

Don't Ever Lie to Me!

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Publish date: January 24, 2012

Pediatric News[®]

Parents may ask you if their child's recent lie predicts a lifelong pattern of dishonesty or a serious character flaw. Many parents will firmly demand and tell their children: "Don't ever lie to me!" Although well meaning, such pronouncements may not achieve the desired result and could potentially do more harm than good.

Sometimes lies, no matter how small, are very disturbing to parents. But pediatricians should counsel them not to overreact. Try to help parents understand that a lie is often a reasonable solution to a problem for the child or adolescent. Also assure them a lie told at age 3, 8, or 14 years doesn't automatically foretell a life of dishonesty, delinquency, and crime.

Lies mean very different things at different ages. A preschooler faced with an angry, red-faced adult may lie out of fear or to fill in something or anything for what they do not understand. An elementary school-age child may lie as part of navigating a complex social situation or to fulfill an obligation to protect a best friend. Adolescents lie to provide space, time, and to cover for friends or themselves, often as a way to gain or protect their privacy.

Rarely do these lies threaten the core trust relationship between parent and children, although some moms and dads erroneously equate a lie at any age concerning any issue and of any scale as the same type of dishonesty they see in adults or even criminals.

It is important to differentiate between very different types of lies. There are pragmatic lies consistent with a child's developmental level. These lies are similar to the lies parents told growing up and honest lies adults tell each other routinely. There are more profound lies that reflect a breach in the trust relationship with the parent. Finally, relatively few children tell lies that reflect a characterological direction of becoming a persistent liar, cheat, or a criminal.

A developmental understanding of lying can help you with the distinctions.

A 3-year-old may quickly say "No" when asked "Did you eat a cookie?" or "Did you knock the plant over?" Often, they see a very angry parent asking a question that would incriminate them. At that moment, the 3-year-old is not thinking about morality, robbing banks, or starting some insider trading. All they are is scared. They don't understand the implication or meaning of the lie. Instead, their thinking is more pragmatic, expedient, and fearful: "If I say no, this will end. If I say yes, I don't know what is going to happen to me."

Many parents make pronouncements that are difficult or impossible for the child to follow. To say "Don't ever lie to me!" or "If you lie to me, I'm never going to trust you again!!" doesn't really make sense in response to one of these pragmatic, developmental lies. I've had parents in my office say, "I don't care what he or she has done, as long as they don't lie to me." This makes all lies the same, at all ages, and puts the full force of the parental relationship on all of them.

I get concerned when parents put so much pressure on telling the truth because they believe it's the path to moral virtue and honesty later in life. This pathway is probably much more linked to the child feeling loved and valued, as well as to the consistency on the parents' part to living the family's values. I often ask parents if they ever lied to their own parents when they were teenagers, and they will respond: "Of course, all the time."

Even very honest adults tell what are called "white lies." Saying "I can't make it that night" or "I'd love to but I can't" when you just don't want to go out three nights in a row is an example. The lie is social and pragmatic, not connected to values and morality, and may replace less socially acceptable truths: "I like you, but not enough to push myself or I like Fred and Alice better."

The school age child, especially 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds, also face some pretty complex social situations. They are learning how groups, hierarchies, and allegiances work. How much can they tell someone? How much can they trust a best friend?

A lot of the cattiness in fourth and fifth graders is a test of relationships and what information they can and cannot share. In this context, there are social and identity lies that have nothing to do with what will later develop into integrity. For example, one child may say to another "I heard that Patty is not going to invite you to the birthday party, and I think she's going to invite me." That's a social hierarchy lie. This can lead to rumors, a test of the social network, and even a mild form of bullying. The initiator may go back to Patty and announce: "If you invite Ellen, then I'm not coming." And then when Ellen approaches Patty for an explanation, and she says, "Oh no, I'd never say that." Clearly, someone is lying in this example.

Adolescents, in contrast, start to tell lies to protect their privacy. For example, a 14-year-old arrives 10 minutes past curfew and says, "Sorry ... but there was an accident, and it took longer to get home."

Who knows if there was an accident or not? She probably overstayed at the party or gabbed with her friends after the movie. There are all sorts of lies that are expedient and pragmatic, but, again, are not connected to later integrity or a lack of fundamental trust with parents.

An adolescent can have a trust relationship with his parent, feel loved and valued, and still say he was late because of traffic or because the car wouldn't start. Or he might say he's going to a friend's house when in fact, he is on the way to meet his girlfriend. That's really about privacy.

I'm not advocating this lying. I'm recognizing this is part of life and of developing one's identity. Assure parents that lies told to carve out some privacy or connected to relatively safe social situations do not equate with a moral lie.

Some parents react to expectable lies by becoming more controlling - especially in adolescence. The lie starts a cycle of no trust that translates into more control, restriction of freedom, and less privacy. The teenager is confused by the intensity and implication of this reaction, and yet is still pushed by his own development trajectory to be more independent and private - all of which may encourage more lies.

We should advise parents to keep this at scale, not to view a minor lie in black and white terms, because this risks the very valuable, deeper trust relationship they need to have with their teenager. You really

want a robust level of trust when a teenager faces major decisions such as whether to drive after drinking or to call when they get into trouble.

Lying that bespeaks a fundamental lack of trust in the parent-child relationship is important to recognize. For example, an adolescent might lie about some serious event in his own life if he has recently discovered his mother is cheating on his father. He withholds information because he no longer trusts his parents with the truth. Again, this type of lying might not predict a life of crime, but it does point to a serious trust issue within the family that needs to be addressed.

A very serious type of lying might present when a parent informs you their child tells lies all the time. Consistent lying from an early age often reflects a child not well connected to all of the people who love him. Without such meaningful relationships in their lives, truth telling might have little value.

These patients - particularly if they break rules without remorse, steal at home or school, and commit other dishonest acts - are at risk for delinquency and might have a conduct disorder. However, this serious group is a very small percentage of the population and should not justify a firm and automatic: "Don't ever lie to me."

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