

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 44

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CHILDREN AND LYING

Honesty and dishonesty are learned in the home. Parents are often concerned when their child or adolescent lies.

Lying that is probably not a serious problem:

Young children (ages four and five) often make up stories and tell tall tales. This is normal activity because they enjoy hearing stories and making up stories for fun. These young children may blur the distinction between reality and fantasy.

An older child or adolescent may tell a lie to be self-serving (e.g. avoid doing something or deny responsibility for their actions). Parents should respond to isolated instances of lying by talking with the youngster about the importance of truthfulness, honesty and trust.

Some adolescents discover that lying may be considered acceptable in certain situations such as not telling a boyfriend or girlfriend the real reasons for breaking up because they don't want to hurt their feelings. Other adolescents may lie to protect their privacy or to help them feel psychologically separate and independent from their parents (e.g. denying they sneaked out late at night with friends).

Lying that may indicate emotional problems:

Some children, who know the difference between truthfulness and lying, tell elaborate stories which appear believable. Children or adolescents usually relate these stories with enthusiasm because they receive a lot of attention as they tell the lie.

Other children or adolescents, who otherwise seem responsible, fall into a pattern of repetitive lying. They often feel that lying is the easiest way to deal with the demands of parents, teachers and friends. These children are usually not trying to be bad or malicious but the repetitive pattern of lying becomes a bad habit.

There are also some children and adolescents who are not bothered by lying or taking advantage of others. Other adolescents may frequently use lying to cover up another serious problem. For example, an adolescent with a serious drug or alcohol problem will lie repeatedly to hide the truth about where they have been, who they were with, what they were doing, and where the money went.

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What to do if a child or adolescent lies:

Parents are the most important role models for their children. When a child or adolescent lies, parents should take some time to have a serious talk and discuss:

- the difference between make believe and reality, lying and telling the truth,
- the importance of honesty at home and in the community, and
- alternatives to lying.

If a child or adolescent develops a pattern of lying which is serious and repetitive, then professional help may be indicated. Evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist would help the child and parents understand the lying behavior and would also provide recommendations for the future.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

- #3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs,
- #12 Children Who Steal,
- #33 Conduct Disorder,
- #43 Discipline,
- #52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluations,
- #65 Children’s Threats: When Are They Serious and
- #72 Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

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