

Why Are You Lying?

When children lie this is often shocking and disturbing to parents, however, it can be seen in many ways as a behavior that can be developmental. Lying may be a phase and a temporary glitch in an otherwise normal developmental trajectory for a child, or it can be the start of a chronic pattern of maladaptive or anti-social behaviors. Below is a list of some of the common reasons children and adolescents may lie and the consequences.

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 behavior 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. Modeling. Lying is a commonplace behavior, 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 modeling, 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 broken 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. Over prediction. Children also lie because they over predict 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 over prediction 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 behavior.

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 behavior. The problem is that punishment is not designed to teach and reinforce an alternate behavior. 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, modeling or over prediction 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 behavior. 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.