Discussion Guide: Lying, Confabulation, and Distorted Thinking

This discussion guide is to help parents and caregivers understand confabulation, and connect how behavior that looks like lying may actually be distorted thinking. As a group leader, you will guide participants through discussion to understand what confabulation looks like and explore how to address these issues at home.

You may wish to review the participant handout before starting the discussion.

Facilitation tips

- Some parents or caregivers may experience guilt during the discussion if they have not handled confabulation behavior well in the past. Remind them that we all do the best we can with the information we have. Learning this information is the first step in improving. They will be better prepared in the future. Help participants be kind to themselves.
- Some group members may be resistant to the concept of confabulation based on their own past experiences with lying, dishonesty, trust, and trauma. Some people also have strong feelings about lying based on their moral or religious views, which may make it difficult for them to understand confabulation as unintentional. You may have to gently challenge assumptions some group members make about these behaviors.
- Remind the group that we come together with different experiences that have shaped us, and that we should assume good intentions with every comment. Rely on group agreements established by the group.

Topic one: Understanding confabulation

When someone lies to you—especially someone close to you—it can create a strong emotional response. It's frustrating and can leave you feeling tricked or betrayed. But when is lying not really lying? Our discussion today will focus on how we can best address children's behavior that looks a lot like lying but is actually a type of distorted thinking called confabulation.

For context, let's first watch this six-minute video from Oregon Behavior Consultation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJI8XN5EEC4&t=9s

Put these thoughts into your own words to introduce the topic:

Discussion questions. Use provided prompts if needed.

1. What are your first impressions of the video? What did you like or dislike about it?
2. Can you think of times in the past where you may have confabulated?

   PROMPT: One common example is when we discuss with someone else a disagreement we've had with friends or coworkers. We can unconsciously change the events to make ourselves look more sympathetic or justified in our actions. The emotion associated with an incident may have changed our memory of the event, as well.
3. When a child confabulates and adults respond as if they are lying, what would you expect to happen?

   CONTEXT:

   - As children's stress and anxiety increase, their ability to reason and remember goes down. This can cause them to confabulate further as their memories become more difficult for them to access.
   - Confabulation is not mean or intentional. Children trust their memory and feel like they are telling the truth. They are likely to be hurt that they are not believed, and respond with sadness, anger, or frustration. They may even rage. (It's important to note that even if a child is intentionally lying, their behavior may escalate if you choose to respond in the moment by trying to take on the lie.)
   - Being accused of lying hurts their self-esteem, especially if they confabulate regularly and are often told they are lying.
   - Their relationships with adults and friends can be harmed.
4. When a child confabulates, is it important to ask them why they aren't telling the truth?

CONTEXT: The child does not have the answer to this question. They don't know why, because they do not know that they are not sharing the truth. A person who is confabulating is telling the truth from their perspective. Even when children are lying on purpose, they usually still won't be able to answer this question.

Some group participants may feel strongly that it is important to confront the child in the moment. Help them understand that questioning the child in this way is likely to upset them and make behaviors worse. To help group members embrace this idea, focus on the goal of avoiding these troubles.

5. What are some positive strategies you can use when your child isn't telling the truth?

   PROMPT:

   - Focus on reducing stress and anxiety and preventing upset. A child that feels safe and secure is better able to remember things and think through a problem.
   - Don't address the fact that their memory of events is wrong. Focus on making a plan to move forward.
   - Remind yourself why your child confabulates and that it's not on purpose.

6. How do your own past experiences affect how you approach your child when they appear to be lying?

   CONTEXT: Some people are more sensitive about being lied to than others. If someone in your past routinely lied to you, this may affect how you respond to your child when they are not telling the truth. Try to be aware of how your past experiences and traumas affect your feelings and how you engage when your child's behavior looks like lying.

7. There can be social pressure to discipline a child who appears to be lying. Family or friends who don't understand children with brain differences—or who don't know the child has a brain difference—may feel like we are letting kids get away with bad behavior. What are some ways we can gently and successfully push back against concerns or assumptions from others?

