



## Positive Parenting of Primary Schoolers

# Lying

*When children often tell lies, it can be difficult for parents to trust them. Parents may find it hard to believe their children even when they are telling the truth. Telling lies can also cause problems with friends and other family members. Children need to learn that no matter what they have done, they must tell the truth. It is best to deal with lying as soon as it starts. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your child to tell the truth.*

### When Is Lying a Problem?

Society's attitudes towards lying are complex and confusing for children. Sometimes not telling the truth or telling 'white lies' is considered to be a good thing if the aim is to protect another person's feelings. Adults commonly tell several 'untruths' like this per day. On the other hand, deliberately saying something that is not true to mislead someone is not acceptable. This kind of lying is a problem because it undermines trust.

Telling stories or untruths is common in preschoolers. Preschoolers sometimes mix up reality and fantasy, so they may tell stories without deliberately intending to tell lies. However, by primary school age, children know the difference between truth and fantasy. At this age, it becomes a problem if children tell lies.

### Why Do Children Tell Lies?

Children lie for many reasons. They may lie to avoid the consequences of something they have done, such as doing something they know their parents would not let them do. Also, if children do not get any benefits for telling the truth, they may lie instead. For example, if a child tells the truth and is severely or unfairly punished, they may learn to lie to avoid punishment.

Children may learn to lie from watching their parents or other children tell lies. If children see others seem to benefit from lying, they are likely to copy them.

Children may also lie as a way of getting attention and approval from their friends. Children may tell lies about what they have done, seen or own. Sometimes children feel that others will not accept them as they really are and that they need to tell stories to make themselves more acceptable to others. These children may be lonely, bored or have low self-esteem. Boastful lies often stop when a child starts school or when they get caught out once or twice by others.

### How To Tell if Your Child Is Lying

Lying can be difficult to stop if you are not sure when your child is telling the truth. Primary school children often give



the truth away because they smile while telling a lie or their story just does not sound right. For example, when asked to explain why they have \$10, your child might tell an unlikely story about being given the money by a friend. Questions about when, where, who was with them or the order of events will often lead to the truth. However, some children will keep to their lie no matter what evidence there is.

### How To Discourage Lying

#### **Discuss the Problem with Your Child**

At a time when everyone is calm, explain to your child that lying is unacceptable and that you want it to stop at once. This talk should not happen immediately after your child has told a lie. Wait and give everyone time to calm down.

#### **Describe the Problem**

Briefly and calmly say how lying affects you and why you think it is a problem—*Tania, I feel angry and disappointed when you lie. It makes it hard to believe anything you say. If you continue to tell lies you'll find that nobody will trust you.*

#### **Ask Your Child's Opinion**

Ask your child why they felt they needed to lie. Many children will not have much to say. Others will make excuses or try to blame someone else. Avoid getting into a *Yes, but...* argument with your child. Simply tell your child that you want them to tell the truth from now on.

## How To Encourage Your Child To Tell the Truth

### ***Give Your Child Opportunities To Tell the Truth***

Tell your child that you are going to give them opportunities to be honest. Occasionally ask your child about things you know about already. Quickly check on the facts then ask your child questions such as—*Have you tidied your bedroom?* or *Have you done your homework?* or *Have you finished raking up the leaves in the yard?* Your child can then practise telling the truth about what they have been doing. You will know straight away whether your child is telling the truth because you have checked the facts.

### ***Praise Your Child for Telling the Truth***

If your child tells the truth, praise them—*Thank you Nicole, for telling me the truth*—regardless of whether your child has done what they were supposed to do. The idea is to praise your child for telling the truth no matter what else has happened.

## How To Manage Lying

### ***Act on Your Suspicions***

Be prepared to take action if you suspect that your child is not telling the truth. You may not always be able to prove that your child has lied.

### ***Tell Your Child the Problem and the Consequence***

If your child has not told the truth, describe the problem—*Kevin, you are not telling me the truth about that. You have not finished raking the yard*—and the consequence—*There will be no television until after dinner.*

Deal with the lying first, then the problem that led to the lie. Provide appropriate consequences for both. Suitable consequences involve the loss of an activity or privilege. For example, a broken lamp is found in your child's room and your child lies about how it got there. Provide a consequence for the lying, such as no television for the rest of the day. Then provide another consequence for breaking the lamp, such as putting some of their own money towards fixing it.

## Points To Remember

It can take time for children who tell lies to learn that it is better to tell the truth. You can help by setting up a contract with your child (see below). Seek professional help if lying continues to be a problem.

### **Key Steps**

- Explain why lying is a problem.
- Tell your child they must stop telling lies.
- Set up opportunities for your child to practise telling the truth.
- Praise your child for telling the truth.
- Use a logical consequence if your child lies.

## If Problems Persist

Here is another strategy you can try if your child continues to lie.

- Explain to your child that they can earn points by not telling lies.
- Set up a written contract which you and your child sign. The contract is an agreement which says what your child is expected to do and the rewards and consequences that will follow (see the tip sheet *Stealing* for an example of a contract).
- Tell your child that the points can be exchanged for a daily reward or a larger reward at the end of the week. Decide how many points your child must earn to get the reward and what the reward will be.
- Make a chart to keep a record of points earned. Stick the chart somewhere that it is easy for you and your child to see, like on the refrigerator.
- Each day your child tells you the truth, put the points on their chart. Remember to praise your child for telling the truth.
- At the end of the set time, add up the number of points your child has earned. If they have reached their goal, give them the reward.
- If your child lies, tell them the problem and the consequence. Do not lecture, nag or shout. Calmly apply the consequence agreed to in the contract. This may involve the loss of a privilege as described earlier, or if your child receives pocket money, a logical consequence may be a fine each time they lie. For children under 10 years of age, you may choose to use time-out as an immediate consequence for lying (see *Positive Parenting* booklet).

***See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.***



Written by the Parenting and Family Support Centre (Triple P), The University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Published by the Victorian Parenting Centre 2005.

© Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2000.

Permission is granted for this material to be printed, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes within the State of Victoria. Code: PPT4007