

How to Use: Real Stuff for Real People

The number one thing you as a parent can do to stop your child from getting into the habit of lying is to never ask a question to which you already know the answer. This recommendation is valid whether your child is two years old or twenty-two. Asking that kind of question sets the child up to deceive and runs counter to good parenting. So rather than asking a child whose face is smeared with chocolate, "I told you not to eat the cookie. Did you eat the cookie?" it is better to state what you know has happened; "I know you ate the cookie even though I said it was not okay." Then you are prepared to administer a consequence or

teach a principle without having compounded the situation (and frustrating yourself more) by setting up your child to lie.

One way for parents of young children to promote telling the truth is to say, "Tell me what happened." This is not something to use only when things go wrong; it is also a way parents can encourage truth telling in general. For example, have your child tell what happened after he has been to the zoo or to Grandma's. If you are not getting all the information you think you need, you can say, "There is some part of this story I'm not getting. Is that all that happened or is there something missing?" Keep going (without reenacting the Spanish Inquisition) until you get a coherent story.

Cinda Morgan, LCSW, is Clinical Director of Wellspring Child & Family Counseling Center and Associate Instructor at Westminster College.

Our Mission

We awaken and uncover the inherent wellness in children and parents through sharing relevant strategies, information, and skills, empowering all to nurture healthy relationships. We value each child and believe each family is worthy of our best efforts.

References

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The Truth About Lying:

How It All Begins

By Cinda Morgan, LCSW

Most parents will tell you that one of their main goals as a parent is to raise a child who is responsible and trustworthy—that means, among other things, a child who tells the truth. We want a child like young George Washington, who, when confronted by his unhappy father about the chopped-down cherry tree, replied, "I cannot tell a lie." (Interestingly, it seems that this whole story is apocryphal, or in more blunt terms, a lie.) The truth is that children *can* and *do* tell lies. It is a normal and natural part of development. Therefore, it is important for parents to understand that being truthful is not just a character trait; it is also a skill and one that must be learned. However, teaching this skill can be a bit tricky because it is not as clear-cut as something like toilet training.

Is That a Lie?

The first step in teaching truth-telling is to understand what a lie is and what the truth is. Most

people, even preschoolers, agree that in order for something to be classified as a lie, there must be the intent to deceive. One study found that "many 4- and 5-year-olds and even a considerable number of 3-year-olds can often determine that a lie is based on a deliberate distortion of secret knowledge, whereas a mistake is based on a lack of knowledge that a [person] falsely believes to be true."¹

Because the person's intent is a critical factor in whether he or she is telling a lie, many child experts do not call a deception a "lie" until after age six, when a child's cognitive understanding is more developed. It is important for parents to remember that most children under six can't be counted on to maintain a rule in the moment of a strong desire.

Some parents worry when their young child's version of what happened starts getting mixed with colorful, fanciful tidbits. With a young child (and with older children as well),

wishes and imagination can get in the way of what is real. The tendency toward fantasy is a natural, healthy quality in children. It is one of the best parts of childhood. It is not helpful and may be hurtful for a parent to verbally pounce on a child with the label of “lying” when the child is in fantasy mode. A better response is to simply say, “I bet you wish that would happen,” “That sounds like a wish,” “You have a great imagination,” or “Wouldn’t that be so fun?” Another way to respond is to exaggerate the fantasy in a playful manner. For example, if a child says, “I have a pet pig” (and you know that he does not have one), you might say, “What if you had a pet elephant? Where would you keep that? How would you keep it quiet so the neighbors wouldn’t get mad?” Joining the child in his fantasy signals to the child that you have entered his world and that you both are in fantasyland, not “reality” land, and that fantasyland is an okay place to be.

Fear is often at the root of the lying or deceiving done by children (and adults!).² But in young children, usually their denial of wrongdoing has less to do with the intent to deceive and more to do with their desire to please. For example, if a parent sees her toddler with a chocolate-smear

ed mouth and asks sternly, “Did you eat a cookie?” the child will answer, “No!” The child does not really mean to lie but wants to avoid the disapproval of the parent. Most children genuinely seek to please their parents. In fact, children of all ages often fear their parents’ anger more than the punishment their parents might give.

Hooray for Lying—a Developmental Milestone

Parents who first discover that their young child has lied might feel shocked, angry, and worried. Certainly, lying ought to concern parents. But when a young child tells a lie, it is helpful for parents to remind themselves that it is not as much a crisis of morality as it is a signal of an important emerging developmental milestone. It might be a bit much to say that it is cause for celebration when a child tells his first lie, but it does show that the child is maturing cognitively. Lying demonstrates that a child is acquiring what child development specialists call “theory of mind.” In other words, the child understands that what is in the parent’s mind, what she is thinking, is different from what is in his mind.³ This cognitive ability is also what allows a child to have empathy, to see someone

else’s perspective, and to be more independent.

Research has shown that deception starts in children between two and three years of age and that there is a marked increase between three and five years of age in a child’s use and understanding of deceptive strategies.^{4,5} Parents’ reports, as well as experiments and naturalistic observations, have long shown that young children frequently deny a misdemeanor or wrongdoing.⁶ For example, one study seated a number of two- and three-year-old children in an empty room. The researcher told them not to peek at a toy that was on the table behind them and then left the room for five minutes. Ninety percent of the children looked at the toy, and about two-thirds of them—a majority—concealed their peeking. One-third of those who concealed their peeking denied the wrongdoing outright by saying that they did not peek, while the other third concealed their misdemeanor by pretending not to hear the question and not answering.⁷ When children are nearing age five, they realize to a greater degree that their parents don’t know everything and that their parents don’t know what they are thinking. Another study involved preschool children who were individually left in a room

with a guitar and told not touch it. Half did touch the guitar. Of these children, only 18% of the preschoolers acknowledged touching a guitar. The others denied doing anything wrong.⁸

The above research findings will sound familiar to parents of preschoolers and hopefully will encourage them to address their child’s deception without becoming concerned that the child will end up in jail someday. Even though the cognitive abilities that support lying grow and develop during the preschool years, children are generally truthful, especially when parents do not inadvertently promote lying. Parents actually teach a form of lying or denying when they ask their child if he did something wrong when they already know that he did. As the studies show, the majority of children will deny wrongdoing.

Remember...

- Young children rarely lie to deceive; instead, they want your anger to stop.
- A child’s “lies” are often part of the normal process of learning what is true and real.
- Never ask a question to which you know the answer in an effort to “catch” your child in a lie.

Next Issue: The Truth About Lying: How Parents Encourage and Discourage Truth Telling in Children