

## Lying

Your daughter tells you she didn't touch the dish, even though you watched her drop and break it. Or your son is caught with cookie-crumbled hands just leaving the cookie jar, yet insists he took no cookies.

A bit unsettling to parents? Yes. The end of innocence? Maybe. A predictor of future immoral conduct? Not at all. It's just typical behavior.

Young children lie for a number of reasons:

- ▶ To make themselves look better in the eyes of others because they don't feel good about themselves.
- ▶ To avoid facing the consequences of their wrongdoing.
- ▶ Faulty memory--when Kyle grabs a truck from Boris, he may already have forgotten that he grabbed it in the first place.
- ▶ Difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy.

You may be upset or even embarrassed to find your child is lying. And while lying should be discouraged, most children tend to lie at one time or another. When a child feels the need to lie, it can tell parents important information about the child. Try to understand the motivation behind a lie.

Children are less likely to lie if they feel their parents love them, even if their parents don't always approve of their behavior. It's important for parents to separate the deed from the doer and convey unconditional love.

Since a young child's fibs are usually not malicious or calculated, they are probably not a cause for concern.

Assuming a child lives in an atmosphere of honesty and trust, the fibbing stage will usually end. In the meantime, deal with untruths and nurture the development of honesty.

- ▶ Don't make it easy for your child to tell an untruth. Don't ask, "Did you....?" If you know the answer is yes, say instead, "I know that you...."
- ▶ Make it easy to tell the truth. If you say, "Something happened to this cup of juice. How did it get on the floor? I wonder...." You stand a much better chance of securing a confession than if you accuse. "Look at what you did—you spilled your juice again!" is more likely to elicit an indignant, "I did not!"
- ▶ Give your child the opportunity to tell the truth. When you suspect your child is lying, ask, "Do you think I believe you right now?" Or "Do you think I might be struggling to believe you right now?"
- ▶ Make telling the truth pay off. If your preschooler admits to coloring on the family room wall and you react with rage, it's easy to see how the child might be discouraged from admitting future misdeeds. If, on the other hand, you show appreciation for honesty ("I like when you tell me the truth."), the child is more apt to be truthful. Of course, even when misdeeds are confessed, the appropriate disciplinary action still needs to be taken. For example, the penalty for coloring on the wall might be to help scrub off the drawing.

- ▶ Help your child see the whole truth. Often a child will remember only part of what happened. “Sam hit me,” may be the truth, but not the whole truth. Your child may have pinched Sam first. Use gentle prodding to coax your child to the full truth.
- ▶ Don’t force your child to lie. Too much pressure or punishment that is too severe can lead a child to lie in order to avoid extremely unpleasant consequences.
- ▶ Leave the grilling to the detectives. If you don’t get a spontaneous confession, don’t give the third degree. Insisting on an admission of guilt is unnecessary. If there is punishment due, impose it. If you don’t know for sure that your child is guilty, don’t press it.
- ▶ Connect what the child says to reality. When a child tells you about the elephant that is bigger than a house, talk to him about how big the elephant really was. Tolerate an inexact match between what a child says and what is real. Saying something like, “It seemed to be about that big to you, didn’t it?” is effective.
- ▶ Call attention to the real world. When young children tell “tall tales,” listen and enjoy their imagination. Avoid punishing or humiliating the child. Let the child know, however, that you know the story is made up. Say something like, “You sure can tell exciting stories.”
- ▶ Trust your child. Truth and trust are inseparable: if you are truthful, you will be trusted; and if you are trusted, you will be truthful. Explain that when people tell the truth, other people trust them and believe what they say. Tell the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* to show the connection between truth and trust.
- ▶ Make honesty your policy. Your example is the most powerful teacher. Be truthful in all your dealings—large and small. Don’t tell your child that getting a shot won’t hurt, when you know it may. Don’t tell the ticket taker your five year old is three to pay a reduced fare. Don’t tell the neighbor you have no idea who trampled her flowerbed when you know your dog is the guilty party. Even “little white lies” can compromise a child’s understanding of the value of honesty. If

you fib, and your child catches you at it, admit that you made a mistake. That way your child will feel free to own up in a similar situation.

The common solution to lying is to make the punishment for lying more severe than all other punishments. Unfortunately, this solution builds up a more intense and punitive environment. It is far wiser to foster honesty than to suppress dishonesty.

### **Imaginary Friends**

Your preschooler may invent the imaginary playmate. Often parents are called upon to feed, cloth, and otherwise adopt the make-believe friend. This behavior is common with some children and nothing to be alarmed about.

Often imaginary “friends” are invented to take the sting out of reaping the consequences for something done by the child. In the case of cookies eaten before lunchtime, for example, the child may blame her “friend” for lifting the cookies. A parental response of, “You tell your friend we don’t eat cookies before lunchtime in this house,” may be sufficient and the parent doesn’t have to get upset with the child.

At other times a child may blame something on the imaginary friend because the parental standards for appropriate behavior are too high. The child is simply trying to tell the parent he can’t live up to this standard.

### **Sources:**

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