



Courtyard Counseling Center

We're here to help



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Lying Around: Part 3 - Children and Lies

At the age of nine, my son said to me, "Pop, do you know that I've never lied to you?" I was a proud parent that day. Some years later, while in earshot of my then 14-year-old son, I was recounting the story to a friend. As I gave the punch line, I heard my son mutter, "I couldn't say that today." Later, I asked about his comment to which he replied, "Sure, I've told you some fibs." "What fibs?" I asked. He said, "Well, I started out very small to see if you could detect it. Then I tried a few whoppers. For some I got caught, some I didn't." "But why would you do that?" I asked. He said, "I wanted to see if you would know. When I learned that you didn't, I felt kind of good, more powerful, like I was my own person." As my surprise wore off, I realized that this made sense.

Why do kids lie? This question often plagues parents, especially those with teenagers. Young children often think that their very powerful parents, from whom they have no secrets, can actually read their minds. As they become older, kids are driven by and fascinated with the developmental task of learning how to separate from their parents. If they don't go through this process, they can't grow up. Anyone who has reared teenagers knows that this can be a difficult and frustrating time. Rest assured, it usually passes.

First of all, kids lie for many of the same reasons that adults lie. Why some children lie more often than others is complicated. Factors such as home environment, natural abilities, birth order, relationships with siblings, personality styles and the restrictiveness or permissiveness of parents, play a role.

Parents often become worried that childhood lying is a precursor to adult delinquency or maladjustment. It can be, but it usually is not. Parents should be concerned about children who lie very often and carefully examine what it is they lie about. The frequency and seriousness of the child's lies are important. A child who lies about everyday things is more worrisome than a child who lies about big issues to avoid punishment. The child who lies often when there seems to be no reason can be showing the early signs of great creativity, a very active fantasy life, or perhaps early signs of delinquency or mental illness.

While lying is generally wrong, it often is a symptom of some other problem. Here are a few rules of thumb to consider:

- Children are more likely to lie when their competence is challenged. This type of lie is about ability and self esteem and usually points to areas where the child needs help.
- Children, most often teenagers, will lie to maintain privacy. Parents, while not approving of such lies, should examine how they might contribute to them. Do you give your child age-appropriate privileges? Are you too strict, overprotective, or too punitive?
- Does your child's lie have a repeated payoff? Does another parent support the lying? Are there appropriate rewards for telling the truth and consequences for lying?
- Does your child lie often to avoid embarrassment or to impress others? If this is happening, your child might suffer from serious self-esteem issues for which he or she needs professional attention.
- Does your child lie out of fear? Examples include fear of severe punishment, lying to protect another, fear of being harmed, or fear of breaking a code of peer conduct. Remember that secrets are different from privacy. Secrets can be a sign of abuse or threats of which you as a parent are unaware. If you suspect such lies you should look into them carefully and seek professional assistance.
- The average teenage girl tends to lie more than the average teenage boy. Girls usually have more privacy needs and more things to lie about. Parents are usually more restrictive with girls. Middle-school age girls often become pros at lying. In some ways, our society supports this behavior and at times might require it for social survival.
- Most lying by children is transitory and situational and will be outgrown. You can help your child by openly discussing moral issues about lying. Discuss your child's reasons for lying (without scolding). Parents of course should model honest behavior. Parents who lie will be likely to have children who lie.

What should parents do? If possible, they should tie the consequences of lying into the behavior or the issue lied about. Young children should be given opportunities to think about the lie and have another chance at honesty before they are punished. The goal is to teach the child that telling the truth is preferable, no matter how painful.

If after your teenager understands and agrees to the rules and still lies about where he has been with the car, take the keys for a week. For each subsequent offense, take the keys for two weeks. If your teen lies about where she is going, require more accountability, or she loses the privilege of going out. The more serious the lying, the more serious the consequences should be.

It helps if children understand that their parents will become more restrictive if they lie. Frightened parents become more untrusting and oppressive. This in turn can produce more secretive behavior in children. Desperate parents who feel compelled to be detectives are unhappy parents with unhappy children.

Our goal in family therapy is to break this cycle and help both sides understand that the more information parents have (within reason), the more relaxed they will be as parents and the more trusting they will be of their children. The difficulty is finding a balance between the child's need for privacy that offers them the opportunity to grow safely independent, and the parents' need for information in order to relax and trust that their children are safe.

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