

## Does your Child Tell Lies?

Most children tell lies at some point, but it can be a shock to parents the first time it occurs. It can make us feel angry and fearful and we can take it personally. Lying may even happen as young as 3 years of age. It is a natural part of child development to learn how to lie and some lies may seem harmless, but it is also important to learn how to tell the truth and the reasons why honesty is important.

Children tell lies for many reasons and these may include: to exaggerate a story in order to impress others, to cover something up in the hope of avoiding punishment or consequences, to get attention, to manipulate a person or situation (for example telling the baby sitter they're always allowed to stay up to watch the end of the movie.)

Whilst younger children can lie readily (but give themselves away when pushed), school aged children can learn to lie more convincingly as their vocabulary expands and they learn more about how other people think.

So what to do when you discover your child is lying to you.

First up: don't panic. Children like to make things up. If the 'tall tale' is in the realm of pretending, make believe and imagining, go along with the story and play the game. Tall stories don't need to be treated as lies, especially for the under 4. Some-times exaggerated story telling that involves bragging might be about a child's self esteem. If this happens often think about using more praise in your everyday dealings with this child.

Once children have learned the difference between true and not true, it is important to encourage them in the telling of the truth. Praise a child for their honesty and courage when they own up to doing the wrong thing, despite the consequences that might follow. Try not to become angry or upset when your children own up to some-thing. It's important that they know it is safe to do so. Don't let your children become too afraid to tell you when something has happened. Children who feel afraid, frustrated and powerless are more likely to lie.

Where possible, avoid situations where a child might feel the need to lie. Instead of asking point blank 'Did you let the dog inside the house?' Say something like, 'Oh dear, the dog's in. Will you help me round him up?'

Have very clear rules about the behaviours you expect in your household, and be consistent with the consequences of breaking them. Take time to explain to your children that lying may make it harder for you to trust them in the future, and that you really want to be able believe what they tell you. An appropriate consequence may involve getting the child to make amends for the action that lead to the lie in the first place. Don't get drawn into discussion about acceptable lies or levels of lying. Be clear. "Lying is wrong. It's hurtful and in our home we tell the truth. And if you break the rules there are consequences."

When your child seems determined to stick to a deliberate lie, or if it seems to be becoming a habit, reinforce how you, as a family value honesty and trust and that lying is not only unacceptable, it is damaging to your relationships. Also take time to think about what might be driving the lie. Are they truly afraid of how you might react or the consequences? Where you can, separate the lie from the behaviour and deal with each individually. Deal with the lie as per family rules, then look at the behaviour behind the lie. If it's about getting attention, think about ways of praising your child more. If it's about getting something they wanted, think about systems in your family for earning treats and rewards.

And here's our Golden Rule: Make sure your children know that your love is unconditional and if they have done something wrong or got themselves into trouble

then you will do everything you can to help them/guide them to make it right. Avoid calling your child a 'liar'. Labels like this can impact negatively on your child's self-esteem. Far better for them to believe that you think they are a good child who's slipped up by telling a lie, than that you believe they are a bad person i.e. 'a liar'. It can become a vicious cycle. 'They think I'm a liar anyway, I might as well just lie to get out of trouble.'

We often write about modelling the behaviour we want to see in our children and this brings us to the subject of white lies. They do have their place. Telling children their cuddles are magic and that your love reaches to the moon and back is less than harmless. Using white lies to manage behaviour is useful, but a trap. 'I can't buy you lollies today because I haven't got any money.' If you are caught out, YOU risk losing credibility with your children.

Our advice? 'Use seldom and sparingly.'

Finally, it is appropriate to be alarmed if your child is lying as part of bigger issues like stealing, lighting fires or hurting animals. Professional help should be sought.

**Gai Bath and Andrea Maver**  
**School Counsellors**

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[amaver@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:amaver@smc.tas.edu.au)

Further reading:

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/lies.html>

<http://www.empoweringparents.com/Why-Do-Kids-Children-and-Teens-Lie-What-To-Do-About-It.php>

<http://www.parenting.com/article/why-kids-lie-age-by-age>