

How to Use: Real Stuff for Real People

When trying to correct a child's lying behavior using the suggestions listed above, it is important to carefully select the setting for these discussions. Avoid sitting directly in front of the child (and demanding eye contact) when discussing his lying behavior-or any negative behavior. This is a confrontational stance. It sends a message of a "show down" with one person being the winner and the other ending up the loser. Instead, sit or walk side-by-side which sends a nonverbal message that you are an ally with your child. The ideal settings are taking a ride in the car together to get a soft ice cream cone or walking together to and

from the local convenience store for a soda. Not only are these settings more "neutral," they signal to your child that you're not rushed and that you want to hear what's on his mind. In these settings the natural tensions surrounding such a discussion are eased and real sharing often occurs. Some parents may be worried about "rewarding" their child if these serious discussions about lying are accompanied by a soda or ice cream. If your child runs home and says, "I lied, let's go get an ice cream cone," that fear may be justified. However, food can symbolize the nurturing care of the parent and can also demonstrate that the parent is not just the "punisher" but also a provider of good times and good things.

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.

Next Issue: *The Truth About Lying: When Lying Seems as Natural as Breathing*

Our Vision

Within each of us is the capacity to achieve emotional health and happiness.

Special thanks to Nancy Reiser and Sue Buehner for their consultation about clinical applications and suggestions for parents in this issue.

The Truth About Lying: *When Lying Signals a Bigger Problem*

By Cinda Morgan, LCSW

Most lies are about what happened or didn't happen—they involve what can be observed or what a camera would capture. Therefore, most of the time parents need to be more concerned about what happened rather than "Is that a lie or the truth?" Lying is usually a byproduct of a child's fear and is like an obstacle that gets in the way of solving the issue at hand. When the truth is known, the dilemma can be solved; until then, lying is a smokescreen that obscures the real difficulty. When parents make this kind of shift in their view of lying, they are less likely to overact to a lie—which often increases lying—and are able to stay more focused on the concern that prompted the lying. This type of lying, which usually involves a minor offense, is what parents generally encounter.

However, some children habitually lie. Some will continually tell you (or anyone else) what they think you want to hear regardless of whether it is true. Other older children enjoy telling elaborate but believable stories about themselves. Some are not troubled by their lying

and its effects, and some children lie to cover another major problem such as drug use. In these instances, lying is the tip of the iceberg and signals there is a bigger problem underneath the lying behavior.

More Serious Reasons for Lying

1. Habit. When lying seems to be a habit, just addressing the lying behavior is not enough. In these instances the child isn't actually deciding again and again, "I'm going to lie," but the behavior has become habitual. One sign of this is when a child lies for no apparent gain. It is helpful for parents to figure out why the lying is happening. Some reasons listed below and in the two previous issues of this newsletter may provide clues.

2. Pleaser. Some children are more interested and motivated to please you or make you happy than in reporting what actually happened or how they actually feel. This is a concern because it points to lack of a sense of self. A sense of self is the internal strength that allows a child to know himself and guide himself

from the inside and not merely react or relying solely on others for direction. There is probably a deep fear in the child that he will lose the relationship which would also feel like a loss of self. In some way the child has come to believe that love is conditional. He then generalizes this belief and reacts as a pleaser in other relationships.

3. Lying as Image Control. There is also a lack of a sense of self when children lie in order to create a positive (and in some instances a negative or “tough guy”) image of themselves. More than an “in the moment I want to look better” lie, this kind of lying is about creating a façade. This child in some way feels that he is not “enough” and therefore needs to make more of himself in order to maintain relationships or value.

4. Lying as a Defense against the Pain of the Truth. The truth can be raw and painful. There may be reasons that the truth is unbearable to a child. In these instances, children lie to protect themselves. For example, a child may say, “I have lots of friends” when the teacher has reported that he doesn’t play with anyone at school.

5. Lying as a Defensive or Offensive Weapon. Lying may be used as a weapon in various ways, but the common feature of this kind of lying is seeking power. Some children who use lying as a weapon

may not be trying to deliberately hurt another person, but they need to win at all costs and will lie in order to get what they want. The root of this lying is usually connected to a child’s early exposure to someone who was absolutely fixed on having things a certain way and the child was constantly obligated to conform. A few children tell lies to protect themselves at the expense of someone else and use lying as a shield or a defensive weapon. The most serious and rare form of lying is when a child lies to intentionally hurt someone else. This is when lying is used to attack. Parents may find suggestions in this newsletter and the next one helpful. However, if children persistently use lying as a weapon, professional help is advised.

Promoting Truth-telling

1. Illustrate Ways to Tell the Truth and Get Needs Met. Some simple things can go a long way in helping a child who lies for the more serious reasons listed above. For example, a parent can discuss in a neutral tone (after the parent has gotten rid of all hints of anger) the number of times or the ways he or she knows a child has lied. But then put a twist in the discussion by talking about ways the child could have told the truth and what would have been saved or gained from truth-telling. Sometimes a child

who gets in the habit of lying lacks the tools for telling the truth. Some children worry that a valid need or desire will be denied and so they impulsively act to get the need met. These children need to be taught that legitimate needs can be legitimately met. The twist here for parents is to point out how the child could have gotten his needs met in an appropriate way. For example, a parent might say, “That is a really good thing to want. Let’s figure out how you can get it without trouble.”

2. Connect Lying to Feelings. Some children who lie quite a bit might not know how they feel or may have a harder time with connecting to how they feel. Therefore, it is valuable for parents to assist a child in recognizing his feelings. For example, a parent could say, “As the days went by, you must have been more worried about what would happen when I found out.” For a child who is very cut off from his feelings, a parent might need to be the bridge that joins the child to his feelings. In other words, you may have to express a feeling about the lying from inside yourself.

3. Allow Second Chances. Parents can give their child more than one opportunity to tell the truth. If he doesn’t do it, a parent can connect him to the feeling and then leave the door open with “You can come back and tell me what really happened whenever you are ready.” This can be a standing invitation or

it can be something that parents offer after the child’s anxiety around being caught has decreased. The key for parents is not to get too invested in their child confessing. If the child doesn’t utilize the additional opportunity for telling what happened, move forward by providing a natural consequence for the lying behavior until trust is reestablished. A natural consequence usually involves changing the parameters of a child’s freedom or responsibility, such as the parent and teacher communicating directly about what assignments are missing.

4. Enhance a Child’s Sense of Self. Although it may not yield immediate results in a child’s truth-telling, increasing his sense of self will build or rebuild the underpinnings he needs to consult himself and tap into his inner strength in difficult moments. Building a sense of self involves a parent accepting as valid a response or thought or action that authentically comes from within the child. In short, it develops when a parent notices and makes a comment without judging it.

Remember...

- When lying signals something more serious, don’t get stuck in punishing the lie.
- It is a parent’s job to teach children that legitimate needs can be legitimately met.
- Enhancing a child’s sense of self is a long-term approach to curbing lying.