

Understand Children's Lying

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Our culture is laced with lies. Movies, TV shows, advertising and the rest of us typically exaggerate, twist facts, create stories, and deny the truth.

How many of us have answered "Fine, thank you," when we're asked on a particularly bad day? How many of us have told a lie because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings? How many of us have said to a phone solicitor "I am busy"? How many of us have insisted that our child say, "I'm sorry," whether she felt remorse or not? How many of us have participated in fantasies such as the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Fibbing and honesty are both learned in the family.

Children under five naturally live in a world where fantasy and reality are blurred. At this developmental time, parents can delight in a preschooler's imagination with a puppet, Santa Claus, an imaginary friend or telling an impossible tale. However, the school aged child and adolescent may lie for other reasons including poor adult modeling, habit of convenience or fear of punishment.

Poor Modeling:

Children are more apt to copy a parent's behaviour than follow directions. Keep your promises. Share times when it was hard for you to tell the truth but you did anyway. Describe a time you lied and its long term effects. Be honest with your own feelings, "I feel some doubt about believing you. I'm sensing you are not feeling safe to tell me the truth." Focus on solutions rather than who is to blame. Demonstrate calmness and acceptance around mistakes. "Making mistakes is an opportunity to learn. What will you do next time?"

Habit of Convenience:

Some children discover that lying can help avoid doing chores or going to school – the old "I'm too sick to go to school" syndrome. Lying may create privacy and distance or alternatively extra attention through an exaggerated tale. It is important to discover the underlying reason for the lie and help the child succeed by a truthful route. Give your child a voice to speak her feelings. "I hate emptying the dishwasher!" gives both parent and child the opportunity to negotiate a workable solution. Ask if you can enter a child's room and note if your child requires more alone and down time. Then give it.

Fear of Punishment:

In the classic *Your Child's Self-Esteem*, Dorothy Corkille Briggs writes "Genuine lies are frequently born of fear of punishment: Harsh reprisals only teach skill in lying. Whenever lying is excessive, examine the climate around your child. Check your expectations. Look to your methods of discipline. Lies are symptomatic and causes need to be removed." A child will lie to avoid an emotional parental outburst. She may first lie to avoid a punishment and then it becomes a "useful" habit -- following the path of least resistance and pain. A pattern of increased distrust and punishment on a parent's part will probably escalate a child's lying. Discover the source of fear and follow some of the previously mentioned suggestions.

Demonstrate as much love and acceptance as you can. Never call your child a liar. She might live up to your declaration.

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