What to Do When Your Child Lies

Parents naturally get angry when their children lie. Lies undermine trust and they make us worry about defects in the child’s character. What’s a parent to do when a child lies?

Do not encourage lying. There are several ways parents encourage lying. One is to ask questions to which we already know the answer. For example, we might ask a child with cookie crumbs around his mouth, ‘Did you eat a cookie when I told you not to?’ We already know the answer to our question. We would do better to say, ‘I am disappointed that you ate a cookie before dinner.’

We also encourage lying when we are not willing to accept the truth. If your daughter blurts out, ‘I hate my brother!’ it does not encourage emotional honesty to shout back, ‘You don’t hate your brother! You love him!’ It is both more honest and more understanding to respond: ‘Sometimes you feel very upset with your brother. Sometimes you wish he would leave you alone when you are playing.’

There are many reasons children lie. A preschool child may find the distinction between wish and reality to be fuzzy. Even school-age children may say things that stretch the truth. For example, a child may say, ‘I am the fastest person in my class.’ We may be bothered by the exaggeration and the bragging, but it helps to understand what the statement means to the child. ‘It sounds like you love to run!’ ‘You like to be fast.’

Sometimes our children lie to us because they are afraid of consequences. For example, a child who does poorly on a test at school may be afraid of being in trouble at home. When the parent discovers the lie, he or she may be tempted to rage, ‘You not only failed a test but you lied to me about it!’ Such a child then feels doubly bad. He feels dumb for failing the test and bad for lying. Those negative feelings are not likely to motivate better behavior. In contrast, a parent might say, ‘You must have felt very bad about that grade.’ ‘You were embarrassed.’ ‘You were afraid you would be in trouble.’ When a parent accepts the child’s fears, it helps the child solve the problem. Rather than have to deal with a bad grade and parental anger, the child feels parent support to deal with the grade.

There is a sensible way of dealing with lies and other dishonesty: We can combine kindness with directness. If a child says she has returned her book to the library and we later find it in her room, it is not helpful to cross-examine the child: ‘Why did you lie to me? Why can’t I trust you to do what you say?’ There are no good answers to accusatory questions. Such questions only lead to arguing and bad feelings. We can simply say, ‘The book on your desk is overdue.’
Children can learn over time to deal with unpleasant truths. They can learn to work with other people. They can learn to solve problems. They can learn from our example to combine honesty with kindness and respect.

Applications:

Be prepared to deal with unpleasant truths. Plan ahead what you can say. For example, if one of your children says that he hates his sister, you can be prepared to help him understand his feelings:

"You feel very upset right now!"

"You wish your sister did not get in your way when you are doing things."

"Sometimes you wish you didn’t have a sister."

Being understood is very soothing for children. It helps them get past their angry feelings and on to solutions.

At some point almost every child will hide or misrepresent an unpleasant truth. If you have a child who has lied about a grade or hidden a report card, you might ask yourself how the child was feeling. What can you do to help the child feel safe and ready to solve the problem that has worried him or her?

Sometimes we may be so upset when we discover a child’s lie that we need to take some time out in order to sort out our feelings. We can say to the child, ‘Right now I am so upset that I am not sure what to do. I need some time to sort through my feelings.’ It can help if we find a quiet place, breathe deeply, and try to see the situation from the child’s perspective.

Example is the best teacher. Think carefully about the example of honesty that you set. Do you sometimes tell lies in order to get yourself out of a fix? Make sure that your example is a positive one. Of course there are many times when honesty must be balanced with kindness, but we avoid deliberate deception.