

Reasons Why Kids Twist Truth

By Marilyn Suttle

Nothing can infuriate a parent like a bold-faced lie. You say, "Don't throw that ball in the house," then ten seconds later there's a crash and a smashed picture frame on the floor. Your little one says, "I didn't do it."

It's a good thing kids are so cute, but that cuteness fades quickly when kids continue to fib. Why do kids lie? Some reasons are obvious. Some are surprising. There are things parents can do to limit the lying and encourage honesty.

Why do Kids Lie?

Young children tell lies to express their rich imagination or to fulfill their desires. Kids may tell their teachers about elaborate vacations they didn't really take or new pets they don't really have. It's a form of wishful thinking. When your sticky faced kid says that the neighbor must have broken into the house and eaten all the marshmallows, it's a fantasy that the child hopes will make everything all right.

Kids lie when they aren't allowed to tell the truth. Mark's mother asked, "Do you like sharing your room with the baby?" Mark answered, "No, I hate it. Take that baby out of my room." Mom screamed at Mark and punished him for being selfish. Mark learned that telling the truth about his feelings isn't what mom wants. He concludes that what mom really wants him to do is lie. He'll say, "I love sharing my room," while his resentment builds. To encourage honesty, be willing to hear your child's negative feelings. If mom acknowledged Mark's difficulty, "It's not easy sharing a room when you're used to having it all to yourself," he would find it easier to be honest about his feelings and cope with his situation.

Some lies are told with good intentions. To spare someone's, feelings, "Your new haircut looks nice," or to protect others from harm, "I haven't see that kid you want to beat up, Bob."

Kids sometimes lie to improve their self image. They may lie about a test score to avoid embarrassment. They might boast about their abilities to impress others.

Fear is a big motivator for lying. They lie for fear of getting into trouble. They don't understand that lying is likely to get them in more trouble than whatever it is they are covering up. You don't want your kids to develop the habit of lying to you. While responding to a lying child, be careful not to reinforce the behavior you're trying to eliminate.

Here are a few things to watch out for:

- * Don't over react to lies. Over reacting to lies creates more lying. All that ranting and raving puts your child in the spotlight. Kids crave attention. If they don't get it by being good, they gladly accept it for bad behavior. The bigger the rise your kids get from you, the more they see lying as a useful tool to gain your attention.
- * Don't label your child a liar. It reinforces the behavior. It's destructive to say, "Are you lying again? You better not be lying to me. I can never trust you to tell the truth." Such comments leave kids feeling hopeless. If their parents see them as liars, they must be. It becomes easier to live down to your low expectations.
- * Don't ask kids questions that you already know the answer to. If you see your child feeding green beans to the dog, don't ask, "Were you feeding the dog your vegetables?" If she lies, your anger grows and nothing is solved. Be direct. State the facts and focus on the solution. "Patty, the dog ate your vegetables. I expect you to eat them yourself."

What else can be done to encourage truthful behavior?

- * Do look for teachable moments to talk about the consequences of lying. Pick a calm time when there is no conflict, perhaps during a snack, while driving, or after a bedtime story. Kids are less likely to tune you out or become defensive if you pick a peaceful time to talk about difficult issues.
- * Do use resources, like books, movies, or life events to illustrate the effects of lying. Pinocchio, and The Boy Who Cried Wolf, are examples of stories that provide an opportunity to discuss your beliefs and values.
- * Do respond to lies by expressing their wish that it hadn't happened, and point out what needs to be done. For example, "I can see that you wish you hadn't knocked down the plant. What needs to be done now is to scoop up all the dirt and sweep the floor.
- * Do Model truthful behavior. Give kids clear messages about what is acceptable to you and what is not, then show them from your own example. No human being is perfect. Instead of fearing or hiding from mistakes, teach your kids to be accountable for their mistakes. Let them know it is safe to talk to you about difficult things.

Kids do tell lies at one time or another. By handling their lies with wisdom and sensitivity, you can give kids the courage they need to be truthful.

Marilyn Suttle brings personal and professional growth seminars to corporate and educational settings. Visit her web site: www.MarilynSuttle.com copyright 2002(c)