

## How to Use: Real Stuff for Real People

When you live with a child who habitually lies, it can seem he lies continually. Actually, there are many instances every day in which he tells the truth. For example, when your child says, “I’m hungry,” chances are he’s telling the truth. Lavishly praise the behaviors you want to increase. Some neuroscientists believe this technique works because it creates a different neuro pathway in the child’s brain—one that associates telling the truth with pleasure. Each time your child tells the truth about something, even if it is just a preference like “I like vanilla ice cream,” reward him and say “That’s real.” The reward can be a tick mark, which can be redeemed for something meaningful to your child; a Skittle; or

whatever you and your child agree upon. This approach may also help you create a new neuro pathway regarding your child—one that recognizes that he actually does not lie all the time.

### Overcome Your Own Bad Habit

One way parents can show that they are an ally for their child rather than an adversary is to also make a commitment to change a bad habit. While the child is working on changing her habit of lying, the parent works on changing his own habit. This process not only allows parents to be empathetic with how hard it is to break a habit but also provides an opportunity for parents to be open with their child about their own progress and relapses. This helps the child feel less like everyone is pointing a finger at her for being a “bad kid” and more like everyone else who also has flaws that need work.

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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.

1. Lee, K., Xu, F. (2001). Chinese and Canadian children’s evaluation of lie and truth-telling: *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 19, 525
2. Erickson, E. (1980) *Identity and the Life Cycle*. W .W. Norton & Company.
3. Hage, D. *Antecedents to Lying and Teaching the Truth*, [www.deborah-hage.com/articles/lying](http://www.deborah-hage.com/articles/lying)  
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## The Truth About Lying: *When Lying Seems as Natural as Breathing*

By Cinda Morgan, LCSW

Few things are as disconcerting to parents as not knowing whether they can believe what their child says. When a child seems unable to sort out truth and untruth, or when lying seems to be a natural part of the child’s interactions, parents may need to explore the developmental foundations of truth-telling and make a shift in how they relate to their child. This kind of lying is most often seen by foster parents and adoptive parents who were not part of the child’s early development. It frequently occurs when some form of lying was a genuine survival skill for the child at some point.

### How We Are Raised Influences Our View of Lying

Parents who have adopted a child should remember that a child raised in a different home, even for a few years, has come from a different culture. Culture significantly influences our view of lying. For example, in one interesting study, Chinese children gave negative scores when individuals told the truth about their own good deeds and positive scores when these individuals lied about their good deeds. Canadian children, on the other hand, did the opposite. These findings

reveal the Chinese cultural emphasis on modesty and the Canadian cultural view (similar to the American view) of self-confidence.<sup>1</sup>

Children’s moral concept of lying varies depending on their upbringing—regardless of their ethnicity. It can be useful for parents to reflect on their own cultural influences around telling the truth, and it can be especially valuable for foster and adoptive parents to reflect on this.

### Shaky Foundations for Knowing Truth

Some major child development theorists believe that the foundation of truth-telling comes in the first years of life. Erik Erikson held that the first social/emotional task of a child is to determine if he can trust the world or not.<sup>2</sup> A young child’s world is dictated by his parents and caregivers. In the first years of life, a child’s needs—food, safety, physical warmth, and emotional comfort—can be met only by another person. When the care the child receives is consistent with his needs, he learns to trust. If the care is not consistent with his needs, he learns not to trust.

As a new therapist, I was asked to go on a crisis visit to a severely bur-

dened new mother. The child had not been well cared for—it appeared she had been in the same diaper for at least twenty-four hours and that she hadn't been fed for some time. As I assisted with the infant, I was saddened to see her open her mouth in distress as if crying, but no sound came out.

If an infant cries because she is hungry and no one comes, and she cries some more and still no one responds, she eventually stops crying and must formulate some kind of internal message in order to survive. It is believed that this is when she begins to tell herself her first lies: "I'm not hungry. I'm not wet or cold. I don't need anyone to comfort me." She distrusts her own senses, her own reality. If a young child lies to herself to preserve her sanity, a parent can expect that she will lie about anything at any time because she won't have the underpinnings to know what is true. For her, lying and truth-telling have no moral dimension. Surviving is all that matters.