   CONTEXT: The response will likely depend on if the person knows about your child's trauma history or brain differences. It's important that we not share our children's private information with people who don't need to know it.

   - To those who know about your child's history, show them the video we watched and share the handout from today's discussion.
   - To those who don't know your child's history, talk with them about how all people confabulate, and that this behavior is frequent in children, whose brains are still developing. Explain that you're taking an approach where you assume the best of intentions, even if the child may be lying on purpose.

8. How can we help our kids understand confabulation?

   CONTEXT: Some children and adults will always have trouble understanding what confabulation is and how their brain differences affect thinking and memory.

   - If your child can understand it, you can explain how we all have to question our own perceptions sometimes. Our brains are trying to help us fill in gaps in our memory. Sometimes, though, that help isn't so helpful because it puts memories in our head that didn't actually happen. Emphasize how this happens to everyone, and not just to them. Practice checking in with each other to confirm how an event unfolded. Be ready to support them through what can be a scary thought—that they can't always trust their own memory.
   - For people who cannot understand the concept, focus on teaching skills that reduce stress. Establish plans that encourage them to check in with people they trust.

Share with the group the following scenarios and talk through how you might respond.

Scenarios

Scenario #1

You hear a loud crash, and seconds later your 12-year-old runs into the living room with his basketball in his hands. "What was that?" you ask.

"I didn't hear anything," he says.

"OK, what did you break?" you ask, exasperated.

"Nothing!"

"Well, what happened then?" you ask.

"I didn't do anything!" he yells.

You go into his room to find the window is broken. With frustration rising, you say, "Did you break the window? What happened?!"

"I said I didn't do it!" he yells.

You say, "You clearly broke the window. You need to tell me the truth when I ask you what happened."

After a screaming match, he yells, "I *didn't* break the window—the ball did!"

Discussion questions. Use prompts if needed.

1. What are all the things affecting the child's behavior at this moment?

   PROMPT: This is not a complete list. There are many correct answers to this question.

   - Stress or anxiety
   - Avoiding being in trouble—taking care of himself
   - Cognitive distortions or limitations—he feels like he's telling the truth, the ball did break the window
   - Hurt or anger that his parent doesn't believe him
   - Hopelessness that there is no right answer, no right thing to say or do

2. What could the parent have done differently in this scenario?

   PROMPT:

   - Start with safety and security—"Are you OK? Are you hurt?"
   - Maintain a calm voice and affect.
   - Think about what you need to know right now. Is it actually important to learn exactly what happened in the moment? If you don't ask "what happened," your child may remain calmer. Depending on the child and the situation, you may choose to ask your child about it later instead.
   - In this case, the parent made assumptions in the way that they ask their questions. "What did you break?" puts the child on the defensive and causes stress. Also, the parent *knows* something broke and *knows* it was probably caused by the child without asking any questions at all. Many of the questions are unnecessary and only serve to agitate the child.

3. How might those different responses affect the child's reaction?

   PROMPT:

   - Avoiding asking "what happened" could decrease the child's stress. He doesn't have to recall information, nor does he have to worry that the answer to that question will get him in trouble.
   - He feels safer and more secure, so he's less likely to get upset.
   - He may be better able to have a future conversation about how to avoid breaking any windows (this depends on the child's individual needs).

4. How could the parent help the child move forward?

   PROMPT: The ball did break the window. Acknowledge that as true as you move forward. "Balls can break windows. You're right about that. Let's play with it outside next time."

5. How could the parent avoid showing their frustrations to their child at that moment?

   PROMPT: The window's broken, it'll take money and time to fix it, and they've told their child a million times not to play ball in the house. The parent is allowed to be frustrated!

   What's critical, though, is that we do everything we can to avoid taking out frustrations on the child. Remember any memory or thinking challenges he may have as a result of brain injury or trauma and that he's looking to you for safety in a scary moment.

Scenario #2

You get a call from your child's school because she is yelling and throwing rocks at a teacher. When you arrive at the school, the teacher says that your child wouldn't come back to the classroom after recess. Your child insists that the teacher had told her at the beginning of recess that she could stay outside and didn't have to come inside with the other kids. The teacher says this didn't happen, and when she told your child so, the child started screaming and throwing rocks.

