

# Lying

By Carolyn Webster-Stratton Ph.D.

*John walks into the kitchen and sees a broken plate on the floor. He says to his daughter, "Jane, did you break that?" She shakes her head. "No, I didn't. Tommy did." The following day Jane, who has been having problems at school, comes home from school and says to her father "I got all As today, but I lost my papers on the way home." John bristles. How, he wonders can he get his daughter to tell the truth?*

**A**s parents we become upset when our children are dishonest because we place a high value on honesty.

Moreover, we may be unsure about how to handle lying. We may vacillate between lecturing and demanding confessions to ignoring the problem altogether with the hope that it won't happen again. Neither of these approaches is effective. First, we need to look at why lying occurs and then we must learn productive ways to deal with it.

## Why children lie

All children lie from time to time. At first, they may tell exploratory lies to test the limits of what they can get away with and to see what happens if they break rules. In a sense this is a step towards independence.

Another type of lie deliberately attempts to conceal in order to avoid punishment. Teenagers are frequently guilty of this. They often neglect to tell us important details like what they were doing and who they were with. A third type is a whopper that involves extreme bragging or exaggeration about a family member or an experience. The fantasy lie, a fourth type, is when children say that an imaginary friend broke something or caused the problem.

Young children have particular difficulty separating fantasy from reality, and they are more likely to exaggerate, deny or engage in wishful thinking. School-age children are more apt to tell deliberate

lies to avoid trouble or gain an advantage.

## What to do

**1. Don't panic.** The first step is to respond calmly.

Like any other common behavior problem, lying represents another opportunity to help children learn. Avoid trying to scare or force a confession because most people, even adults, will lie when asked to incriminate themselves.

If you know one of your children broke a plate, do not ask, "Did you break it?" This invites the child to lie. Instead, state matter-of-factly, "I see you broke a plate. What should we do about that?"

Avoid lectures, moralizing and criticism. Negative attention is likely to lead to power struggles and may encourage defensiveness, rebellion and more lying. Sometimes it's difficult to keep calm with teenagers who lie because they are old enough to know the rules, whereas younger children do not. However, remaining calm is important with children of all ages who lie.

**2. Confront your child in a positive way.** If your youngster tells a story about something that isn't true, calmly respond that you know it is made-up. For instance, if she says, "My dad is getting me a dog." You might say, "I know you really want a dog and wish you could get one, so you were imagining your own dog." Or, if your son says, "A ghost

came in and messed up my room," you might respond, "That's an interesting made-up story. Now tell me what the true story is."

With an older child who lies to avoid punishment or to conceal something, respond with, "I know that isn't true. It doesn't help to lie. Let's see how we can solve this problem." Point out the truth in a way that doesn't make your child feel defensive. Never call your child a liar, for such a label damages self-esteem.

**3. Try to understand the reasons for the lie.** It is important to assess why your children feel the need to lie. For instance, sometimes they tell a series of whoppers such as "I got all As" or "I'm the best hitter on the team" when, in fact, they are having problems at school or feel clumsy at baseball. Ask yourself whether they are under too much pressure from you or their peers and lying helps them to compensate for feeling inadequate.

You can help such a self-image problem by explaining, "I know you are working really hard on your homework and it's difficult for you. I'll spend some extra time helping you tonight if you like." Or, "I know how much you would like to be better at baseball. Let's practice batting after dinner."

If lies are told to avoid punishment, be sure that your discipline is not so feared or painful that your child would rather not tell the truth than get in trouble. Consequences should be enforced for lying and for the misbehavior that led to it. However, remember to use consequences to teach, not to inflict physical or emotional pain.

Often children lie because they do not want to disappoint us. They may feel it will be impossible to ever regain our trust. It may be helpful to let them know that telling a lie is unacceptable and will

be dealt with appropriately, however, over time, trust can be restored.

**4. Follow through with discipline when appropriate.** When school-age children do not tell the truth in a deliberate attempt to cover up some problem, they should be held accountable for the lie and the misdeed. This may result in a double punishment or the loss of two privileges. For instance, Lois says to her 8-year-old son: "Tyler, I want you to be honest with me. If I discover that you've done something wrong and lied about it, the punishment will be twice what it would have been if you'd told me the truth. If you tell the truth, I will be proud of you. For example, let's say you broke a window and you told me about it. I would be proud of you for telling the truth and we would probably work out an arrangement for you to pay for the window. But if you broke a window and lied about it, you would have two punishments. You would have to pay for replacing the window and lose one privilege for lying, such as no television for a few nights."

This approach helps children understand that the next time they do something wrong, they will receive less punishment if they tell the truth rather than risk a lie. It also emphasizes how strongly you value honesty. Remember, punishment should not be too severe or they may learn to lie as a means of self-protection.

**5. Model honesty.** Adults sometimes model dishonesty by telling white lies. For example, a father may say, "Let's tell Mommy that this cost \$10," when it really cost \$40. Or a mother may tell her child who is answering the phone, "If that is Mary, tell her I'm not home." Establish the same standards of honesty for yourself that you set for your children.

## **6. Avoid misplaced honesty.**

Misplaced honesty says truthful things that are better left unsaid. For instance, a child telling another child, "You're a lousy soccer player" or "Your grandma is fat and ugly" only serves to hurt feelings. As your children grow old enough to understand, explain that, although such things are true, it is better not to say them.

## **7. Praise and reward honesty.**

When possible, praise your children for being honest about their mistakes and difficulties. Teach them how honesty helps and how dishonesty is destructive to themselves and others. Remind them of the boy who "cried wolf" so often that no one believed him when he was really in trouble.

If one of your children has a problem with frequent lying, it may help to set up a reinforcement program where he or she gets a token or coupon for each day without lying. These can then be traded for various rewards such as games, treats, special privileges or extra time with you. ■

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### **RECOMMENDED READING**

■ **When Good Kids Do Bad Things**, by Katherine Gordy Levine, (Pocket Books, 1991).

■ **Why Kids Lie, How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness**, by Paul Ekman, Ph.D., (Penguin Books, 1989).

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