

Lying and Dishonesty

One evening I found a large cup of urine in the bathtub. Surprised, I asked my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Jessica, if she knew anything about it. She looked at me oddly and quickly assured me that she did not know what I was talking about. Stories of men with strange fetishes who sneak into houses and perform bizarre acts ran through my head. How could a cup of urine have ended up in my bathtub? Embarrassed, I called my brother at work. He was the only other person living in the house at the time. “Uhm, uh, Dave, did you, ah, well, uhm, pee in a cup and uhm, leave it in the bathtub?” Of course not.

I looked at my little girl again and considered the possibility that she would have done such a thing. Didn't seem likely. And she had never lied to me before. Feeling pretty creeped out, I called the police and explained to them that I thought an intruder had been in our home and peed in a cup in the bathtub. They told me that I should leave the house in case the intruder was still there and stand out front and wait for a police cruiser to show up. As I hung up the phone, I noticed my daughter was crying. “I peed in the cup.” “Why?” “Aunt Susan told me it was bad to pee in the bathtub, so I peed in the cup.” So, my little Jessica had learned to lie!

Most parents will tell you that their children lie. In many ways, lying is a normal part of a child's development. Children may lie for a multitude of reasons, some of them even acceptable.

However, lying does still concern parents, and sometimes it should. Problem lying may cause difficulties for children at school and with their friends, as well as disrupt family life and lay the groundwork for further problems in adulthood.

Some children will develop a greater propensity to lie than others. Children and adolescents who live in environments where they often witness others lie, or where they feel they must lie to protect themselves from harm, are more likely to lie than other children. Lying may also be affected to some degree by personality. Finally, age has a lot to do with the types of lies that a child or adolescent may tell.

Lying is not usually a serious problem unless it becomes habitual or compulsive. Like many problems, addressing lying early may be the most effective way of preventing it from becoming a more serious concern.

Why Do Children Lie?

Children lie for different reasons at different ages. Very young children may not yet be able to always distinguish fantasy from reality. Three-year-old Mikey's fantastic story about the toy that flies around his room is not actually an attempt to deceive. More likely, Mikey has a very active imagination and cannot always tell the difference between what he imagined and what really happened. Children this age may also appear to lie because they have honestly forgotten things.

When a 2 year-old is accused of putting a roll of toilet paper in the toilet and she claims she didn't do it, she may simply not remember doing it, especially if it wasn't discovered for several hours.

Around the age of 5 or 6 children start to develop a more consistent understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality and are less likely to insist on the truth of their imaginings. Around this age, a child begins to develop a conscience and understand that certain behaviors may disappoint his or her parents. He or she may also begin to experience feelings of guilt associated with misdeeds. For the first time, the child may construct a lie in an attempt to avoid punishment and/or disapproval. Children this age may also tell fibs or exaggerate extensively in order to get their parents' attention.

By the age of 7 or 8, most children have learned to tell the difference between fantasy and reality and can usually be counted on to tell the truth. The most common reasons for children to lie at this age are to avoid being punished, or to avoid doing something unpleasant like emptying the trash. Children may also begin to grasp the concept of polite social lying around this age. They may pretend to like the knitted socks that Grandma gave them for their birthday, or compliment a friend's new haircut even though they think it looks ridiculous. Altruistic lies to protect others from harm may be told as well. Lies at this age may also be a cry for help. Children who are very fearful of disappointing their parents and are feeling overwhelmed by school or some other area of their lives, may lie in an attempt to deal with this pressure.

By adolescence, lying begins to take on a new significance and parents are likely to become more alarmed by the lies their adolescents tell. Adolescents clearly understand the difference between fantasy and reality and are aware of the possible consequences of telling lies. They have also become better at it! However, not all lies that an adolescent tells should be taken as a sign that he or she is up to something dangerous or forbidden. Adolescents may lie simply to protect their privacy, to establish their independence, to avoid embarrassment, or to spare another's feelings. Of course, they may also lie to avoid punishment or doing chores, or to try to get something that they think they may not be able to get by telling the truth.

What Can Parents Do?

