

## WHY DO CHILDREN TELL LIES AND WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

The first step to dealing with lying in your child is to understand some of the reasons children lie. There are many different reasons and motivations for a child to lie, depending on the child and the situation. In general, children tell lies *to get something they want or need* (this could be something tangible like an extra dessert, or intangible like your attention) or *avoid something they don't want* (this could be escaping something real, like getting out of chores, or something they fear will happen, like harsh punishment or rejection).

### Some possible reasons for lying include:

- **Lying is a normal part of development.** For young children (or children with delayed development), it is common to make statements that aren't true, but rather are based on wishes. This isn't really lying, but is rather related to imagination and pretend play; an important part of development. The ability to lie, or purposely make deceptive statements, starts to develop for most children are around age 3. Around age 4, almost all children begin telling lies to avoid punishment. Lying tends to peak around ages 4 to 6: 4 year-olds lie an average of once every two hours and 6 year-olds lie every hour and a half! School age children also develop skills for telling "white lies", to be polite or protect someone's feelings. Almost all adolescents engage in some lying to parents, to protect their privacy or assert their control and independence.
- **Some lying is to get out of trouble.** Often, children lie when to avoid being punished for something they've done. Sometimes this is wishful thinking related to feelings of guilt (they *really, really* wish they hadn't done the act). For other kids, they may be very afraid of the consequences of misbehavior. Also, sometimes kids (and adults!) will continue to lie once they've been caught, rather than admitting to lying and facing disappointment and consequences.
- **Sometimes it works!** Lying can become a bad habit, because sometimes when children tell lies, it might work to get them what they want (a desired object, to get out of trouble, to impress someone, to get your attention, etc.). Kids may have seen adults lie to get out of sticky situations, and sometimes it works! When lying behavior is rewarded some of the time (we call this "intermittent reinforcement"), it is very likely that the child will do it again.
- **Sometimes kids lie to protect themselves and connect to others.** Some kids use lying as a strategy to get attention from adults or peers, to make connections, or to sound cool or important. Unfortunately, when this strategy works in getting attention (even if it's negative attention, which some kids seem to seek out) or a sense of control, it tends to stick around.

*For children who have experienced trauma, think about how the child's beliefs about adults, him/herself, and the world (the "invisible suitcase") can contribute to lying. If a child has experienced harsh punishment or physical abuse, he or she may be very scared to admit to misbehavior. Children may have a hard time trusting that adults will give them fair consequences, or may have had previous caretakers model lying behaviors.*

### Why does it make parents so upset?

Lying is a violation of our trust. Parents may feel manipulated when a child lies to get what they want. It can lead adults to question everything the child says and put strain on the child's relationship with family members, peers, and teachers. When parents are feeling very upset about a child's lying, it can be helpful to understand the motivations for this behavior from the child's perspective. Also, sometimes it is easy to let negative thoughts about your child's behavior build and build, having a snowball effect, and before you know

it, a lie about completing homework has led to thoughts about your child's future dropping out of school and landing in prison. Challenge your negative thoughts about your child's behavior by asking yourself "is this realistic?" and "is this helpful to me or my child?"

### **What can parents do about lying?**

*Why adding harsher punishments for lying may not always work:* Kids often understand that lying is wrong, and that there are consequences for telling lies. Many kids tell lies because they are afraid of punishment or disrupting a relationship. So, when parents up the stakes for lying, making it even more costly to tell a lie, some children are more likely to use their go-to strategy for avoiding social harm or punishment- lying!

#### **Here are strategies for handling two types of lying:**

- When children tell lies about misbehavior, ***it is okay to give a consequence for the behavior without asking the child if he or she did it.*** If you see your child with a face covered in chocolate and a chocolate bunny wrapper on the floor next to them, it is okay to assume the child got into the Easter candy and provide a consequence. Asking the child to admit their misbehavior sets the child up to lie. An important principle in behavior management is to *prevent* misbehavior. Although you may be tempted to test your child by asking for a confession, it will usually result in more stress for you and your child.
- When children tell lies about things that don't seem important (for example, telling you they rode on spaceships at school today), ***ignore the lie.*** Active ignoring is most effective if you actively direct your attention to something else or walk away.

**Positively reinforce honesty:** Praise kids for bravery when they admit mistakes, even small ones ("It must have been hard for you to tell me about that, but I'm so proud of you for telling the truth!"). Remember, admitting honesty doesn't let them off the hook for negative behaviors.

**Think about your child's specific reasons to lie:** If your child is lying to meet a need (like your attention), give them extra opportunities to meet their needs in constructive ways. Also, all the behavior that we see is connected to thoughts and feelings. If there are inaccurate or unhelpful thoughts related to lying behaviors (for example, "Mommy wouldn't love me anymore if she knew I lost her favorite necklace"), it can be helpful to correct these misunderstandings.

**Avoid lying in front of the child:** We all like to think we are always honest, but the average adult lies about once a day! Sometimes we have good reasons for lying: to protect someone else's feelings (think about the last time you said "no, that dress looks great on you"), to protect ourselves from embarrassment or shame ("why yes, that is my natural hair color" or "that smell must be the dog"), to avoid conflict ("no, honey, I'm not mad"), or to avoid getting in trouble ("I was late because of terrible traffic"). Sometimes it is important to tell lies to children to protect their innocence or protect them from harm ("who put those presents under the Christmas tree?"). But when it can be avoided, try not to let your child see you lying, especially when you might get caught.

#### **References**

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