

Information

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Children who exaggerate

Children lie. That is a fact most parents would attest to. They don't seem to need instruction on lying; they don't need encouragement to do so. They just do. Children exaggerate, twist the truth, hide the facts, manufacture stories, and deny the obvious.

Lying ought to concern us. Yet what concerns us most is when a child lies compulsively. By that we mean that a child lies frequently or for no apparent reason. Parents subject to compulsive lying become suspicious and distrustful of their children, and the children conversely become more unruly and more dishonest.

Once the cycle of lying and distrust is in full swing, it is difficult to find a single way in which the cycle may be stopped. That is the primary purpose of this pamphlet: to initiate a process of thinking through why a child lies, and then find the help necessary in discontinuing the behaviour.

Lying As An Indicator

Before we consider why children lie, it is essential to recognize that lying may be an early indicator of a more severe problem. Compulsive lying has often been indicated in the early stages of children suffering from social behaviour disorders, primarily that of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and Conduct Disorder.

The current space does not permit a detailed discussion of such disorders. Suffice it to say that in such cases, compulsive lying usually accompanies other problem behaviours such as stealing, cheating, aggression, violent temper tantrums, skipping school, constantly losing items, and poor behaviour in groups, social settings or with authority figures.



Problems such as impulsivity, an apparent inability to link consequences with behaviour, inattentiveness and discomfort with social situations may be at the heart of lying.

Why Are You Lying?

Recognizing that there are "special needs", however, only allows the parent to seek more help. There are still some fundamental reasons why children lie compulsively.

1. Fear. Fear is a common motivator for lying. Consider the child who lies because she fears that her mother would "blow up" at her, or that dad would take privileges away, or that the teacher would send her (or her friend) to the principal's office. Such fear may be rational or irrational, but the effect of lying is similar - a temporary shelter from punishment.



What do we do about fear motivated lies? Consider two important implications.

First, children who lie out of fear usually know that they have done something that is wrong. This provides an important clue for parents responding to the lying child. Consider that the child's problem is not in knowing what is wrong, but in resisting its temptation.

Claiming "I've told you more than a hundred times..." does not help children deal with the heart of the error or disobedience. It merely alienates them. Parents have to get beyond the lie, and address the behaviour that "necessitated" the lie in the first place.

Second, parents may need to accept that their children lie because they are afraid of their parents' temperament. It is not surprising that constantly angry, shouting, rigid or restrictive parents often encounter compulsively lying children. Allowing room for negotiation, compromise, listening before accusing, and keeping your volume down usually helps in paving the way for more honest communication.

2. Habit. Lying can also become a habit formed through constant practice. It is possible that a child can "lie by reflex", and when confronted insist that it is the truth. Habitual lying is often strengthened by hostile confrontation.

One of the most effective ways of dealing with habitual lying is to give the child an opportunity to retract the lie without fear of consequences.



3. Modelling. Lying is a commonplace behaviour, and children are subject to lies all the time. The problem is that children learn to lie through experiencing others lie. The dilemma is that it is impossible to shield children from lies.

One parent who limited her child's friends to those who did not lie reduced the number of approved companions to just one, and that under close supervision!

One potent source of modelling, however, is from within the home. There is an old proverb that says, "What parents do in moderation, children do in excess." "Moderate" lying is thought of by many parents as harmless (such as a "white" lie, or a "harmless excuse") or mistakes (such as an unkept promise), or even purposeful and calculated distortions of the truth ("I had to lie because..."). Children, however, do not appreciate the nuances of a lie. Since it is difficult for parents to control the lies that children will encounter outside the home, it is more useful to start eliminating lies from within the home. Make telling the truth a priority both in instruction and by example.

4. Overprediction. Children also lie because they overpredict a reaction. One child said, "I know mom would say 'no', so I lied." In reality, mom would merely have asked more questions and given her permission! One of the most productive ways of addressing overprediction is to provide a child with clear boundaries, and yet emphasize that these boundaries are negotiable. Making up the rules as you go along, and far too many "don'ts" and restrictions can promote lying behaviour.



Do I Punish Lying?

When we get to the "bottom line", many parents want to know if they should punish a child for lying, and if so how. Recall that one of the main motivators of lying is fear. Many children choose to lie because it seems the lesser of two evils, and they imagine they could get away with it. In a sense, lying is punishment-avoidant behaviour. The dilemma regarding punishment for lying is that the parent may risk reinforcing fear, thus increasing the likelihood of lying in the future, rather than decreasing it!

In addition, there is the risk of confounding the message of the punishment. While the parent is saying, "I'm punishing you because you lied", the child may be thinking, "You are punishing me because you found out the truth." For the child, punishment is not associated with lying but being found out. The next time around, the child finds new ways to misrepresent the truth, and the parent is left in a quandary of suspicion and distrust. Consider some important issues regarding punishment and lying:

1) Punishment is most effective in limiting habitual lying (discussed earlier) since punishment is designed to reduce a learned behaviour. The problem is that punishment is not designed to teach and reinforce an alternate behaviour. Punishment without loving and careful instruction is a useless tool, and one that often leads to excessiveness and abuse.

2) Punishing a lie when it is motivated by fear, modelling or overprediction tends to be ineffective in the long run. Seek the deeper motivation for the lie and work at the source rather than the symptom.