The first thing you can do is to teach honesty in the home and be aware of your own standards for lying. In some homes polite social lies are more acceptable than in others. Some parents may inadvertently promote lying by asking their children to lie about their age, or tell a caller that Mom or Dad isn't home. Be aware that children will have a very difficult time seeing the difference between these types of lies and lies they may tell to you. Modeling honest behavior in the home as well as setting up an environment in which it is easy to be truthful may be two of the strongest lie prevention strategies. Here are a few tips:

- Whenever possible, keep your word. Always explain and apologize if you must break a promise.
- If you do find yourself lying in front of your child, be sure to talk about it with him or her and explain your reasons and values surrounding the lie. If you made a mistake by telling a lie, admit it.
- Do not expect young children to understand the subtle differences between "white lies" and more serious lies.

- Do not tell your children lies to promote compliance (e.g., telling them that shots won't hurt or that going to the dentist will be fun).
 - Praise truth-telling, especially when it was likely difficult to do.
- Assume family members are telling the truth unless you have reason to suspect otherwise.
- Don't overburden your child with too many rules and expectations. The more rules there are, the more likely they are to get broken, and the more likely the child may feel the need to lie to avoid punishment.
- Involve your children in developing the rules. It is easier to abide by a rule that you had some role in developing.

Even children raised in the most truthful and honest of households will still lie on occasion. When this happens, it is important to remain calm and remember that the lie is not a personal attack, so don't take it as such or give into anger. Review the reasons why a child might lie at any given age and respond accordingly.

- Try to discover the reason why the child is lying. What a child is trying to hide by lying may be much more important than the lie itself.
- Tell your child that you love her, even when she lies. She's not a bad child; rather, it's just her behavior that's unacceptable.
 - Make sure any consequences for lying are kept separate from the consequences for whatever the lie was designed to conceal. And be careful not to overreact. Remember that children may lie to avoid punishment. Excessive or irrational punishments may backfire. The greater the fear of punishment, the less likely your child is going to "fess up" the next time.
- Make it very easy for your child to tell the truth and give him a chance to confess. Don't stage a courtroom drama and try to force a confession.
- If your child tells tall tales or lies to get your attention, don't accuse the child of being a liar, but don't pretend like you're not aware of it, either. Make it clear that you don't believe that he ran a mile in less than three minutes, but that you love him anyway. If your child tells a tall tale to someone else and you witness it, don't point it out in front of the other person. Wait until you are alone with your child to discuss it.
- Don't accuse. "I wonder how this milk got spilled -- I wish someone would clean it up," is more likely to get an honest response than "Sarah, did you spill this milk?"
- Don't try to set your child or adolescent up to tell you a lie when you have discovered the truth. Asking "Where were you Friday night?" when you know Susie was at a party you had forbidden her to attend is a form of dishonesty and deceit – just the thing you are trying to avoid! It also encourages Susie to lie, giving her more practice at the very thing you don't want. Further, this tactic places the emphasis on the lie as opposed to the behavior, which may be the more serious problem. If Susie hadn't gone to the party in the first place, there would be no need to lie.
- Help the child explore the effects that lying has on others and on the child's relationships.
- Fables are a great way to teach values to younger children. The Boy Who Cried "Wolf" may be especially effective.
- Be sure adolescents are given a fair amount of privacy. This will lessen the likelihood that they will lie just to protect what privacy they have.

How Can You Encourage Truthfulness?

As mentioned above, doling out punishment for lying can be risky business. Remember that one of the main motivators for lying is fear of punishment. A lie may feel like the lesser of two evils, and it may improve the chances that the child will get away with whatever transgression they have committed. (And, face it, sometimes they will!) Punishment for lying may reinforce the fear of punishment and increase the likelihood of future lying rather than decrease it. Additionally, while the parent may be trying to give the message “You are being punished because you lied”, the child is more likely thinking “I’m being punished because I got caught.” The child resolves to get better at lying to avoid being caught in the future.

Instead of punishment, consider promoting the natural and/or logical consequences of dishonest behavior. For example, it may be appropriate that a child who has repeatedly lied about getting her homework done be required to bring a note home from her teacher on a daily basis until trust is restored. This consequence makes sense to the child in light of the behavior you are trying to change. Additionally, promoting the natural or logical consequences of dishonest behavior requires the child to take responsibility for his own behavior. Punishment is rarely related to the actual act of lying and is designed to give the message to the child that he or she is bad. Logical or natural consequences are directly related to the problem behavior and do not carry a moral judgment about the child.

