



First Steps

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Is It Lying or Telling Tall Tales?

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

No child is born a liar. This is a behavior that is learned, and can be easily handled and understood if parents are willing to take the time—and they need to do that early to prevent lying from becoming a habit in children. Honesty and dishonesty are learned in the home. “Until they are six or seven years old, most children do not know the difference between wishful thinking, imagination, and what is real. Imaginary thinking, imaginary playmates, and vivid fantasies remain quite meaningful parts of the small child’s life. This is why expecting a child under seven years old to tell the truth is inappropriate. However, after the age of seven we can increasingly expect children to know the difference between the truth and a lie.”



Source: Paul, Henry A., M.D., *Is My Child OK?*, 2000

Why Do Children Lie?

- They have rich imaginations and fantasy lives.
- To avoid punishment.
- To cover up actions they know will disappoint their parents.
- To boost their self image or impress their friends.
- Their parents’ expectations may be too high.
- To protect themselves or their friends.
- To avoid chores, consequences, and responsibilities.
- To get attention.
- They feel it isn’t safe to tell the truth.
- They copy the adults in their lives who tell “little white lies”.

Ways Parents Can Respond to Lying

1. When you suspect a lie, say: “That sounds like a story to me. I wonder what the truth is.”
2. Identify with the child. Ask if he feels scared to admit to making a mistake. Tell him we all make mistakes and feel scared at times.
3. Focus on solutions rather than on blame. Instead of asking who broke the egg, ask if the child needs help cleaning up the mess.
4. Explain the need to accept responsibility for our actions. We all make mistakes, but blaming others, even imaginary people, does not take away responsibility for what we did.”

Source: Nelsen, Jane, Ed.D., Cheryl Erwin, M.A., and Roslyn Duffy: *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers*, 1998.

What Can Parents Do to Prevent Their Children from Lying?

- Never brand your child as “a liar”. This name-calling is hurtful and damaging.
- If your child is younger than 7 years and tells lies only once in a while, do not punish, spank or in any other way shame him or her for the mistruths.
- Remember that most young children grow to have a normal sense of honesty and learn what is right and wrong. “Fantastic” lying will decrease with time.
- Avoid putting your child in a position where he or she must lie to avoid punishment. Instead of saying “Did you break this glass?” ask “Do you want help cleaning up the glass you broke?”
- As your child gains the ability to tell the truth, he or she should be praised, particularly if it was hard to admit to having done something wrong. Positive support of the child’s good behavior goes a lot further than punishing him or her for telling a lie.
- Gently tell your child that reasonable punishment for lying doesn’t mean you love him or her less.
- Make it clear that he or she will feel much better if the truth is told in the very beginning of a situation.
- Make it clear to children older than 7 who lie in order to avoid punishment for accidents or purposely naughty behavior, that while telling a lie might work in the short run, sooner or later it will weaken your ability to trust him or her.
- Be a good role model for your child; make sure you don’t lie—“little white lies” can be damaging and hard for young children to understand.
- Talk about the meaning of trust. Help your child see the connection between telling the truth and having others trust what he or she says and does.
- Even if you have clear proof, avoid accusing your child of out and out lying. It’s better to give your child time and invite him or her to come back on what he or she said by saying something like “If you have anything to say about what happened, come back and tell me later.”
- If your child lies, and you clearly know it is a lie but he or she refuses to admit to lying, lay out the facts that bring you to your conclusion. Then apply a suitable consequence depending on the situation (returning a stolen item, cleaning up spilled milk, paying broken toy, etc.).

Source: Paul, Henry A., *Is My Child OK?*, 2000

Lying is one of the behaviors that can be completely avoided or corrected if parents have patience and the right attitude. Parents must be good role models by making sure they don’t lie. Parents must reply with support when children tell the truth. While there may be consequences for telling the truth, the consequences don’t need to be punishment. The child needs to clean up the mess, apologize, return items, or pay for damages, but he or she does not necessarily need to be grounded or sent to a time-out area. However, if lying continues after the child is 7-8, and the lying is frequent, stronger action may have to be taken.



For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.