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# LYING: STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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One goal for parents and educators is to help children develop appropriate moral judgment in order to become responsible members of society. Even though clear expectations are often set for children at home and at school, children will nonetheless experience various conflicts and situations in which they need to solve their problems independently. They will inevitably make some mistakes along the way, and they need continuous guidance and instruction to support them as they learn to make appropriate choices.

Honesty is one of the moral character traits needed for success in parent-child relationships, social relationships, and future adult relationships. Children will lie for many reasons, such as avoiding punishment, avoiding parental disapproval, and helping their social status.

Adults may unwittingly model for children the telling of white lies as acceptable, and this often confuses children. As parents and educators, we must understand the reasons children lie, the impact of a given child's developmental stage, the nature and frequency of distortions of the truth, and strategies to intervene effectively.

This handout will explore moral development in children and will provide suggestions for appropriate consequences for lying.

## Developmental Issues

**Toddlers.** Children under the age of 3 typically do not have the capacity to understand lying and its consequences. Young children lie because they are not yet distinguishing reality from fantasy. They express themselves freely without regard for the impact of the words they choose. For example, children may make statements about someone's appearance that creates embarrassment for their parents. As they witness their parents' reactions and discuss their impact on others, children will begin to learn about how to make more appropriate comments.

**Preschoolers.** Preschool-aged children typically lie by fabricating stories, and often they do so to avoid parental disapproval and punishment. Developmentally, children at this age have a beginning sense of cause and effect. These young children have difficulty separating fantasy from reality, and their stories often display this fantasy-based thinking. Their cognitive skills are also developing, and they are able to follow one or two directions. They may not remember multiple demands placed on them, and as a result they seem to be lying when in fact they were not yet able to process so much information. As a parent it is important to understand this aspect of your child's development so that your child is not punished for actions for which he or she is not yet ready to be responsible.

Preschool-aged children frequently focus on the sense of fairness. In their minds, fairness involves their personal needs and safety. If they do not get the toy they want, it was "not fair." When children receive attention for telling stories or sharing certain information, they may attempt to establish a pattern of continuous sharing so that they may receive constant attention. As they reach ages 4 and 5, children have a better sense of what is true and what is make believe. They start observing their peers and others as doing either right or wrong.

**School-age.** School-aged children typically lie to avoid punishment and to fit in or to have similar experiences to those of their peers. By the age of 7, children typically make clear distinctions between reality and fantasy. If they are able to lie and not get caught or punished, they will continue to lie. Though they may understand cognitively that it is wrong to lie, children at this age have not yet internalized truth telling as a moral trait and may remain more concerned with external consequences.

Older children, 7–11 years old, have developed the cognitive and moral understanding that lying is wrong. Children's lies at this age may express their need to test limits, avoid difficult situations, or improve social status. School-aged children need clear expectations and consequences for lying. They

are aware that consequences are likely to occur for lying and normally will accept these consequences.

**Adolescents.** Adolescents are most concerned with their own independence and privacy, for which lying becomes a means to maintain. While they understand that lying is wrong and are aware of possible consequences, adolescents may rationalize that lying is acceptable. They believe that if someone's motive is to help others, then lying is justified, and may lie to spare someone's feelings, protect a friendship, avoid embarrassment, and hide dangerous or prohibited actions.

**Individual needs.** While these developmental trends can be observed in typically developing children, there are children with special needs who may not follow similar age-typical development. Though all children need to learn what constitutes acceptable behavior, teaching methods used to address children's individual needs should vary according to individual abilities and unique needs. Children's cognitive understanding of lying may not occur at typical or predictable times because all children develop differently.

For parents, discussions with community mental health professionals, school psychologists, or your pediatrician may be helpful in developing appropriate strategies to help your child.

## Intervention

Children need clear expectations and consequences to learn appropriate behaviors. As parents and educators it is important to design these expectations and consequences to match children's developmental levels.

