



NEWSLETTER

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Getting Your Lying Teen to Level with You

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Calm can parents help children stop lying.

"I'm infuriated, all she does is lie to me!" exclaimed Joan, about Allison, her not so angelic fifteen-year-old daughter. "She lies about what friends she sees at the movies, lies about completing her homework, and by the way, I am sick of policing her about it. And, you know what, I can't even trust if she really washes off her dishes. If she's like this now, how's she going to be as an adult? And, even when she tells me stories, I am finding that she is embellishing galore. I just don't get it. I was not like this as a kid and it would be so much easier if she was straight up about things."

As you can see from the above example, and as you probably know if you are reading this blog, lying children and teens can drive us nuts-if we allow them to. The best you can do as a parent is keep yourself from overreacting to your child's lies. If you overreact, then you are just building a bigger barrier between you and your child feeling safe to open up to you.

The "truth" is that often pre-teens and teens will shade the truth or downright lie. It is best as parents not to take the lies personally. This is not easy but if you step back and stay mindful that kids can lie for different reasons, this realization alone may help you stay calm. Preteens and teens can lie to try to avoid getting in trouble, defend a friend they like, or lie because they are too upset to talk about painful experiences, like rejection from peers.

One child in my practice concocted a story about burying a gun in the woods that was supposedly obtained from a "gang" he belonged to. Turns out the story was a hoax but his underlying feelings of inadequacy were a serious matter. In this example, the child lied to make himself seem more powerful to others, calm himself from feeling invisible and lonely, and because he lacked social and problem-solving skills.

It's important to be cognizant of the difference between lies that cover up for risky behaviors including drug use as opposed to smaller, every day lies. Lying that results in, or covers for, unsafe or illegal behavior must be addressed directly. Instead of getting hung up if your teen is showing remorse, and yes, I realize that this is important, remember that being responsive is paramount. When the lying is about dangerous

behaviors, involving drug or alcohol use, stealing, or other risky activities, seek guidance from a qualified mental health professional in your local community.

What to do as a parent or caregiver

Try to keep in mind that kids can be quite self-absorbed (can't we also be as adults too?) and they often don't understand how hurtful lies can be. Calmly discuss versus lecture about honesty and dishonesty, and why they chose to lie. Do not use a judgmental tone, as it just usually fuels the "See I can't tell my parents anything" reflex from preteens and teens. You may not be able to stop your teen from creating those every day lies, but you can convey that there are other options available.

I suggest that you think of yourself as an "emotion coach" versus over the top disciplinarian out to show who is boss. Talk about how telling the truth can feel scary and how we can all feel scared and that it's okay. Share how calming down and solving problems are the keys for a successful life. Relate how lies can give the tempting illusion of calm and avoiding problems (e.g. homework not completed) but in the long run lies just create stress and emotional chaos.

If you feel that your child is making lies a "go to" way to cope then acknowledge this observation. Talk about the problems they face as a consequence of lying but don't use shaming tones as you speak. Join with your child about his fears. For example, does he believe that saying something dishonest helps him fit in?

Remember, above all, to help your child see her value. I often remind my own children and my clients about KYV (Know Your Value). In fact, I wrote a past blog on this very topic. For example, if your child is exaggerating a story, you might ask, "What you were telling me really held my interest, but then it seemed like you started to add things to it that weren't true. That got in the way of seeing how you really are becoming so mature. Can you tell me why you decided to do that?"

Keep in mind that addressing lying behaviors is a process versus a quick fix. Some kids may take a while before they feel safe to level with you. But if you keep your own emotional reactivity and judgmental responses at bay, your child or teen is more likely to eventually open up. While in the short term you may just get a shrug, keeping yourself calm will help your voice of truth and reason be heard.

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