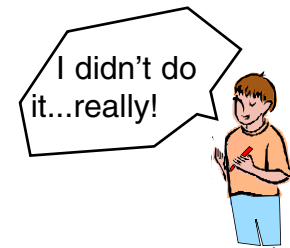




"It Wasn't Me!"

Children Lying



When children don't tell the truth it can be very worrisome for parents. It is easy to become upset about the lie and to overlook what it means to the child. There are many reasons why children may not tell the truth. Almost everyone tells lies from time to time for a variety of reasons - from avoiding hurting someone else's feelings to getting out of an awkward situation. It is important to understand the reasons why a child might lie before you react.

Why Children Lie - A General Developmental Guide

Under Three Years Old:

Children this age do not understand that thinking is private. They believe that their parents can read their minds. A two-year old in a shop may say, "Why did you lose me, Mommy?" because they think that Mom knows where they are, even when she is out of sight. A child under three in this developmental stage who spills milk, for example, probably thinks you know he did it even if you weren't there to see it. If time passes, upon which you discover the milk has been spilled and you ask your child, "Did you spill the milk?", your child will probably answer, "no." He is not lying - he probably does not remember doing it. Telling "lies" has no meaning for children under three.

Three to Four Year-Olds:

Children this age are learning that older people don't know what they are thinking. They enjoy practicing their knowledge and skills and testing those around them by telling "stories" like, "The big bad wolf did it." It is normal for young children to lie, blame someone else, or make up a story. Some children this age have an imaginary friend. They talk to and play with this friend when they are upset and sometimes blame the friend when they do something wrong. This is part of normal growing up and usually disappears as the child grows older. There is no need for concern unless the child seems really withdrawn and unable to get along with other children and adults. You can help by seeing that your child has lots of opportunities for fun and enjoyment.

Early School Years:

Children this age want to please their parents more than they want to "do the right thing." Children this age are not likely to tell the truth if they think it will make their parents angry. It is better not to ask them whether they did something than risk them lying. For example, rather than saying, "Did you spill the milk?" You could say, "I see there has been an accident with the milk. Let's get a cloth and I'll help you clean it up." By eight or nine years, children also have some understanding of the difference between truth and fantasy. The child's sense of right and wrong usually develops by about nine or ten years of age.

Older Children and Adolescents:

Kids this age have a need to keep some parts of their lives private and not share them with parents. If parents ask too many questions, the older child or adolescent may lie to protect this privacy.

CONTINUED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE



This two-page tip sheet was created by the Department of Families, a government agency based out of Queensland, Australia, and can be found at www.families.qld.gov.au/famfirst.html. Some language and spelling was slightly adapted to reflect North American English for the purpose of our audience. Visit the site for more reproducible parental tip sheets on a range of topics.

"It Wasn't Me!"

Children Lying (Continued)

Other Reasons Why Children Lie:

- ☐ Fear of punishment or fear of losing their parents' affection
- ☐ Having low self-esteem and wanting to make themselves sound better
- ☐ They are young for their age and have not yet understood the difference between truth and fantasy
- ☐ To impress their friends and be accepted in the group
- ☐ Sometimes that is how it really seems - they believe that what they are saying is true
- ☐ Copying other people in the family who tell lies. Parents might say that lying is wrong, but not always tell the truth themselves. For example, when someone is at the door and the parent says to the child: "Tell them I'm not home."
- ☐ Adolescents may tell lies because of their strong need for independence. They may be afraid that if they tell the truth, they will not be allowed to do something they really want to do

What Parents Can Do:

- ☐ If you think your child is afraid of punishment, talk with them about other ways that you will deal with mistakes so that they know that they don't need to be afraid to be honest.
- ☐ For younger children, teach the difference between truth and fantasy, e.g. say, "That was a good story" or "I can see you make up lovely stories. Perhaps we can write them down to keep."
- ☐ Show your child that you understand that some lies are wishes. For example, if a child says that their non-custodial parent is calling them all the time, and you know this is not so, you could say, "It sounds like you wish Dad (Mom) could be here all the time."
- ☐ Try not to get into a battle about telling the truth.
- ☐ Teach children why it is important to tell the truth, e.g. "When people tell us the truth it helps us to trust them."
- ☐ Don't label the child "a liar" because labels tend to encourage the kind of behavior you don't want.
- ☐ Notice when children tell the truth and let them know you are pleased.
- ☐ Give adolescents and older children some personal privacy. Ask what you need to know about to protect them, but don't pry too much. Often, teenagers will talk to you when the time is right and they feel you will listen without judging.