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CHILD BEHAVIOR HELP

ARTICLE

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT LYING

by Michael Kramer, Ph.D.



When your child lies to you, it stirs up a potent mix of emotions. You might feel angry, hurt and offended all at once. Lying is extremely upsetting for parents because it shakes the foundation of trust we have in our child. So it's understandable and normal if you have an emotional reaction to lying—whether the lie is elaborate and “premeditated” or impulsive—a fib your child tells because he just didn't stop and think.

Related: [Is your child lying and talking back? How to change their behavior.](#)

But no matter how angry, hurt or offended you feel when you catch your child in a lie, it's important to respond to him in a consistently calm and measured way rather than an emotionally reactive way (e.g. “How dare you lie to me? I'll never trust you again!”). When we overreact emotionally, it allows our kids to focus on *our* unreasonable behavior and sometimes diverts them from taking personal responsibility for *their* behavior.

Likewise, it's important not to overreact by imposing a disproportionate or inappropriate consequence that doesn't fit the circumstances (e.g. “You're grounded for a month! No electronics. No car!”). While throwing down a punishment might make you feel better in the moment, it won't help your child to learn from her mistake. Often, kids prefer to simply “serve their sentence” rather than have a meaningful conversation with their parents about the reasons for and impact of their lie. But having a conversation about the lie is where the learning happens for your child and is where you can influence better choices for more consistently responsible behavior.

Related: [How to be a consistent parent.](#)

What We Want Kids to Learn from Lying

Talking about the reason your child lied is an opportunity for her to learn from her mistakes in three ways:

1. **It increases her awareness of the emotional impact of lying on others.** Lies don't happen in a vacuum. They affect lots of other people, from siblings to peers to teachers and coaches, depending on the nature of the lie and the consequences that result from it. Because kids have a tendency to “leap before they look,” they often don't realize how their actions affect others...until you make them

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aware of it.

2. **It increases their awareness of the impact the lie has on them.** Kids may feel guilt, shame, and a loss of self-respect and self-esteem when they lie. They lose freedom and have to endure more parental supervision. It's helpful to talk openly about these realities with your child so she becomes more aware of how she is impacted as a person when she doesn't tell the truth.
3. **It teaches children the importance of solid core values.** A value system can't be variable or situation-specific; it has to be consistent to have any meaning. Your child's value system is the cornerstone of trust in your relationship.

By talking about the lie with your child, you are creating an opportunity for her to gain a better understanding of the consequences of her actions and, ultimately, to be more truthful.

Related: [How to make consequences work for your child, even when she says, "I don't care."](#)

The Conversation: How to Set It Up for Success

Don't just dive in to this conversation. After you've taken some time to calm down and get some perspective, set it up with these four things in mind:

1. **Establish consequences or loss of privileges.** It's definitely necessary and appropriate to have consequences for lying. The most common consequence is a loss of privileges for a specific period of time. This is different from the "grounded for eternity" consequence I mentioned earlier. Suspend a privilege that's related to the offense. Say, for example, your son tells you there will be a responsible adult chaperoning the party this Friday and you find out later there wasn't. You can give a consequence called "verification." For the foreseeable future, your son loses the privilege of going to any party until you've verified there will be an adult on site (By the way, I've found this consequence to be very effective. Kids really don't like it and will often decide being truthful works better.). Or let's say your daughter uses the family car to go somewhere you've told her she's not allowed to go, and lies about it. The consequence could be her car use is restricted to driving to and from school only and you check the odometer. When she demonstrates she can follow the rules with the car for two weeks, she gets driving privileges back.

Withholding privileges for a period of time is important because it helps draw the child into a period of reflection. So, time that's normally spent on the phone or with the Play Station is spent thinking about telling the truth and how to be reflective, not reactive.

Related: [Stop Reacting—and Start Responding.](#)

2. **Tell your child that part of the consequence is that he needs to have a meaningful conversation with you about the lie.** Some kids won't want to talk about it at all. It stirs up emotion that make them very uncomfortable, and they'll resist at all costs. In this case, explain that the loss of privileges stays in force until he has a meaningful conversation. Other kids may want to have the talk quickly to get the consequence over with. I've always found it to be most effective to keep the suspension of privileges in force for the amount of time you specify and not cut it short after the conversation takes place. So, if you take away your teen's cell phone for a week, and he decides to have the conversation on day two, he still loses cell phone access for the rest of the week. Privileges resume after both conditions are met.

3. **Set the framework before having the conversation.** Talking about a subject like this can seem pretty big to your child, and he might not know where to begin or what to anticipate. You can simply tell him, “Here are some things I’d like you to think about before we talk.” Then give him a list of three or four open-ended questions to consider, such as:
 - a. What were you trying to accomplish when you lied?
 - b. (If the lie involved peers) How would you define a healthy friendship?
 - c. (If the lie involved breaking house or family rules) How did you decide that lying was a way to deal with your frustration about our rules/expectations? If you’re unhappy about a rule because you see us as overly restrictive or protective, what could you do about that besides lying?
 - d. Ask about trust with a question such as: In the future, what are the reasons that I should trust you’ll keep your word?
 - e. What will you do differently the next time you find yourself in this situation?

Related: Regain control of your child, your family and your life.

4. **No lectures. Avoid the word “why.”** When you are establishing consequences, setting the framework and having the actual conversation, avoid the emotional temptation to lecture your child about the offense. Keep it businesslike and calm, asking open-ended questions that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no. Avoid the word “why.” Asking your child “Why did you lie about going to the party” will likely set up a power struggle and defensiveness that will get in the way of learning.

Once you’ve given your child the framework and he’s thought things through, have the conversation. You can use the framework you set up as a guideline.

How Will I Know My Child Has Learned Something From This?

You know best when your child is being authentic or simply telling you what they think you want to hear. Children generally demonstrate that they are learning from mistakes by speaking openly and genuinely about their reason for making the misstep. They will also generally show some level of authentic emotion—sadness, guilt or shame. For most kids, lying doesn’t feel good. In your conversation, allow space for them to talk about that and why it doesn’t feel good.

Some kids can lie regularly but only get caught infrequently. That’s why when you discover that your child has not told the truth, it’s important to have a structured conversation that shines the light on the *impact* of their lie. It’s not a conversation your child will enjoy having, but the payoff of that talk is a big one—a child who has more respect for himself, you and others. A child you can trust.

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Dr. Michael Kramer is a Clinical Psychologist and Nationally Certified School Psychologist who has worked with children, adolescents, and their families for over thirty years. Over the course of his career, he has worked in residential treatment centers, inpatient psychiatric units, community mental health centers, and public and private schools. In his private practice, he specializes in providing treatment to youth with anxiety, depression, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. He also works as a Sports Psychologist, providing service to high school, collegiate, and professional athletes. Dr. Kramer is the father of two grown children.

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