3) Use punishment as the last option, not the first reaction. Parents are often surprised how soft messages excel in impact over hard messages. For example, "You really hurt mom and dad when you lie," is often more effective than, "I'm really going to hurt you because you lied."

Above all, recognize that the purpose and desire of every parent is to encourage honesty. That is a characteristic, not just a behaviour. When all is said and done, we want our children to love the truth, not to fear it; and to hate lies, not merely the punishment that lying brings.

For many children, telling tall stories is just a part of growing up. According to David Walsh, author of "No: Why Kids--of All Ages--Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It," this type of creative exaggeration or storytelling usually starts when kids are 3 or 4 and stops by the time they're in second grade. It's important to encourage children to tell the truth, but Walsh says it's equally important to properly evaluate the situation and act in a positive manner.

Step 1

Consider your child's age before broaching the subject with them. Many 3- and 4-year-olds may still have trouble distinguishing between the truth and exaggeration. Older children know the difference but may be using the tall tales as a way to express themselves and their needs.

Step 2

Discuss the difference between the truth and lies with your child. Most of the time, tall stories are different from outright lies in that they're meant to entertain, not deceive. Gently recognizing that the story isn't the full truth is usually enough. For example, if your preschooler is exaggerating details of your family vacation to a friend, tell the child something like, "Yes, it would have been fun if that had happened on our trip. But why don't you tell your friend about all the fun things we really did on our vacation, like riding the roller coaster?"

Step 3

Give your child a creative outlet for her stories. Help her write and illustrate a book about her imagined adventures, or give her a journal. Expressing herself in this way will help her distinguish between the truth and tall tales and give her an appropriate place in which to demonstrate her imagination.

Step 4

Explore the reasons why your child might be exaggerating, and work to correct the situation. For example, if your son tells his friends an untrue story about his father taking him to an amusement park, that could be a sign that he's craving some one-on-one time with his dad. If you address that issue, he'll be less inclined to lie.

Step 5

Take your child to a psychologist if her tall tales become more frequent and graphic, and nothing you've done gets through to her. She may have some underlying issues that a professional can identify and help you work through with her.

Step 6

Limit punishments for telling tall stories. Talking things out will allow you to grasp exactly why your child isn't telling the truth, and punishing the child instead will only teach him to lie to avoid unpleasant consequences when he's in trouble.



Activities to Help Stop Kids From Exaggerating Stories

Encourage your kid to turn exaggeration into creativity.

Kids tend to exaggerate stories from a young age up until their teenage years. Although the quality of writing and storytelling at every age differs, the problem remains the same and it is a common cause for concern among parents. Stopping kids from exaggerating stories is best done in private through honest discussions and creative activities.

True or False

Tell your child stories, some believable and others overly impressive and exaggerated. Ask him to determine which ones are true and false. Ask him to justify his opinion and reward him with one point every time he gets it right. If he fails to spot an exaggerated story, calmly explain to him points that might have shown that the story was false. Take turns and listen to some of his stories. Tell him whether you think they are true or false. Carry on playing until one of you has gathered five points. This helps your kid distinguish truth from exaggeration.



Writing and Drawing

If your child tends to exaggerate stories at a preschool age, urge him to put all these creative ideas onto pictures. Advise that he start a storybook of sketches or buy him a notebook where you write his exaggerated story on one side and he draws the illustrations on the other. If your child is in school, recommend that he keep a diary with all these interesting things that are happening to him or write a book about it. Give your child a creative outlet for his imagination, and he will not feel the need to lie in his everyday life.

Drama

Register your child with a theater school or independent drama classes. Encourage him to exaggerate as much as he wants when he is playing a character. Buy him masks and Halloween costumes and remind him that, when he is wearing a mask or costume, he can exaggerate and be someone else.

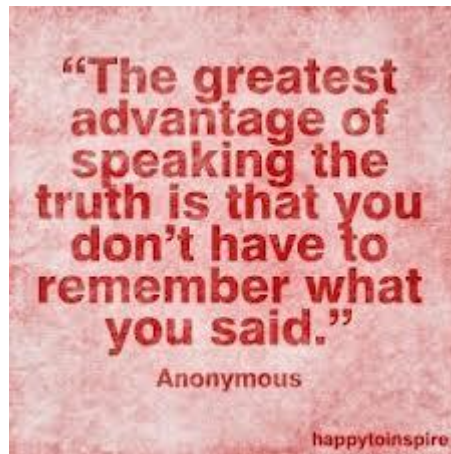
However, stress that when he is not rehearsing or performing, he should be telling the truth and not exaggerating situations. This can help your kid shape his own personality without feeling trapped in himself. It also can help him realize that there is a place for impressing and a place for being who he really is.

Confidence Boost

In younger kids, the reason for exaggerating stories usually comes from a need to escape the world they are in and go somewhere where everything is possible. In older kids and teenagers, however, the most common reason for trying to impress through their stories is a lack of confidence and desire to be liked and accepted by other people.

If you have a very young child, a creative outlet for his imagination, such as writing, drawing, playing and acting, is the most effective way to help him stop from exaggerating stories. If you have an older kid, the way forward is boosting his confidence. Comment on how handsome he is. Congratulate him for something he has achieved.

Tell him that his friends are lucky to have him. Encourage him to join a sport's team or subtly push him to take lessons in the performing arts. Any of these activities can make your kid feel more confident and stop the need to impress by telling stories.



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Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a
medical professional for a correct diagnosis.