TO START CONVERSATION

Age Group	Example Language
Young child (6-9)	“When you were growing inside your birth mom, alcohol got into your body and changed how your brain grew. That’s why your brain learns differently. It’s not anyone’s fault.”
Tween (10-12)	“Your brain works really hard to remember things and handle feelings. It was affected before you were born, so we use tools and supports to help it work its best.”
Teen (13+)	“You have a medical diagnosis called FASD. It helps explain why some things are harder — focus, memory, emotions — and why you may need more support. Understanding your brain helps you advocate for yourself.”

TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT FASD

- Keep It Short and Honest
- Share small pieces of information and build on them over time.
- Listen More Than You Talk
- Let the young person share what they notice or wonder.
 - ◇ “What do you think it means that your brain works differently?”

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Normalize Supports

- Talk about tools, not limitations: visuals, reminders, routines, coaching.
- Revisit Often
- Understanding evolves. Expect to have many short conversations rather than one big one.

HANDLING TOUGH FEELINGS

It's normal for a child or teen to feel sad, angry, or confused. You can respond with empathy:

- "It's okay to have big feelings about this."
- "This doesn't change who you are — it helps us understand how to support you."
- "You are loved exactly as you are."

If needed, connect them to a therapist familiar with FASD or trauma who can help process emotions and build self-esteem.

CAREGIVER TIP

"Information heals shame." When a child understands why things are hard, they can more easily stop believing they're "bad" or "lazy." Honest conversations replace confusion with confidence.

FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS

Encourage your child to see their diagnosis as part of who they are — but not all of who they are. Create a "Strengths List" together:

- What are you good at?
- What do you love to do?
- How do you help others?

Post it where they can see it daily.

FOR TEENS: EMPOWERMENT, NOT EXCUSE

Help older youth understand that FASD explains their challenges — but doesn't excuse harmful behavior.

"Your brain makes some things harder, but you can still do well when you have support."

Teach self-advocacy:

- Practice ways to explain FASD to teachers or employers ("I learn best when directions are written down").
- Encourage them to identify what helps — calm spaces, checklists, reminders.

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

Websites

- FASD United: www.fasdunited.org
- Proof Alliance: www.proofalliance.org
- FASD Mosaic: www.fasdmosaic.com

Books

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