### **Can I Love Someone I Don't Trust?**

Some adoptive or foster parents may protest, saying they have taught their child to know right from wrong and the difference between truth-telling and lying, and he knows better. Their child may indeed be able to articulate what he has been taught, and at times he may act accordingly. But in the moment of perceived deep need, he may revert to his early survival skill of lying. Parents might recoil and say, "I can't have a relation-

ship with someone I don't trust." The truth is, their child did exactly that—had a relationship with someone he couldn't trust. The question for the adoptive parents is, "Can he trust us when we say that we will be his forever family?" The child subconsciously asks, "Can I trust someone who doesn't understand me?" Therefore, foster and adoptive parents need to in turn ask themselves, "Can I love someone I don't understand?" One of the most healing messages a parent can give a child is "I can love you even when I don't trust you" or "You can't keep me from loving you even when you lie." It is also realistic to couple this message with "When you are dishonest, our relationship is not as comfortable and relaxed as I would like it to be." For a younger child, parents can say, "When you don't tell me what really happened, I don't know how to help."

### **Ways to Promote Truth-telling**

**1. Don't Ask.** The February issue of this newsletter suggested that parents avoid asking their child questions to which they already know the answer, such as, "Did the teacher give you a note for me to sign?" after receiving an email from the teacher. If a parent has a child who lies automatically, it is also wise to avoid asking a question if the parent doesn't know the answer. There's a good chance the child will lie, and asking will reinforce his habit of lying. Parents need to accept that they may never get the real story, resist the urge to become private detectives, and

provide consequences based on what they believe is true and what will provide safety. Parents need to do the best they can regarding their child's lying behavior but should not let it sidetrack them from building the relationship.

**2. Playfully Predict Lying.** Before discussing a situation with a child in which he is likely to lie, parents can good-naturedly say, "I'm going to talk to you about something, and it might make you a bit nervous. So if you want to tell a lie, go ahead and tell a really good one." Using this approach eliminates lying as a tool for control, and giving a child permission to lie helps parents avoid getting their buttons pushed. There are three cautions when using this approach: parents' playfulness cannot contain any hint of sarcasm, the technique should not be overused, and it should not be used with young children who may be confused by it.

**3. Identify the Deeper Need for Lying.** Most behaviors, if not all, serve a purpose of some sort. Therefore, lying that appears to be purposeless may actually perform a service for the child, though she may not be aware of it. Lying may perform the following functions: 1) It allows the child some relief from her own chaos by transferring it to someone else, such as the parent; 2) it recreates a familiar, comfortable pattern for the child, such as being in trouble or being the "bad kid"; 3) when the child can't handle the chaos in herself, lying helps her see how the parent

handles it; 4) it is a way for the child to feel powerful by controlling the parent's mood; 5) the child uses it to test the genuineness of her relationship with her parents; or 6) if the child is frightened or distrustful of close relationships, it may serve to push the parent away. When parents identify the child's need behind her lying and experiment with alternative ways of addressing that need, the child may no longer feel a reason to lie, and the lying may dissipate.

**4. Create Internal Conflict in the Child.** Although it is not true for every child, when some children perceive that lying upsets a parent more than them, their concern about lying diminishes. Therefore, the first way to create an internal conflict around the child's behavior is for the parent to detach emotionally from the child's lying. The child needs to have an emotional connection to the negative results of his behavior. When he is the one who suffers because of his lying, he will want to stop. This is not to say that an excessively punitive approach will achieve this goal. Different things will create an internal conflict for different children, since each child has different motivations and values different things. Ultimately, the child will stop lying when it no longer works for him—when it is not helping him get what he wants.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of whether the child can be trusted, each child needs to feel secure in the knowledge that she is safe, cared for, and loved.