Here are few more things to consider when deciding how to deal with a child who has lied:

- Punishing lies that are based on behavior learned by watching significant others is not likely to be effective. You may want to consider trying to change the behavior of the person modeling the dishonest acts.
- It is often more effective to tell children how you really feel about their lie than to punish them for it. An honest statement like “I’m really hurt that you lied to me” is likely to have more impact on future lying than a week without television. Further, emphasizing the effect of the lie on others promotes the development of an internalized sense of morality.
- Don’t make a decision about the consequences of a lie in the heat of the moment. You can let you child know that you are very upset, but that you need time to think about what the consequences should be. However, don’t make your child wait for days in dreaded anticipation as you make your "decision". This is just another form of dishonesty and will not do anything to strengthen the shaken bond of trust between you and your child.
- Make sure that the consequences for lying don’t drag out for so long that your child forgets what brought the consequence on in the first place. A child needs another chance. Be sure that she knows she will get one. However, if the lying is repeated often, it may make sense to extend the length of time before the child is allowed to try again.

When Is Lying a Serious Problem?

Isolated lies here and there don’t usually indicate a serious problem. However, when lying becomes habitual or compulsive, and is used as a major strategy for dealing with difficult

situations there is cause for concern. Chronic lying may be just a bad habit that a child needs help breaking. However, it may also be a sign that the child cannot tell right from wrong. This may especially be the case if your child does not appear to have any remorse about lying. Lying that is accompanied by behaviors such as fighting, stealing, inflicting cruelty, skipping school, or cheating may also be a sign of more serious problems such as conduct disorder or a learning disability. Children with biological conditions such as ADHD may also find it more difficult to control lying behavior. Children may also lie to cover up more serious problems like Substance Abuse. Finally, when older children or adolescents tell tall tales, and overly exaggerate and embellish everyday occurrences, it may signal a serious need for attention. In any of the above cases, seek help from a professional trained to deal with children and/or adolescents.

Other Frequently Asked Questions

1. How young do children learn to lie?

Research suggests that some children are capable of lying in a deliberate attempt to deceive by age four, and perhaps even earlier. However, lying at this age is not likely to be a problem. Talk with your child about the consequences of dishonesty when you realize that he or she has learned to lie.

2. How can I tell if my child is lying?

There are no sure-fire ways to know if someone is lying just by observing them. There may be a few behavioral clues that suggest deceit. Sometimes a clue can be found in what the person says (e.g., the story is too farfetched or inconsistent). Other times you may find a clue in what is not said (e.g., a look of guilt or fear, too much excitement in the telling of the story, or an overly calm telling of what should be an emotional event).

However, as children get older they get better at disguising these little signs. Further, research indicates that most people are fooled by most lies. It is unlikely that parents will consistently know that their child is lying just by watching him or her closely. You can only be absolutely certain that your child is lying if he or she tells you so, or you happen to discover the truth on your own.

3. If my child lies now, will he or she grow up to be dishonest?

In most cases, lying in childhood does not lead to a life of deception. Since all children lie from time to time, and few grow up to be dishonest adults, the odds are pretty good that your child will be fine. However, this does not mean that lying should be brushed off as just a passing stage. Discussing with your child the consequences of lying and dishonesty will help him or to grow into an honest adult.

Intervention Options

In most cases, lying can be dealt with effectively in the home by dedicated parents. However, if you are unable to limit the numbers of lies your child tells or suspect that he or she may be lying compulsively or to cover up a serious problem, you should seek the help of a qualified professional.

Individual counseling – May be helpful for the child who lies habitually or is lying as a cry for attention. Make sure to select a therapist who has experience dealing with children and/or adolescents.

Family counseling – This may be especially useful for families who feel that trust has been seriously damaged, or in cases where a child has learned to lie as a result of watching others. Family therapy may also be critical for families with children who have learned to lie in order to protect themselves from harm.

Group therapy – Children who exaggerate and embellish as a way of getting attention may well benefit from participation in group therapy where they may receive honest feedback in a safe setting about how their peers respond to their tall tales.

Medication – Lying cannot be treated with medication. However, children with ADHD who lie may find it easier to control their lying when properly medicated.

Assessment for a learning disability – Children who are lying in an attempt to cover up difficulties at school may have a learning disability. If you suspect a learning disability, speak to your school about having your child tested.

