



So you want to know more about...

# Lying

## Truth or Consequences

Stretching the truth, exaggerating, and even telling outright lies are perfectly normal childhood behaviors.

**Children ages 3-7** sometimes have trouble separating **fact** from **fiction**. They may believe that they can make something true simply by wishing it were so. Children have vivid imaginations and often use imaginary playmates, or imagined scenarios with real playmates, to act out scenarios that would be inappropriate in “real” life. Children under seven are not very reliable reporters because their concept of time is vague and they are still learning to put things in sequence and encode memories for retrieval. They are also influenced by the way we interrogate them about incidents. So, sometimes the whoppers about things that happen on the

playground are not even conscious lies.

**Children ages 6-12** can understand what “lying” means and that this behavior is “wrong.” However, they may still do it. Sometimes they are **testing** adults’ observation skills. Sometimes they **wish** that they could change reality. Sometimes they fear the **consequences** of telling the truth. And sometimes, they’re just saying what they **think** we want to hear.

One way to discourage lying is to be honest ourselves. Another way to help children learn to tell the truth is to own your mistakes. “I lost my temper.” Children fear our disapproval, and we need to show them that everyone makes mistakes. It’s a lot of pressure to try to be “perfect.”

Parents should also ensure that lying **isn’t an effective way** for your child to get what he or she wants. If doing the chores is a prerequisite for some reward, make sure that you check that the chores are done, rather than relying on self-reporting. With older children, establish clear consequences for lying and enforce them. Don’t punish children for telling the truth, or put them in no-win situations.

Last but not least, try not to **overreact** to a lie. As with any aspect of raising children, a dramatic response is an exciting one. Making too big a deal of lying can make this behavior a way to get more attention, albeit negative, for some children. Read further for specific suggestions for dealing with lying at any age.

## Stealing

**Children ages 3-7 years** understand ownership, but their egocentrism may interfere with their judgment. They can want something so badly that they don’t realize that someone else will feel sad about losing the object. In stores, they may not understand that they are stealing because they don’t believe that the merchandise belongs to a “person.” Remind your child how it feels to lose something. In stores, show her that you need to give a clerk money in order to take things out of the store.

**Older children** steal for different reasons. It can be a way to get back at someone who’s angered them; a way to obtain a forbidden toy or treat; or again, a way to get some negative attention. If your child steals something, have him return it, with an apology. Sparing your child the “embarrassment” of apologizing sends the message that stealing isn’t that big a deal (especially if you just sneak the item it back into place).

### Further reading

- *A Bargain for Frances*, by Russell Hoban
- *Junie B. Jones and the Sneaky Peeky Spying*, by Barbara Parks

# Nipping Fibs in the Bud

**Younger children's** lies center around wishful thinking. For example, they wish the world could be as fun and ridiculous as it is in their imaginations, or they wish that they could have something that doesn't belong to them. When your young child fibs:

- Do a reality check. Say, "Wow. I haven't seen anything like that — are you sure?"
- Push for details. "There were dragons messing up your room? How many? What did they do?"
- Find the truth in the story. "Something scary happened on the playground today."
- Help kids learn the difference between "pretend" and "real" and use those terms to talk about the stories they relate.
- Give them an out. Say, "Did that really happen, or did you wish it did?" instead of forcing the lying issue. Then, let it go.

Although they know it's wrong, **children ages six and up** still lie. Here are some of the reasons:

- To "help" them live up to high expectations;
- To avoid consequences/embarrassment;
- To receive attention.

To address these kinds of lies,

- Make sure your expectations are age-appropriate and in line with your child's demonstrated abilities.
- Don't ask questions that give an opportunity to lie. Instead of saying, "Did you do this?" Say, "I heard this vase break. How did it happen?"
- Have a firm but boring response to lies. Enforce consequences and give praise for honesty.

## When is lying NOT normal?

- When the lying is associated with other behavioral disturbances such as sleep disturbances, physical acting out, being mean to animals, etc.
- When children do not have many friends, do not want to join groups, or show other possible signs of childhood depression.
- When children show no remorse about lying.

*Consult your pediatrician or school social worker for an opinion and/or referral if you feel that your child's lying is over the top.*

## Frequently Asked Questions

**My four-year-old daughter will lie about anything. I'm tired of arguing about what's true and what isn't.** Save your reality checks for times when they matter. It doesn't matter that a child says, for example, that she is the strongest girl in the world. In her mind, she may be. So what? If your child says "Tommy colored on my wall," however, and Tommy is not in the house, point that out. Remember that you don't need to agree on the truth in order to enforce the consequence. "No more markers in your room until you show me you know how to keep the walls clean."

**Sometimes I wish my child would lie! Yesterday he told his grandpa that his breath stinks.** It's too confusing for kids under seven or so to figure out when a lie is acceptable. Instead, you can focus on being polite. Being polite means you don't talk about people because it can make them feel bad. Be sure to model more appropriate ways to say "touchy" things. You may not realize that you tell your child his breath stinks, for example. (And, hey—if a child's impulsive

comment gets Grandpa to pay attention to his oral hygiene, that honesty may not be so bad, after all.)

**My child has been stealing money out of my purse. It's not a lot, but still...** Maybe she's ready for an allowance, or earning money by doing small chores. If she already has an allowance or her own money and is just excited about saving it up, remind her that you like to save your money, too. It might help to put your purse out of reach for a while to reduce the temptation.

**I'm so ashamed that my child is stealing other kids' toys at school.** Trying to shame your child to stop stealing isn't an effective motivator. It's akin to the humiliation you might feel when being called on the carpet by your boss. Whether or not the criticism is warranted, the message is obscured by your reaction to the way it is delivered. Also, stealing is not always a "moral" issue for young children, particularly when they are younger than seven years old. Sometimes it's just a matter of impulse control.