

6 truths about children lying

“I’m not LYING,” your six-year-old screams at you, eyes brimming with tears. He believes he’s been falsely accused, but you are certain he’s being dishonest. Maybe his story has changed. Or there’s no way it happened the way he’s telling it. Or he’s left out (important) parts.

Teaching our kids to tell the truth can feel like an impossible task, riddled with land mines. Here are a few truths to remember.

1. Honesty is a skill kids have to learn.

Tying shoes, learning to read and swimming are all things we spend lots of time teaching our kids.

We wouldn’t expect them to “get it” the first time they try. We wouldn’t punish them if it takes a little more time than we’d expect.

In the same way, teaching kids to tell the truth is an important skill they have to learn. They won’t be born understanding what it means and how to do it. It will take trial and error – and as caregivers, we have to be ready to guide them through the process.



2. Being truthful means different things to different people.

“Our culture doesn’t have a nationally-agreed-upon definition of lying,” explains Jen Best, certified family life educator with Iowa State University Extension.

But as the caregiver, it’s part of your job to define what lying means to your family:

- Is it lying to withhold the truth?
- Is it lying to bend the truth to keep from hurting someone’s feelings?
- What are the consequences of lying?

There really are some shades of grey when it comes to lying. And just because other families do it differently doesn’t mean one way is right or wrong.

But it is important for you to set up the framework for honesty in your own family – and then follow the rules yourself (see #6 for more).

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3. Kids don't always intend to lie.

Young people develop at a rapid rate, but they won't always think or reason the way their caregivers do. A good example is time and sequence – kids can get mixed up when trying to explain something in a certain order.

So, if you ask your daughter what she did today, she may get the sequence out of order or miss parts entirely. And the more you press, the more confused she may become.

This doesn't mean she's lying or that she isn't smart.

"Kids just don't think in a straight line," Jen says.

4. Kids believe in magical thinking.

"Kids think if they say something, it may be true," explains Jen. "This magical thinking drives parents crazy, but it's totally normal."

So when you ask your son if he put his shoes on and he says he has, it may just mean he plans to do it or thinks he has done it because he said he has. (Say that ten times fast.)

In addition to this magical thinking, kids also mix up pretend and reality a lot. That's why some stories seem unrealistic – it's because they actually are. They may not be princesses or dinosaurs or astronauts, but the storytelling they are practicing is an important part of their development.

"Their brains are wired to imagine," says Jen. "And they are really good at it."

5. Kids need to be able to say, "I don't know."

Sometimes, we almost force our kids to lie because we don't allow them to say "I don't know" or "I'm confused."

Our children want to please us. That's why they try to answer questions, even when they aren't quite sure how to do so.

Try these tips:

- Ask yes and no questions, which are a bit easier for younger kids to follow.
- Watch for signals to know when your kids are getting frustrated or confused.
- When this happens, it may be time to change course – or even drop the subject entirely (at least for now).

6. Practice what you preach.

So, you believe that being honest is important? Then are you always 100 percent honest with your kids?

Don't give yourself free range to lie to your kids, just because you are the parent. Just like all skills, if

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we want our kids to be honest, we have to be honest as well.

"The most important thing in teaching honesty is don't lie," says Jen. "You may want to protect the child, but lying is never healthy."

Jen reminds parents that lies are scars that some kids don't ever get over. Even as adults, many people remember lies parents told. When a pet dies, it may be easier to tell your child that Sparky is "living on the farm," but these lies are really only making the discussion easier for the parents.

"All children are 'meaning makers,'" says Jen. "In the absence of information, they'll make up their own stories - which are often ten times worse than the truth."

It's also perfectly reasonable to tell your children you don't know something. Caregivers cannot be all-knowing, even though we may wish we were.

now
what?

KEEP LEARNING.

Being truthful is something all of us begin learning at an early age - and something we all practice and refine throughout our lives. As caregivers, it's our job to help our children develop these skills. We can do that by trying our best (just like everything in parenting). And our best often starts with being honest.

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Originally posted on the Now What? Blog 5/20/15. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

now what? Keep Learning.

