

## Lying: Is it normal?

Young children lie for many reasons; most of them are developmental, but others may be stress related. A young child's "lies" are not exactly like those of an adult, because a child's understanding of right, wrong and morality are different than an adults. However, since young children are developing their sense of justice and morality, it is important that we be sensitive and thoughtful when we respond to their experiments with truth and mistruth.

Young children are still trying to figure out the power of language. You can make things happen with language: you can draw a picture for someone of an event they didn't experience, hurt someone's feelings or share a thought, an idea, a feeling. You can create a whole reality with language. Once children discover this, they're driven to explore it, and much of their lying comes from this kind of wishful thinking: "I wish this were true, so I'll pretend that it is, and then maybe it will come true."

Children are also creative. They create elaborate stories that are similar to dreams; they have parts in them that are true or based on real events, but they also have terrific flights of imagination. Younger children are often unsure which parts of their stories are real and which are fantasy. As they get older, they are clearer about what is true and what is false, but other questions arise.

"Can I use language to change someone's idea of an event?" "Could I actually change a past event by describing it as different than it was?" "If I can convince Mom that I didn't take the cookies out of the cupboard, would it still be wrong?"

Children are not just trying to escape consequences or punishment by telling these kind of lies; they are trying to figure out the place where right turns to wrong and truth turns to mistruth. These are normal, healthy questions that children need to answer while they are trying develop their moral integrity. Understanding them will enable us respond in ways that help children develop into strong, competent and moral human beings.

There are other reasons that children experiment with lying:

- They may lie because they feel unsafe.
- They may fear the consequences if they tell the truth and lie to protect themselves (or others).
- They may not feel comfortable enough to reveal who they really are.
- Children who feel a lack of acknowledgement through positive means may lie to "get attention."
- Children who have been called "liar" repeatedly may be convinced that lying is their role and set out to do the best job they can.
- Children might not have been told the difference between truth and mistruth and therefore, haven't learned to recognize the difference or the importance.

## There are some things you can do to help put your kids on the path to truth and honesty:

- **Make it clear to children that the truth is important to you.** When children first start testing the limits of the truth, it is important that you tell them that you expect them to tell you the truth, even though it is hard sometimes. Explain to them that the truth is what allows people to trust one another and that you always want to be able to trust them.
- **Model honesty.** This seems like a simple idea, but children are watching carefully, even when we change information slightly to manipulate a situation. It may seem harmless to tell them the TV is broken when, in fact, you just don't want them to watch it anymore, but the model we provide our children is our most powerful teacher.
- **Avoid labeling children as "liars."** Even though we get scared when our children start telling bold-faced lies and may be tempted to whip them into shape by calling them names. This usually works at cross-purpose of what we want to teach. In fact, lying is not completely descriptive of what young children are trying to do. If you remember the moral questions they are trying to answer, "experimenting with truth and mistruth" is more descriptive. We want to avoid sticking a child with a label that he or she may later feel compelled to live up to.
- **Confront children gently but truthfully.** When you find that your child has been lying to you, you may feel scared, betrayed and angry. If you can remember that this is an opportunity to both teach about the importance of the truth, and to help them answer some of his underlying questions, you will be encouraging real moral development.

"I hear you telling me that you didn't take the cookies, but there were crumbs all over your bed. I know that it is scary to tell me the truth sometimes, but the truth is very, very important to me." "Thank you for telling me you took the cookies. I know it was hard for you to tell me, but I am really glad you told me the truth. Now let's figure out an appropriate consequence for you taking the cookies. I'm thinking that I'll wait until next week to buy any more cookies." Angry, punitive responses are more likely to teach children to tell the truth out of fear. Consequently they learn that if they can avoid getting caught, it is okay to lie.

- **Talk about what makes telling the truth difficult.** It is helpful to discuss with children the reasons that it is hard to tell the truth sometimes. "It can be scary to tell the truth if you don't know how someone will respond." "I know that it is embarrassing sometimes to tell someone what you did, but we all make mistakes." "Sometimes, I do things that I wish I hadn't and then it is hard to admit that I did it, but I always feel better when I talk about it."

You can also ask your stepson if he knows what makes telling the truth hard for him. If he can't answer, you could ask him about the times he is able to tell the truth. Maybe he can tell you what makes it possible for him to tell the truth.

- **Discuss the moral questions.** You can talk about the moral issues when you discover your child is not telling the truth and generally, in stories. It is sometimes easier for children to think about these issues if they are not personally involved in the situation that's being talked about. "Tell me what you think. If a child took a trading card from another child is it wrong? What if the other child didn't notice, would it still be wrong?"
- **Offer children opportunities to make amends.** Once you've discovered and discussed a situation with your child, the two of you might be able to think of a way to make-up or apologize for what he did. It is important to involve your child in this process. It will be more meaningful than if you just ask them to "say sorry." "You went to bed without brushing your teeth last night after you told me that you had. What do you think would make this situation better?" "What do you think we should do with this gum you took from the corner store?" If children's first ideas aren't appropriate (often they are way too punitive), you can ask them for other ideas or offer a couple of your own for them to choose from.

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