

Is it Lying?

It is so easy to catastrophize about our children becoming pathological liars when they hide the truth about anything. Even parents of toddlers call their children liars. True lying is a premeditated, manipulative deception intended to coerce someone into believing one thing in order to get away with another—hard to do as a young child. Lying is a learned behavior built to defend against something feared.

What children are doing when they say, Yes they brushed their teeth, did their homework, cleaned their room—when they didn't—is avoiding or dodging what they anticipate if they tell the truth. A lie is a protection against getting in trouble, being lectured to, or causing disappointment. It saves face. We all do it. (“I’m sorry officer, I thought the speed limit was 55.”)

The question we need to ask is, *By demanding the truth, am I teaching my child to be dishonest?*

When we demand the truth by accusing children of lying, we don't give them the chance to be honest. “If you don't tell me the truth, there will be no more sleepovers.” If the child feels forced to uphold the lie so he doesn't lose a privilege, he can't be honest about his feelings and motives behind the lie. When we call an act of hiding the truth for self-protection a lie, we label and set an expectation that our child is a liar. When heard or inferred enough, the label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and lying turns chronic. Even into the early teen years, the child believes about himself what he *perceives* his parent believes about him. He may fight it by acting-out if he believes he is not acceptable, but a liar is most likely what he will become.

How truthful are you with your children? Have you ever said, “I don’t have any money?” “The cookies are all gone?” “That’s a beautiful drawing.” “I don’t have time for that,” in order to avoid an argument, sadness, or a meltdown when it isn’t the truth? Do you always model telling the truth? Do your children ever overhear your evasion of truth during a phone conversation? Are you overly suspicious?

“Did you take that money I had on my bureau?”

“No, I don’t know anything about it.”

“You’re lying. I know you took it because you were the last one in my room.”

This is a manipulative trick on the part of the parent that sets the child up to lie. Why ask the question? Why not say, “I think you must have picked up the money from my bureau. I’d like to have it back. It belongs to me,” is a far more honest approach to the problem. The word lie needs never to be said. If you understand that the temptation to pick up available money is greater than the self-control of the child, you will see the action as a mistake rather than stealing and then lying about it.

To encourage honesty, the child must not fear punishment if the truth is hidden—hard for those who grew up with this seemingly logical discipline. Lies have complex layers. You do not tell a friend who says, “My hair looks awful,” that yes, indeed it does look awful. You withhold your truthful opinion and say, “No, it looks fine,” and lie out of compassion for her feelings. That doesn’t make you a dishonest person.

We need to make sure our children behave honestly because it feels right to do so inside, not out of fear. We can problem solve with

them and instill trust and encourage honesty. “That doesn’t sound like a true story. I wonder if you’re afraid to tell me what happened because you’re worried I’ll be upset? I can understand wanting to hide the facts. But I don’t want you to be left with knowing that you can’t be honest with me. I know that would feel awful to you. Tell me your side of the story, and we can go from there.”

Many children hide the truth because they have been brought up to feel responsible for their parent’s feelings. If the child often hears *you make me mad, that makes me sad, how do you think I feel when you do that?* then the child feels responsibility for her parent. If she knows her mother will be disappointed in her if she says she forgot about her homework, she will likely say that she did it believing she can get it done later, so it won’t end up a lie. Allowing your child to take responsibility for herself is hard to do, but if she knows that her homework is her problem, and you will not be rescuing her or scolding her about it, then she is left with the responsibility of getting it done or not.

Developing an honest relationship takes motives of behavior into account. Calling a child a liar ignores any motivating factors. A lie may begin innocently but develop into deception if the child fears enough repercussion to build a wall of defense. Instead of “Don’t you lie to me,” ask, “What prompted you to hide that from me?” A very different message is sent.