

LYING



While this article is written for parents, the information can easily be transferred to other adults in a child's life. Children lie for a number of different reasons, and in many cases it is a normal part of development. All children lie at one time or another. This behavior, however, can be very upsetting to parents. Many parents wonder how they should handle their children's lying. How lying is handled often depends on the age of the child, the specific situation, and the established family rules about lying. Below is some information that will help parents determine when lying should and should not be punished, and how it should be handled. As children enter the school age years (6-8 and up), they begin to fully understand the concept that lying is wrong. When children reach this stage, parents should begin disciplining their children when they tell lies. Lying among children in this age group is not uncommon, and there are many reasons why children in this age group lie:

- *To avoid punishment** - Many children this age lie in an attempt to stay out of trouble.
- *To impress others** - In this case, children may tell tall tales to make themselves look good.
- *To boost their self-esteem** - Children may stretch the truth in order to get attention or praise from others.
- *To get something they want** - Children may lie to get something they would like.
- *To protect others** - Children are very loyal to friends and family members. They may lie to protect someone else.
- *Because they hear their parents lie** - Many children hear their parents and other important adults lying (e.g., lying about their plans in order to avoid something). Children learn from their parents and other adults in their lives, and thus will be more inclined to lie if they hear their parents and other adults telling lies.

How to Tell When Children are Lying

Knowing when their children are telling the truth and when they are not is often a hard task for parents. There are, however, many clues parents can look for to help them figure out whether or not their children are telling the truth.

***Facial expression** - When children are telling the truth, they are generally relaxed, and their facial expressions show it. Children who are not telling the truth can be anxious, and their facial expressions may show their anxiety.

***Clearness of statements** - Parents should listen carefully to what their children tell them. Are there inconsistencies in what their children tell them? Do their statements make sense? Does what they say sound credible?

***Spontaneity** - If children are telling the truth, their statements usually do not sound rehearsed. If statements do sound rehearsed, parents can ask questions and see how their children handle coming up with answers.

What Parents Can Do About Lying

***Explain/discuss why telling the truth is important.** Parents should begin teaching their children the benefits of telling the truth while their children are young. They should be careful to use language that is age-appropriate. Parents should let their children know that telling the truth lets other people know that they can be trusted. They should also let their children know that lying is dishonest, and there are often negative consequences for lying. Parents can discuss examples of truthfulness and lying that they see on television, read in books, etc. Parents can also help prevent lying in their children by communicating effectively with them. This, too, should start while children are very young. Children who have open, honest relationships with their parents are much less likely to lie to them.

***Model truthfulness.** Children learn by watching their parents. Parents who lie to their children and in their children's presence are teaching their children that lying is an acceptable behavior. Parents should try to set a good example for their children by being as truthful as possible themselves.

***Discipline for lying.** Parents should set specific rules for lying, and specific punishments when lying occurs. These rules should be discussed with children before they are enforced. It is a good idea for parents to provide separate punishments for misbehavior and lying. When children misbehave but are honest about it, they should get a lesser punishment than when they misbehave and lie about it. Parents should make sure that there is a payoff for being honest. For example, when children are honest about

their misdeeds, parents can praise their children for their honesty and then provide punishment for their misdeed. When children are dishonest about their misdeeds, they should provide a punishment for the dishonesty, and a punishment for the misdeed. Parents should be careful, however, not to be too severe or too frequent in their punishment, or their children may continue to lie as a means of protecting themselves.

***Be consistent in treatment of lying.** Parents should come up with a set of rules about lying and then stick to them. Children should be disciplined accordingly each time they lie.

***Make sure lying is not rewarding for children.** Parents should be careful not to reward lying behavior in their children. If, for example, a child lies to get something he wants, parents should make sure he or she does not get it.

***Don't shame children for lying.** Parents should try not to make their children feel guilty for lying. Parents can let their children know that they are disappointed with their actions, but they should try hard to avoid sending the message that they are bad people for lying. Instead, parents should make sure their children know that they are being disciplined for their actions, not for who they are.

***Don't set children up.** Parents who are sure that their children have done some misdeed should not try to trap them in a lie by asking them whether or not they did it. Many children will lie to protect themselves when they are backed into a corner. Instead, parents should treat the situation matter-of-factly. Parents should explain to their children exactly what they did that was wrong and why, and then provide discipline. Along the same lines, it is also not a good idea for parents to demand confessions from their children or to punish their children for misdeeds that they are not absolutely sure their children did.

***Figure out why children are lying, then look for solutions.** Parents should pay close attention to the lies their children tell. They should try to figure out if there is any specific pattern to their children's lies. If parents figure out specific reasons why their children tell lies, they should then look for specific solutions. For example, when children lie to boost their self esteem, parents should develop a strategy to increase their children's self-esteem, so that they do not have to lie to feel good about themselves.

***Praise truthfulness.** Parents should make every effort to praise their children when they are being honest. Behavior that is praised is much more likely to be repeated.

***Seek professional help for persistent lying.** Children who persistently lie may have underlying problems. In these instances, parents should seek professional help.