

## How to Use: Real Stuff for Real People

Since the research is clear that the majority of children deny wrongdoing, parents can do some common-sense things in response to lying. As stated before, don't ask a child if he has done something wrong if you already know he did. Parents who ask a child about a wrongdoing to see if the child will lie or tell the truth have missed the point of discipline. The idea is not to catch the child in the act of doing something wrong—there's no triumph in it, and punishment isn't the goal. The idea is to discipline, which has its root in teaching. Effective parents correct behav-

ior with 90 percent teaching and 10 percent punishing.

Try to catch your child telling the truth. Start a family goal of truth-telling so that one child doesn't feel targeted and embarrassed. Whenever someone in the family tells the truth about something that is hard to say, he or she tells the parent, who puts a candy heart (or macaroni or bean) in a jar. When the hearts reach a predetermined mark on the jar, it is time for a family celebration. After the celebration, empty the jar and start again. The parent has the discretion of emphasizing a child's brave truth-telling by putting extra hearts in the jar for telling the truth in a really difficult situation.

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## Our Mission

We awaken and uncover the inherent wellness in children and parents through sharing relevant strategies, information, and skills, empowering all to nurture healthy relationships. We value each child and believe each family is worthy of our best efforts.

## References

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- Special thanks to Nancy Reiser and Sue Buehner.*

## The Truth About Lying:

### *How Parents Encourage and Discourage Truth-telling in Children*

*By Cinda Morgan, LCSW*

“How can I teach my child not to lie?” It's a question most parents have asked themselves—usually when facing their child's dishonest behavior. When a child lies, it can start the alarm bells ringing in a parent's head: “What if he keeps lying? What other behaviors could it lead to? What am I supposed to do about this?” These alarms can cause parents to panic and possibly react in anger.

When a child has a dishonesty problem, one of the best first steps for parents to take is to be introspective and ask some questions: “What is my underlying fear about this? Do I tend to over-react around this problem? Why? Do I do anything to contribute to the problem?” The purpose of these questions is not to place blame, because blame doesn't enlighten or provide solutions. Curiosity, on the other hand, can yield amazing insights that can be the springboard for change.

## Why Lie?

A parent might want to ask herself (not the child), “Why did he lie?” Children do not lie for unique reasons; an honest appraisal will reveal that adults lie for the same reasons children do. Looking at why a child lied can help the parent address the root of the problem. When the problem is dealt with, there is no longer a need to lie about that problem.

Here are some reasons people lie:

**1. Fear.** As stated in the February 2009 issue of this newsletter, fear is the most common reason for lying. For many children and adults, lying is punishment-avoiding behavior.<sup>1</sup> However, it is probably even more of an anger-avoiding behavior for your child. Parents would do well to ask themselves, “Am I doing something that makes telling the truth seem more difficult for my

child?” If parents want to minimize lying, they will not talk to their child about his lying behavior until they are calm.<sup>2</sup> When a parent is angry, a child can assume, “You’re not mad because I lied; you’re mad because you found out I lied.” A parent’s anger could inadvertently encourage the child to find new and better ways to lie.

**2. Approval or status.** Children sometimes lie to seek attention or gain status, especially among peers. Children might also lie to avoid what they often fear most: ridicule from their peers.<sup>3</sup> Exaggeration is a common form of this kind of lying and is employed when a person feels “less than” or inadequate. (Both adults and children use exaggeration to gain status but also to make something seem more important. For example, someone might say “I called you four times” when he actually only called twice.)

**3. Anticipating a negative response.** Sometimes a child lies because he is sure his parent will say no to a request.<sup>4</sup> When a parent sets clear boundaries but also lets the child know that negotiating is acceptable, the child will be much less likely to lie for this reason. Too many “don’ts” or

“no’s” create a belief that the answer will always be no.

**4. Convenience or short-cut mentality.** At times a child may lie because it just seems easier than telling the truth. When an older child lies for this reason, it is probably because he is still captivated by the pleasure principle, which is common among young children. The pleasure principle is “I want what I want when I want it, and I’ll do all I can to get what I want when I want it.” Usually there is no thought beyond satisfying the want, and therefore the child is stuck in his own wish.

### **Ouch! Children Imitating Adult Behavior**

Child development specialists point out that children naturally imitate.<sup>5</sup> This is true of positive behaviors (like smiling) as well as negative ones (like lying). Lying can be disconcerting for parents because they were children once too, and lying, at some point in time, may have been an issue for them.

An interesting experiment for parents is to only tell the truth for twenty-four hours. This can remind them that truth-telling is not always as easy and simple as it seems. Parents teach children

to tell the truth or to lie the same way parents teach them kindness, table manners, or politeness—by doing it themselves. For example, a child witnesses a parent complimenting someone on her hair. She leaves and the parent then says to someone else, “Wasn’t her hair color a little odd with her skin tone?” When children see the discrepancies in what parents say and do, they may learn to lie.

### **Promoting Truth-Telling**

There is much research about lying and surprisingly little research about how to encourage a child to tell the truth. Studies have found that children are more likely to tell the truth rather than lie when no negative outcomes are expected for doing so.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, when a child lies for any of the reasons listed above, it is probably best not to punish the lying behavior. It makes a child more fearful and therefore more likely to lie.

The research on what promotes truth-telling in a child also focuses on two approaches that deal with two of a person’s self-regulating motivations: 1) social approval, especially from parents, regarding telling the truth (an external motivation), and 2)

self-produced reasons linked to moral standards and the virtues of truth-telling (an internal motivation).<sup>7,8</sup> In other words, parents can discuss with a child how pleased they are when the child tells the truth (this is the social approval or external aspect). Parents are wise to emphasize truth-telling often and not just after they suspect a child of lying. Parents are also the ones who lay the groundwork for the internal motivation as well through teaching the value of honesty. Lecturing is the one of the least effective ways of teaching. One of the best ways for a parent to teach truth-telling is by being truthful.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the goal for parents is to have a child who values the truth, not fears it, and who is averse to lying, not just the punishment of it.

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#### **Remember...**

- A fearful child is more likely to lie.
  - Parents teach truth-telling by telling the truth themselves.
  - Encouraging truth-telling is more effective than punishing dishonest behavior.
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**Next Issue:** *The Truth About Lying: When Lying Signals a Bigger Problem*