

Why Lie?

Lying tends to serve our self-interest. We want something, like a discount or a refund, so we lie. Or we want to avoid something negative like a fight or a ticket, so we lie. We are very interested in ourselves and sometimes our desires or fears get in the way and we choose a lie over the truth. This is very similar for children. A child wants to have things that are good and wants to avoid things that are bad. A lie can help them get what they want.

When they are very young, a toddler is just trying to figure out the world around them. A lie is something they may try – they may have learned how from watching a sibling – or a parent – and it is a way they interact with the world. At this age, it is a great opportunity just to talk to them about how the truth is so much better and that lies aren't good. However, as they get older, they will understand that lying is wrong, but self-interest will win out occasionally. And when it does, here comes the lie. Because lying is based on self-interest it is pretty easy to figure out ways to encourage honesty.

React Well to Truth

The first step in discouraging lies is to encourage and praise honesty in your home.

The second step is to react well when a child is honest. It is very important that your children know they can tell you how they messed up without worrying about being cut off from your love. If needed, take a few minutes away from the situation, then come back and ask the questions in a calm manner.

Removing the fear of the harsh words and hateful emotions will go a long way to encouraging honesty. This, of course, does not mean there are not consequences for poor choices. You just need to separate the consequences from the relationship and help them understand they are loved even when they mess up.

The next step is to celebrate truth telling. Make telling the truth something to be celebrated, even if there are still consequences for the underlying actions.

React Well to Lies

We also need to react *well* when you find out a child has lied. Calm your emotions. Addressing a lie when you are upset can cause more issues than it heals.

Once ready, sit the child down and tell them that, "Our family values honesty." Let them know that honesty is sometimes hard and takes *courage*, but strong and courageous people make the choice to be honest even if it is difficult. Then give them a chance to be honest. Say, "I would love for you to be brave with me right now and tell me what happened." If they admit

they were lying, praise the honesty and give them a hug. If they continue to lie, give them a hug anyway. But here is the important part. There needs to be consequences for lying, and they need to be separate from the consequences for whatever wrong actions they were hiding. You can say something like, “For not doing your chores, you lose electronics tonight. For lying about it you lose electronics tomorrow.”

Make telling the truth a positive experience and make telling a lie an action that has a consequence of its own. In both cases, react with love, but make sure and follow through on the consequence so that lying is not in their self-interest.

The Harm of Lies

If you want a child to be honest, you need to *model* honesty. You will have to be honest in the big things and the small things so that your children can see what it looks like to choose to tell the truth. Unfortunately, when we lie, and especially when we lie to our children, we are encouraging dishonesty.

Remove Opportunities

Asking direct questions seems like a good idea, but sometimes it can just give an opportunity for an excuse and then a lie. You can reduce the number of lies and help your child take responsibility just by changing those questions around so you avoid lies and power struggles.

Getting to the Root

Finally, one of the best ways to help create honesty is to get to the *root* of the reason for the lie. If your child does lie, you will want to take some time out and sit with them and ask, gently, “You must have been worried about something ...” or “You must have really wanted something...” and find out what your child is thinking. Help them voice their fears and concerns so that you can hear them, reassure them, and then talk to them about telling the truth.

Resources include:

1. Lying and Children, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, No. 44; Updated July 2017. Found at https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Lying-044.aspx, accessed 8/13/2019.
2. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Raising Caring Kids, Moral and Ethical Development, For Families: Tips for Encouraging Honesty. Found at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/tips-encouraging-honesty>, accessed 8/13/2019.
3. Stearn J., Ph.D. Teaching Your Kids to Be Honest, Parenting Is a Contact Sport. Psychology Today, Mar 23, 2011.
4. Hays C, Carver LJ. Follow the liar: the effects of adult lies on children's honesty. Developmental Science. 2014 Nov;17(6):977-83.
5. McCready A. The me, me, me epidemic: A step-by-step guide to raising capable, grateful kids in an over-entitled world. Penguin; 2015 Aug 11.
6. Talwar V, Lee K. Social and cognitive correlates of children's lying behavior. Child development. 2008 Jul;79(4):866-81.