

FAMILY WELLNESS

When Children Lie

- Developmental considerations
- How to respond
- Resources to support



Every family experiences a time when a child discovers lying. How do we respond with care?

Lying can trigger big emotions for adults and can make us feel like our children do not love or respect us when they engage in lying behaviors. Considering their age and development in light of the behavior can help.

Children are able to consciously tell lies usually around the age of four--after they understand that others think differently than they do and after they can think hypothetically and critically. When children lie before this time, they are experiencing genuine confusion or "magical thinking"--when the desire for what they want to be true is so strong

that they actually believe what they are saying (lying about) is reality. Even after developing the skills needed to lie, children can still fall back into these patterns from time to time when they don't understand that their lies are not true.

The way that we respond to lies should reflect the child's perspective. Are they confused? Do they understand that what they are saying isn't true?

Or are they consciously trying to deceive? When you feel your older child is intentionally trying to deceive, try some of the following strategies.

Addressing a Lie

How to help your child when they're caught in a lie.

Don't ask for a confession.

"Did you get into the paint?!" is always going to be met with a "No I didn't!". Rather than asking accusatory questions, simply narrate for your child what has happened: "I see that you have lots of blue paint on your face. Looks like you may have gotten into the paint without permission." This helps them avoid lying in the first place and keeps you both focused on whatever behavior needs to be addressed.

Make it safe to be truthful.

If children fear harsh consequences, they will be afraid to come out with the truth when they've been caught in a lie. Hold children to loving boundaries with fair and gentle consequences, but avoid discipline strategies that create fear and make children afraid to make mistakes.

Help them avoid temptations to lie.

When you're aware of a situation that might create temptation for lying, help prepare children by talking about it in advance. "We're going to go play with your cousins. What are good and safe choices that you can make with them?" "I am leaving 12 cookies here to cool. You will get to have one at the party, but it is not a good choice to sneak one now."

Focus on repairing the relationship.

When lying has occurred, it's important for children to see how it affects others around them, but we don't want to create excessive shame or guilt. Coach them on ways to help people they've hurt in their lies--making an apology, drawing a picture, writing a note, or helping to solve the problem they've contributed to are all good ways for children to repair their mistakes.

**"One can always forgive lying--
lying is a delightful thing for it
leads to truth."**

– FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

Resources

For continued support

- Unruffled Podcast by Janet Landsbury, "[When Children Lie](#)"
- [Lying and Brain Development](#) article from NPR
- [The Psychology Behind Lying](#) article by Child Mind Institute
- [How to address lying at different ages](#)
- [List of picture and chapter books](#) to help talk to your child about lying

