

Lying in children

Have you ever listened to your preschooler weave a tall tale or deny something you know to be true? Lying may be difficult for parents to accept, but it is part of growing up. Parents often ask us how they should handle lying situations. It is dependent on the age of the child, the specific situation and the family's rules.

At the preschool age, children are learning and practicing how to separate fantasy from reality. They aren't necessarily intending to outright deceive you but instead believe that it is their wishes or thoughts that can cause things to happen a certain way. Preschoolers don't really grasp what truth is yet. Developmental theorist Jean Piaget tells us that children are close to age seven, elementary age, before they really understand what a lie is and that it is bad.

Your preschool child's lies may stem from:

- Forgetfulness - Preschoolers have short attention spans as well as short memories. They may not remember taking a friend's toy.
- Wishful thinking - Preschool children may wish that something did or did not happen. They may wish that the glass bowl did not break.
- Active imagination - Creativity is at a peak for this age. Many lies are from active daydreaming. Your child may enjoy telling you an outrageous story about an adventure that occurred on the playground while at school. Did you ever read *And to Think I saw it on Mulberry Street* by Dr. Seuss?
- Need for Attention - Your child may feel important when they have your attention and they get a response from you...good or bad.

How can you deal with this frustrating behavior? Help your preschooler to sort out reality from wish, or what is in their head. In fact, you could point out their creativity. "That story you made up was very entertaining!" rather than "Stop lying!" However, don't get caught up with reinforcing the lie by asking them to repeat the story for Grandma.

Kindergarteners generally tell two kinds of lies: lies to get something or lies to avoid something. When you hear your kindergartener telling lies, do not overreact but point out that it is wrong and that it is important to tell the truth. The fable of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* or the Chinese fable *The Empty Pot (Demi)* are two of my favorite tales to tell that illustrate the impact of lying.

Usually, by the time a child enters Elementary, however the knowledge that lying is wrong is fully understood. This age child generally lies to stay out of trouble and avoid punishment, impress their peers, boost their self-esteem or protect others. Children of this age also lie

because they may hear their parents or other adults lie. Remember to be a role model as a parent and avoid the common custom of 'white lies' being overheard.

Handling lying at this age is a bit different. It takes a great deal of time and patience. As soon as you suspect your child has lied, tell him that you suspect that he is lying. Comment, "That doesn't sound like the truth. Tell me details." Try to avoid focusing on the solution and asking leading questions in a disappointed way. Your child will pick up on your tone and on the sound of your voice. Comment, "I know that you did it and I am disappointed that you did it." Once you have stated the facts, encourage the truth to bring closure to the matter. Avoid the trap of instant forgiveness that causes your child to believe, "I told the truth so I will not get punished or have any consequences." It is important for everyone to note that something has been done and there is a consequence.