

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Confabulation

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FASD is brain damage caused by exposure to the teratogen alcohol in utero. It is a lifelong disability that is invisible but nonetheless impacts on capacity to live independently and behave responsibly. Young people with FASD required structure support and supervision and to be assisted at home and school by responsible adults who are well educated in the disability and how to manage those affected differently so as to accommodate their special needs.

Damage to the function of the frontal lobes of the brain means that a person with FASD may confabulate, that is make up things that may not be true. This is not lying as it is a neurological condition due to faulty wiring in the brain. The affected person has trouble basing what they say in reality and checking it against the evidence. When they have forgotten or are confused they may just say anything that suits or they think is expected at the time. They may believe what they say to be true at the time and for this reason can be very convincing. Young people and not so young people with FASD have even confessed to crimes they have not committed so as to be agreeable and they get easily confused when questioned using complex language or leading questions. They are not devious or sophisticated, take things at face value and do not realise the intentions of others, for instance in situations where others may be blaming them for something they have not done. They also lack reserve so can be overly open and honest, disclosing things about themselves that it may be best not to. For this reason they need responsible adult assistance when they run into difficulties.

Young people with FASD want to be liked and they struggle to form and maintain friendships because they miss social cues and can behave in a socially inappropriate way because of their brain damage. They may say things to try to impress others without realising the implications. They are also often scape-goated by others due to their naive simplicity and are prone to acting under the instructions of more sophisticated peers. They are easily victimised by individual and systems. Immaturity is the primary feature of the disability so they require the expectations of a much younger child. Sadly most do not grow up to be able to live independently and they require lifelong support. The brain damage they suffer is through no fault of their own.

Confabulation is a feature of a brain based deficit of reasoning and therefore when a young person says things that turn out not to be true it is pointless trying to reason with them. It is best not to pick up on it and store it away for further investigation and verification. This does not mean that we should not believe what they say but a grain of salt is required. For the welfare of young people with FASD it is vital to have open communication and good collaboration between school and home so that all are working to best support the young disabled person across their entire day. It is best for one well informed person, usually the SENCO to manage situations that may arise so that solutions can be quickly found and problems averted.