



Helping Young Children Tell the Truth

Young children occasionally experiment with lying. We can help them tell the truth by responding calmly and consistently when we know they are saying something false. To be effective, we must understand their behaviour and remember that young children reason quite differently than adults.

To help young children tell the truth, adults must distinguish between a lie – a purposeful and persistent intent to deceive (“I didn’t do it!”) – and a young child’s imagination simply escaping into the realm of tall tales and wishful thinking (“We are going to throw away the new baby. She cries too much.”)

Persistent lies are built on a foundation of little lies that “worked” for the child in the past the child has learned that fantastic stories of false statements are effective ways to:

- minimize embarrassment
- avoid punishment
- gain attention
- protect self-esteem

Wishful Thinking

Upon seeing a friend’s new puppy, a child may state emphatically, “I have a new puppy too!” Knowing this to be untrue, we may think the child is being deceitful when he is merely confusing fact and fantasy. If he states the wish convincingly enough, perhaps it will come true or even raise his status with peers.

When responding to wishful thinking, focus on the child’s feelings rather than the facts: “Do you wish you had a new puppy too? Would that be exciting?” By allowing the child to have in fantasy what he can’t have in reality, the story-telling very often subsides.

If, however, the child persists with the false statement, calmly restate the facts and again accept the feelings: “You do not have a new puppy and neither do I, but Tim does. You really wish that you also had a new puppy to play with. Tell me about the puppy you would like to have.” Redirect the child and



be sure he gets plenty of attention for non-puppy talk.

Persistent Denial of Observed Misdeeds (“I didn’t do it!”)

Frequently, deliberate denial in a preschooler is a sign the child has low self-esteem. He builds himself up by telling fanciful stories and protects his weak sense of self by denying misdeeds. If the behaviour is habitual, he needs our help.

- Remain calm. A severe scolding or punishment often results in more lying!
- Avoid setting the child up to lie (even though you know he is at fault) by demanding: “Did you do that?” His instinctive reply will be “No!” Angry adults and harsh consequences may

simply frighten a child into continued lying.

- Never shame the child or imply that he is a liar. “You are lying, and you know it!” This reinforces in the child’s mind that he is a liar. The more he believes this, the more he will lie. Simply state your point: “Writing on the wall is not allowed.”
- Help the child break free from the role of liar. Point out his own honest statements and courageous actions: “Billy, I asked where Erin’s new whistle was and you said it was in your pocket. Thank you for helping by telling the truth. You are honest and also courageous!” If the child reverts to lying remind him that you believe lying is not typical of him: “Why Billy, I’m surprised. Usually you are very good at telling us the truth. Remember when...” Before habitual lying can stop, the child must believe that deep inside he really *is* an honest person.
- Distinguish for the child the difference between his behaviour and himself. Young children often believe good people do good things and bad people do bad things, so denying a misdeed is a way of coping with the problem of wanting to be a good person.
- Meet the child’s need for attention by recognizing appropriate behaviour.
- Give the child an opportunity to make amends for the misdeed (cleaning up the mess, apologizing for hurt feelings, offering to share, returning an item). This teaches “a better way” and reinforces in his own mind that he really is a good person.

Reference

Faber, A. & Mazlish, W. (1982). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon Books.