### What I Can Do as a Parent

If your child is lying excessively and having other serious behavior issues, it is important to speak to a mental health professional, such as your school psychologist, or to your pediatrician.

- Encourage an honest and truthful environment in your home, where telling the truth is expected. When children do tell the truth in difficult situations, praise them.
- Model appropriate behaviors, such as honesty. Children's greatest teachers for both positive and negative behaviors can be their parents.
- Teach character traits such as honesty to your children to help support their development. After sharing stories, reading books, and watching movies, discuss the content with your children. These can be very teachable moments to which children can easily relate without taking issues personally.
- Try not to make promises to your children if there is a possibility the promise may not be kept. Telling

children you will *try* or *maybe* something can occur will not break their trust.

- If you tell a lie in front of your children, explain it to them and apologize for not being truthful.
- When a child lies, try to discover the reason the child lied and what he or she may be hiding, as that may be more serious than the lie itself.
- Try to help children understand that while their behavior was bad or inappropriate, *they* are not "bad." Everyone makes mistakes, and children need to learn from these experiences.

### What I Can Do as an Educator

Teachers are valued adults in children's lives. Children are often eager to please their teachers and want their praise. Teachers and staff members in schools try to model appropriate behaviors that children incorporate into their lives. Older children tend to focus more on the behaviors of, and acceptance by, their peers. Having positive peer role models is important for adolescents. Teachers can:

- Speak to the student about lying and deliver appropriate consequences, such as a shorter recess.
- Share the information with the student's parent or guardian and together discuss ways to help the student. Encourage the parent to set consequences at home as well as in school to show the student that the behavior will not be tolerated.
- Speak to the school psychologist or counselor to see if the student has a history or pattern of lying or other inappropriate behavior. If a pattern exists, work together with the parents to help the student.
- Display throughout the classroom clear expectations for behavior and encourage discussion of character traits such as honesty, which should be regarded as essential if one is to be a valued member of the class community.
- Read stories and books in which honesty themes are integrated, and allow students to express their knowledge of, and experiences with, honesty. When possible, incorporate discussions about positive character traits throughout the curriculum.

### Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Children and lying. Available:

[www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/lying.htm](http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/lying.htm)

Berenstain, S., & Berenstain, J. (1983). *The Berenstain Bears and the truth*. New York: Random House. (For ages 4–8.) ISBN: 0394856406.

Moser, A. (1999). *Don't tell a whopper on Fridays! The children's truth-control book*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark. (For ages 9–12.) ISBN: 0933849761.

Jacki, S. (1995). *Normal children have problems, too: How parents can understand and help*. New York: Bantam. ISBN: 0553374389.

Weinman Sharmat, M. (1993). *A big fat enormous lie*. New York: E. P. Dutton. (For preschool.) ISBN: 0140547371.

### Websites

National Education and Mental Health Center—  
[www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org)

National Parenting Center—[www.tnpc.com](http://www.tnpc.com)

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org) and the NASP Center for Children & Families website [www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org). Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

**About School Psychology**—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.

[www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/spsych.html](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html)

**Crisis Resources**—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.

[www.nasponline.org/crisisresources](http://www.nasponline.org/crisisresources)

**Culturally Competent Practice**—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.

[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**En Español**—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. [www.naspcenter.org/espanol/](http://www.naspcenter.org/espanol/)

**IDEA Information**—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.

[www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html)

**Information for Educators**—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.

[www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html)

**Information for Parents**—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.

[www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html)

**Links to State Associations**—Easy access to state association websites.

[www.nasponline.org/information/links\\_state\\_orgs.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html)

**NASP Books & Publications Store**—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.

[www.nasponline.org/bestsellers](http://www.nasponline.org/bestsellers)

Order online. [www.nasponline.org/store](http://www.nasponline.org/store)

**Position Papers**—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.

[www.nasponline.org/information/position\\_paper.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html)

**Success in School/Skills for Life**—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.

[www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit](http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit)