



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 2 LYING, CHEATING, EXAGGERATING

Dear Parent,

Is it a lie to say something which you later realize is mis-information? Is it a lie when you make arrangements with another person and later change your mind or forget the arrangements? Is it a lie if you forget or are unable to keep a promise that you made? Is it a lie when a four year old reports that he was bitten by a million mosquitoes? What makes an untruth a lie? Why is cheating a life-blocking behavior? Is the exaggeration of a young child a cause for worry? What are helpful ways to respond to your child if she lies, cheats, or exaggerates? This newsletter focuses on these difficult behaviors and shares the advice of parents who have faced these situations which are so common children.

LYING

Fantasy talk is characteristic of young children. They tell make believe stories and embellish commonplace events for effect. Out of a need for security a child may fabricate elements of a situation in an effort to explain it to himself or to make sense of a stressful situation that he does not understand. Some children, however, practice a pattern of telling untruths because they are *unable* to distinguish between reality and fantasy and, therefore, are unaware that they tell lies. This is different than deliberate fantasy. These children will benefit from professional help rather than negative consequences.

“A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2482). Intentional deceit is the distinguishing factor between an untruth and a lie. Some children lie because they want to avoid punishment for mis-behavior. Parents can minimize the fear of punishment in several ways:

- (1) Consistently use moderate, logical, non-emotional consequences for mis-behavior. Emotional, overly severe parent responses make a child nervous; lying then becomes a self-protection mechanism.
- (2) When the truth is already known do not question him about the incident; that sets up the conditions for defensive lying. Instead, use as few words as possible and a calm voice to let him acknowledge his behavior. Follow up with an appropriate consequence. Let your face and body language convey that you love him and that you are both going to take this incident in your stride.
- (3) Let the child know that truthfulness is respected. Express admiration for her courage and sometimes reward her immediate truthfulness by sparing the consequence.

Some children lie because they are imitating their parents' behavior. They need parents to model truthfulness as a way of life. Some children experience a need to defend themselves with a cover up or protective story and still others are not developed enough to be able to integrate information from several sources and so they tell the truth as they see it but their perception is necessarily limited and, possibly, untrue to reality. Sometimes a child will lie to impress others. She equates personal worth with achievement. The need to impress others can be healed if parents help her to focus on her strengths, discourage comparisons, and help her to improve the skills that she considers valuable.

EXAGGERATIONS

Exaggeration is a type of fantasy language that is common among pre-school age children. Imaginary playmates are not unusual to three year olds and 4-5-6 year olds are great tellers of tall tales. Fictional tales are often indicators that the child perceives that he needs to have something bigger or better to relate in order to receive attention. When parents acknowledge the core message without correcting the inaccuracies spoken, the child feels validated. Parents can then speak accurately about the topic and in that way instill a sense of reality while giving positive attention. Once a child is capable of distinguishing *fact* from *fiction* a parent can ask, “Is this fact or fiction?”

CHEATING

Cheating is a form of lying because it is a deliberate attempt to misrepresent reality. It breaks trust which is essential to any relationship. A student who cheats misrepresents his knowledge, violates a teacher's trust, and is unfair to the students who were not cheating. Such a student deceives those who care about her, her teacher, her classmates and she deceives herself. A habit of cheating undermines self-confidence, self-respect, a sense of industry and self-esteem. The dynamics that motivate lying and the practices that minimize it apply to cheating as well. In both instances, children of the age of reason benefit from understanding that trust is the foundation of personal relationships. The temptation to cheat is lessened when a child understands that trust is needed in order to communicate with each other, believe in each other, rely on each other, and to grow together in a loving, satisfying relationship.

PARENTING PRACTICES

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, "It is easier to create faith than to restore it." Understanding the power of those words and making efforts to reduce the fear factor are effective tools to shape the value of honesty within a child. Explain to a child that toys can be mended; test grades can be improved; material things can be replaced; restitution and consequences can correct poor choices but lying or cheating breaks the trust that we have for each other. If we cannot trust the word of another, we cannot grow in relationship. The specific problem is insignificant compared to the value of truth and our ability to trust each other. It is better to tell the truth and take the consequence than to lie and lose the trust of another person.

May the suggestions that follow affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine ways that you can promote the virtue of honesty within your child.

QUESTIONS: Avoid asking a "yes" or "no" question that invites your child to tell a lie. Instead ask, "Where did you get that candy bar?" Ask your child why he lied or ask him to explain a particular behavior, i.e., fear, peer pressure, inadequacy, resentment.

TEACHING TOOL: Consider the correction of lying as a valuable opportunity to teach a lesson about moral behavior, restitution and responsibility.

ATTENTION SEEKING: If a child arranges a situation to be caught in a lie or an instance of cheating, she is probably trying to get parent attention. Increase practices that help her to feel belonging, contribution, wanted, preferred, needed, and being noticed.

POWER STRUGGLE: If a child is caught in a lie but denies it, his motivation may be a desire for power. Increase practices that help him develop self-reliance, respectful independence, and decision-making capability. Involve him in accountability and logical consequences for behavior. Use encouragement that is helpful, directional, empowering, and skill-related.

RESENTMENT: If dishonest behavior seems revenge based, increase practices that foster initiative by placing more emphasis on effort than on results. Demonstrate that mistakes are redeemable. Increase opportunities for your child to experience fairness, justice, respect, reasonableness, consideration, and appreciation.

INFERIORITY: If lying is motivated by inadequacy, despair, or inferiority increase opportunities for your child to

experience accomplishment, capability, skillfulness, diligence, and responsibility. Give him tasks that require steady care over time. Help him manage time, set goals, and learn ways to plan his work and work his plan.

TEACHABLE MOMENTS: Use as a teachable moment for your child, TV stories, movies, cartoons, books, and observable real life situations that illustrate the effects of dis-honesty on relationships. Explain how lying can become a vicious cycle, i.e., a lie to cover a lie.

CORRECTION: Separate the child from the deed. The act was bad; not the child. Involve God as a loving Father with life-giving advice; not as a weapon! Jesus came to redeem and heal and show us the way to the Father.

REPAIR: If a lie affected others, teach your child to acknowledge the untruth, apologize and ask forgiveness.

PERSPECTIVE: If you sense that the purpose of your child's lying is to irk or annoy you, downgrade the seriousness of the situation. Act casual and very little impressed while applying the logical consequences of the behavior involved.

REDUCE FEAR: To lessen the fear factor associated with telling the truth, teach your child to say something like, "Don't get mad about what I am going to tell you." Take that as a signal to be extra calm and to respond instead of react to what you hear.

EXAMPLE: Be an example of directness, honesty, and owning up to your own mistakes.

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