



How to Handle Lying

Because one of the cardinal symptoms of ADD is impulsivity, lying can be commonplace for children with ADD. Impulsivity is acting without thinking about the consequences. Children with ADD might then lie or say something that is not true, before they even think that it is a lie or that there might be consequences of the lie. It is extremely important then to talk about lying with children with ADD. They must understand how serious this can be an unhealthy lying is.

More Serious Conditions of Lying

Some children will develop more serious conditions like conduct disorders or even antisocial personality disorder. These conditions are more serious and very difficult to treat. Children who habitually lie need to be evaluated by mental health professionals to determine if one of these more serious disorders exists.

“White Lies” or Social Lies

Many people lie for one reason or another. Some of the time, the lies are what we call “white lies”. These social lies are used to protect someone’s feelings or to preserve enjoyment in a social situation, or to avoid a conflict during a social situation. Children do not understand the social graces and do not use white lies often; rather they tend to lie for many other reasons. We will explore why children lie and give some options on how to react when children lie.

Why Children Lie

- **Wishful Thinking** - Preschool children often will lie when faced with a situation that they wish were true for themselves. For example if a child says that he has a pet at home, the preschool child may respond, “I do too.” For the parent of the preschool child, acknowledging that this is a desire rather than a lie, the child learns the difference. “I know you wish you had a kitty too.” This allows the child to have the fantasy and avoids discipline where it generally is not needed.
- **Minimizing Embarrassment** - All of us, from school age up through adulthood will say things to keep from getting embarrassed. It is important to recognize why a child would do this, and then identify the truth.
- **Avoid Punishment** - Because they know that they will get into trouble for things that they have done, they try to avoid punishment by lying. This too is very common. Allowing for a second chance at the truth to “turn oneself in” often will assist children in being honest.
- **Gain Attention** - Many times people want attention and do not know how to get the appropriate attention from those they wish to acknowledge them. Lying might give you the attention that you feel that you need.



- **Protect Self-Esteem** - It is a natural thing to try to protect one's self-esteem. When faced with the option of giving in to being less than perfect or telling a small lie, it is human nature to try the lie. As parents we must acknowledge this and use these occurrences as learning experiences.

Modeling a Parental Behavior

Parents often teach their children to lie if they use lying to protect themselves. They might watch their parent call in sick when they are not or say that their child is sick to avoid work, when it is not true. These small seemingly insignificant lies often give our children the framework to lie themselves.

How to Help a Child who Lies

- **Stay calm** - If you react quickly and impulsively when you catch your child in a lie, you might offer a severe punishment or scolding only resulting in more lying to protect oneself.
- **Avoid setting the child up to lie** - Even though you know that your child did something, asking them "did you do that?" might generate an instinctive reply of "No!" Angry adults and harsh consequences may simply frighten a child into continued lying. State the truth, the importance of telling the truth and walk away. If there is a consequence, acknowledge that there will be a consequence but avoid sentencing at that moment. Leave the child time to think.
- **Never shame the child or imply that he or she is a liar** - When you tell your child that they are liars, then you are reinforcing in the child's mind that in fact they are liars. The more your child hears and believes that they are liars the easier it will be to lie again.
- **Help the child break free from the role of being a liar** - The child must believe that deep inside that he or she really is an honest person. Say things like, "you usually always tell the truth, I am surprised today that you told a lie. That is not like you to lie."
- **Distinguish for the child the difference between his behavior and himself** - Young children often believe good people do things and bad people do bad things, denying a misdeed is a way of coping with the problem of wanting to be a good person.
- **Give the child an opportunity to make amends for their misdeed** - Cleaning up the mess, apologizing for hurt feelings, offering to share, returning an item; these things teach children a better way and reinforce in them that they really are a good person.
- **Give them time to think** - Allowing the child time to think about the lie and to empower them to come up with ways to correcting the situation is always a better option.
- **Discuss lies that they might witness in the family** - if the child is associated with someone that they might care for has lied, it is important to talk about those actions and how hurtful they can be. Do not then say that this person who they might care for is bad, but that the lie was bad. This helps the child see a lie for what it is.

Joseph C. Stegman, M.D.
George W. Hatley, PA-C

Maricela Dominguez Gulbranson, M.D. F.A.A.P.
Angela Noone, CPNP

Mark C. Clayton, M.D.

301 Medical Park Drive, St 202B, Concord, NC 28025

Phone: 704-403-2626 | Fax: 704-403-2699 | www.behavioralped.com