Potential Resources

- Behavioral health professionals trained to deal with children and adolescents (including psychologists, social workers, counselors, and social workers)
 - School psychologists, counselors, and teachers
 - Your family doctor or pediatrician
 - Your minister, rabbi, bishop, or priest
 - Parent support groups
- Parents Anonymous (this non-profit group may be helpful for parents whose children have learned to lie in order to protect themselves from physical harm)
- Your health insurance company (look for "behavioral health services" or "mental/nervous services" listed in your health benefits booklet)
 - Community information-and-referral services

Authors, in order of contribution:

- [Jeri Samson](#)
- [Beth Keen, Ph.D.](#)

© 2000-2008 Notmykid.org All Rights Reserved.

Related Articles - Children Lying

[Advocating for your child.](#)

When parents or teachers suspect that a child may have an emotional problem, they should seek a comprehensive evaluation by a mental health professional specifically trained to work with children and adolescents.

[Children and lying](#)

Honesty and dishonesty are learned in the home. Parents are often concerned when their child or adolescent lies.

Children Lying Related Web Links

www.parenthoodweb.com - Contains the Children and Lying Fact Sheet from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

webhome.idirect.com/~readon - Dr. Timothy Quek's homepage. This site offers advice on dealing with compulsive lying as well as other topics of interest to parents and families.

www.parentsoup.com - This site contains some good articles on habitual and compulsive lying, as well as advice on how to deal with some specific situations.

Children Related Books and References

[Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness](#)

by Paul Elman, Ph.D.

Children tell a variety of lies, from little white lies to boasting and bragging, to the outright concealing of information, and they do so for a number of different reasons. Dr. Ekman explains what motivates children to lie, how lying changes at different ages, and how a child prepares a

lie. Dr. Ekman tells parents how they can encourage truthfulness in their children in this informative guide.

[When Good Kids Do Bad Things](#)
by Katherine Gordy Levine

[Before It's Too Late: Why Some Kids Get into Trouble and What Parents Can Do About It](#)
by Stanton E. Samenow, Ph.D.

In this newly revised and expanded edition of the classic guide, clinical psychologist Stanton Samenow discusses the difficult subject of "problem children" with compassion, reassurance, and welcome clarity. He offers concerned parents and professionals instructive insight into the personality of...

[The Moral Intelligence of Children](#)
by Robert Coles

Child psychiatrist and Harvard professor Robert Coles has actively dedicated much of his life to exemplifying, teaching, and writing about the moral life. In his wonderful new book, Coles illuminates the ways in which children become moral--or not so moral--adults, drawing on case studies, talks...

[P.E.T.: Parent Effectiveness Training](#)
by Thomas Gordon

Parent Effectiveness Training is a proven method to bring parents and their children together and to show parents how to help their children become mature, healthy, happy, and loving individuals. Hundreds of thousands of parents have completed Dr. Thomas Gordon's P.E.T. training course with tangible...

Children Related Books and References

[Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness](#)
by Paul Elman, Ph.D.

Children tell a variety of lies, from little white lies to boasting and bragging, to the outright concealing of information, and they do so for a number of different reasons. Dr. Ekman explains what motivates children to lie, how lying changes at different ages, and how a child prepares a lie. Dr. Ekman tells parents how they can encourage truthfulness in their children in this informative guide.

[When Good Kids Do Bad Things](#)
by Katherine Gordy Levine

[Before It's Too Late: Why Some Kids Get into Trouble and What Parents Can Do About It](#)
by Stanton E. Samenow, Ph.D.

In this newly revised and expanded edition of the classic guide, clinical psychologist Stanton Samenow discusses the difficult subject of "problem children" with compassion, reassurance, and welcome clarity. He offers concerned parents and professionals instructive insight into the personality of...

[The Moral Intelligence of Children](#)
by Robert Coles

Child psychiatrist and Harvard professor Robert Coles has actively dedicated much of his life to exemplifying, teaching, and writing about the moral life. In his wonderful new book, Coles illuminates the ways in which children become moral--or not so moral--adults, drawing on case studies, talks...

[P.E.T.: Parent Effectiveness Training](#)
by Thomas Gordon

Parent Effectiveness Training is a proven method to bring parents and their children together and to show parents how to help their children become mature, healthy, happy, and loving individuals. Hundreds of thousands of parents have completed Dr. Thomas Gordon's P.E.T. training course with tangible...