1. How would you handle this? What approach would you take with school staff? What approach would you take with your child?

   CONTEXT: Remember, the child really feels like she's telling the truth. Confabulation is unintentional and children do not know they are doing it. In this scenario, the child already knows she's in trouble at school and may not understand why. She feels like something she was promised was taken from her, and her behavior has already gotten worse. In this moment, it's important for her to know that her parent/caregiver believes her and can empathize with her situation. It's not important at this moment to explain to her that her version of events didn't happen.

2. How can we advocate for our kids in settings like this (school, camp, social activities, etc.) where they can get in serious trouble for lying when they are actually confabulating?

3. How can we prepare other adults so that they understand confabulation and how to handle it?

4. How can we help children prevent cases like this from happening? What tools can we give them to use in moments when other people don't believe their version of events?

   PROMPT: The goal is to prevent behavior from getting worse—*not* to prevent children from confabulating, which is not possible.

   - Put a plan in place for the next time they aren't believed. Can the child call you or talk to another trusted adult? Plans may be different for different settings.
   - Reducing anxiety improves thinking. Give them stress-reducing ideas that they can use in the future.

Over time, once trust is built and the child knows you believe them, you can help them understand that *everyone's* memory is sometimes unreliable and it's important for *everyone* to question themselves sometimes.

More resources for parent group leaders

AdoptUSKids offers tip sheets and tools to help parent group leaders facilitate discussions and manage their groups. You can find these resources at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders*
- *Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders*

Tools

- *Self-Care Activities for Your Support Group*
- *Discussion Guide: Understanding Childhood Grief and Loss*
- *Discussion Guide: Understanding Parental Grief and Loss*

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Participant Handout: Lying, Confabulation, and Distorted Thinking

Understanding confabulation

When someone lies to you—especially someone close to you—it can elicit a strong emotional response. It's frustrating and can leave you feeling tricked or betrayed. But when is lying not really lying? This handout will help you recognize behavior in your child that looks a lot like lying, but is actually a type of confused thinking called confabulation.

Confabulation is the brain's attempt to fill in the gaps of a story due to memory or understanding challenges. Everyone's brain confabulates, though those with brain differences due to fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), trauma experiences, or other brain injuries are more likely to experience it. Confabulation is done unconsciously, with no bad intent: it is the brain trying to make sense of an experience in spite of missing information.

Anxiety's role in confabulation

When faced with questions about a particular event, a person with a brain challenge or memory issue is likely to feel anxious about the gaps in their memory. That anxiety acts like fuel for confabulation, as the brain tries to retrieve correct information about what happened. The more emotion associated with the event—and the more pressure put on them to remember what they cannot—the more anxious they become, and the more likely they are to confabulate. Children may feel anxious in many different cases, such as when they need attention, when they think they are in trouble, or when feeling awkward in social situations. These are all times in which children may confabulate.

Cognitive distortions

Our memory can also be affected by past experiences or perceptions. The beliefs we hold about particular people, places, and events influence the way we remember things. For example, if a child receives a compliment from a teacher who he believes doesn't like him, he may hear a positive comment and assume negative intent. He then locks the memory in with the idea that his brain included—that his teacher was mean to him. If we aren't careful, it can be easy to treat our children's cognitive distortions as if they are lies.

Lying as a learned coping skill

We all may consciously lie for a number of reasons. It may be to avoid punishment, deflect blame, or avoid feeling guilt or shame. Most often, as we grow, we learn that lying is not socially acceptable and it causes people to distrust us.

For many children who have experienced trauma, loss, abuse, or neglect, lying becomes a critical skill they need to survive. It can take a very long time for them to unlearn this skill. Consistently calm and nonjudgmental responses to lying behaviors from us are incredibly important to our children's success.

Learn more

Oregon Behavior Consultation offers a brief video, *Confabulation: When Lying Isn't Lying*, available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJI8XN5EEC4&t=9s.

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