

Have You Taught Your Child to Lie Today?

“Did you take that cookie?” (“No.”)

“Where have you been?” (“At my friend’s.”)

“What happened?” (“Nothing.”)

“What’s the matter? Did you hit her?” (“I didn’t do it.”)

Innocent questions like these, intended to get the information we think we need to parent responsibly, only set our children up to lie. When questions are accompanied by even the slightest tone of accusation, children who are usually punished or yelled at for misconduct are left with little option other than to lie to protect themselves.

Surveys have shown that for the past two decades, parents have placed trust and honesty at the top of the list of traits they want in their children. What we parents don’t understand is the root cause of lying, how we unintentionally teach our children to lie, and how to develop honesty in our children.

In a recent New York Magazine article called “Learning to Lie,” by Po Bronson, avoiding punishment is said to be the number one reason for lying. Children also lie to increase their power and ability to control with bragging and teasing. Studies cited in the article show that punishment for lying does not teach children to tell the truth. It only makes them hyper vigilant of the possibility of the loss of what they want (freedom, privileges) and distracts them from learning how lies affect others. “In studies,” Bronson says, “scholars find that kids who live in threat of consistent punishment don’t lie less. Instead they become better liars, at an earlier age—learning to get caught less often.” Instead of punishing them for doing something wrong, we need to teach our children the value of doing right.

We also teach our children to lie with our own lying, says McGill University’s Dr. Victoria Talwar. They listen to us being disingenuous with friends, relatives, and strangers. And we teach them to respond politely, even dishonestly, when they don’t like a present or are offended by something a relative may say. We teach them that tattling is bad but don’t teach them how to report wrongdoing. So children learn to keep quiet, hide their feelings, and never tell when they do something they know is wrong. Our reactions teach them to get more secretive and sneaky.

White lies often become bigger in families where children feel powerless to tell their side of the story and be heard.

Talwar also claims that lying is linked to intelligence. It is an advanced skill, she says. “A child who is going to lie must recognize the truth, intellectually conceive of an alternate reality, and be able to convincingly sell that new reality to someone else.”

So what should we do? First of all, stop punishing your children. Use problem solving and conflict resolution skills to hold them accountable. It takes more time, energy, and no-how, whereas punishment is easy, quick, and requires very little thinking. But at what cost comes this age-old labor saving device?

Dr. Nancy Darling of Penn State University says that 98% of teens lie to their parents. In her study, Darling looked at what kind of a family raises the most truthful children. She found that permissive parents, who may fear that rules keep their children from communicating, actually raise children who think their parents don't care whether they tell the truth or not. She also found that parents with the most rules seldom enforce them. And autocratic, oppressive parents raise more obedient children but those children are depressed, leading to many other problems. She claims, “The type of parents who are actually most consistent in enforcing rules are the same parents who are most warm and have the most conversations with their kids.” They set few rules but explain what those rules are for. And they *expect* the rules to be followed without punitive enforcement. They support “the child's autonomy, allowing them freedom to make their own decisions.” This is a definition of problem solving.

Another thing you can do is argue and negotiate. Darling's study showed that teenagers see arguing as the opposite of lying, not telling the truth as we might think. Even arguing viewed by a parent as stressful or destructive to their relationship, was seen by teens as strengthening the relationship because they hear their parent's point of view. Liars rarely argue with their parents. And controlling parents who give knee-jerk nos for answers, rarely engage in arguments. “In the families where there was less deception there was a much higher ratio of arguing and complaining. The argument enabled the child to speak honestly.” How the argument is resolved is what makes the difference.

Problem solving requires negotiation, which is pretty hard to do without an argument or two. The inherent question in problem solving is, *How can we make this work for both of us?* It means both parties understanding, not necessarily agreeing, with both sides, which means respecting where the other one is coming from. Even if the parent ends up with a no, the child may be left feeling frustrated and angry, but he also feels heard—not usually the case with punishment. So argue away—just don't do it endlessly. Your child can always outdistance you.

The irony of lying is that it is both normal and expected as well as wrong and hurtful. Teaching our children to only tell the truth will not get the results you expect. More important is teaching them how lies can deceive and hurt and how other lies can protect and care. It's that distinction that is paramount in children understanding right from wrong.