



by Karen Stephens

Lying, Fibs, and Tall-Tales: Teaching Children To Be Truthful

Very young children can have a blurry sense of what is fact or fantasy. They also don't have much experience with issues of right and wrong. Toddlers and two year olds are in the earliest stages of developing a personal "moral code" for behavior.

Three year olds' expanding social world gives them more opportunities to explore the difference between proper or improper conduct. Research has shown that by four years of age most children can reliably understand the difference between truthfulness and lying.

Throughout the preschool and school-age years, children encounter situations that tempt them to fib or lie. Some struggle with the ethical dilemma more than others, but most children resist developing a chronic habit of lying. Fibs, tall-tales, and stretching the truth can be limited if parents patiently and sensitively respond to children as they gradually grasp and adopt our values.

Children aren't born liars. They toy with the habit up for a number of reasons, which may include:

- need for attention
- protecting loved ones or friends from trouble
- avoiding responsibility for misbehavior
- avoiding a parent's disapproval or rejection
- anxiety over failing to meet a parent's very high expectations
- fearing physical punishment and emotional shaming
- delayed concept development about truth and lies
- wishful thinking, such as pretending something is true if said out loud
- imitating a sibling, peer, or television character's behavior
- denying emotions or incidents too painful to talk about
- inflating stories or tales to impress friend or cover up a sense of inadequacy.

Parents Help Children Develop an Honest Character

Be a good role model. Even your "little white lies" confuse children about boundaries for honesty. Don't call into work sick if you're not. If you are clearly upset about something, don't say you aren't; children will know you're lying. As children mature they'll understand that sometimes the complete truth is withheld to spare another's feelings. But until children can understand that, full honesty from you is their best guide. Make it clear, by your word and deed, that lying is unacceptable.

Acknowledge and encourage whenever truth is told. This is especially important when lying could be a big temptation. When your child resists lying, tell them how proud you are. Give them a pat on the back and tell them they should be proud of their choice, too. Noticing and applauding truth-telling is as important as responding to lying.

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Help children distinguish between fact and fantasy. During “pretend play” telling tall tales is fun. So fun, some children may try to carry it over into “real life,” too. To help preschoolers make the distinction, respond empathetically to tall tales by saying, “Wow, that sounds magical. That would be fun if it were true.”

Express faith in your child’s ability to tell the truth. Resist labeling your child a “liar.” Rather than sentencing children to a lifetime label, talk about their ability to make good choices. Reassure your child that you are confident they can choose to behave honestly, even when it’s hard or they’re afraid.

Openly talk about the importance of honesty. Help children experience how important trust, a by-product of honesty, is to family and friend relationships. Find ways to express your values in relevant ways. For instance, when watching a television or movie character lie, take the opportunity to talk about how you feel about it. Depending on your child’s age, discuss how things would turn out in “real life” if someone lied like the character.

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Teach through play. With preschoolers, take time to enjoy pretend play with dolls or puppets. Create situations in which your puppet lies. See how your child responds. Illustrate remorse and making amends by having your puppet express those emotions in the play scenario.

Avoid pushing children into a lie. If you know about a child’s infraction — such as milk spilled on the table — don’t pretend you don’t by asking, “Who did this?”. Asking the question simply sets up the temptation for your child to lie. After all, it’s human nature to try to avoid blame, especially if parents use overly physical punishment. Out of impulsive “survival instinct” children may lie without even planning on it. If you know how an accident occurred, calmly say it. Then firmly enforce a respectful logical consequence so your child accepts responsibility to remedy the problem. If milk is spilled, rather than opening the door to a lie, simply point to the paper towels so your child can clean the spill.

If your child lies, focus on finding the underlying cause. The cause of lying probably needs your attention most. For instance, a child may lie about wetting her pants, even though you can clearly see it happened. Finding out why the wetting occurred, and why the child felt too frightened to tell you, are clues to the lying. Once you determine why your child lied, it’s easier to reassure them to avoid future lying. Maybe she’s afraid to go into the bathroom at child care. If so, find out the cause and work with a teacher to help your child master it. If she lies because she’s afraid she’ll be spanked, it’s time to use more respectful discipline methods. It’s a constructive consequence to have a child help clean wet pants and put on dry ones. It’s not productive or empathetic to spank for wetting.

Share your childhood memories to create teachable moments. When relaxing together, or even driving in the car, share simple stories that illustrate how you learned to resist lying. Children love hearing about times their parents got into trouble when young — and how they got themselves out of it.

Help children interpret emotions associated with lying as well as getting caught in a lie. Most children show remorse over a lie. When they do, gently empathize and name the emotions experienced when one lies. For instance, we feel guilty, nervous, sad, or embarrassed. Sometimes we’re afraid to look people in the face. Remembering the emotions associated with lying can be an effective deterrent to future lies.

Read books to spark discussion about honesty and the difference between truth and lies. After reading, talk about the importance of telling the truth. Talk about the motivations and feelings of the book’s characters. Recommendations include:

- *Harriet and The Garden* by Nancy Carlson (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2004)
- *Pinky Promise: A Book about Telling the Truth* by Vanita Braver (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 2004)

- *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting (Minneapolis: Sagebrush Education Resources, 1997)
- *Franklin Fibs* by Paulette Bourgeois (Toronto: Kids Can Press Limited, 1991)
- *Sam, Bangs and Moonshine* by Evaline Ness (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1966; so good it's still in print!)

When Lying Becomes a Greater Concern

If children reveal any of the following patterns, consider seeking the help of a child care specialist or counselor. Extra emotional support and guidance is needed if your child:

- lies daily, not just occasionally;
- never shows remorse about lying, deceiving, or misleading others;
- lies frequently, causing significant problems at child care or school;
- lies or spreads rumors deliberately to hurt others; or
- lies extravagantly to gain friends, acceptance, and attention, such as claiming to own incredible possessions or having won fantastical awards.

Remember, an occasional fib now and then is perfectly normal. For most kids, lying doesn't become a habit. With patience and forethought, parents help children as they acquire positive character traits, such as truthfulness.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.