

10 Ways to Help Children Who Have a Problem With Lying

Honesty is the basis for any relationship because it develops trust and upon that foundation simple things like communication and responsibility rest. When a child lies, that trust is broken and relationships suffer.

Parents often don't know how to handle dishonesty and common discipline techniques don't quite address the problem. A more comprehensive plan is usually necessary since dishonesty often has several components. Here are some ways to deal with it.

1. Talk about reality and truth and how they are different from fantasy, wishes, possibility, pretend, and make believe. Require that children use cues to identify anything other than reality. Here are some ideas:

- "I think it happened this way," "I think this is the answer," "I'm not sure..." "Maybe..." (possibility)
- "I wish this were true," "I'd like it if..." (wish)
- "I'd like to tell you a story..." "I can imagine what it would be like to..." (fantasy)

2. When you sense a child is beginning to stray from the truth, stop them. "I want you to stop talking for a minute." Sometimes children just get started and can't stop. Parents can help teach them. "Think for a minute and then start again. I'd like to hear the things you know separated from the things you think." "Start again and tell me how it really happened. Just the parts you are sure of."

3. If a child has ADHD or is impulsive, use a plan for self-discipline. Sometimes children who are impulsive blurt out things without thinking. Other times they start talking and don't know how to stop. This impulsivity component can lead to dishonesty because of a lack of self-control. It's not always

malicious lying, but it's still not good and shouldn't be excused because the problem often gets worse. Even though children may have poor impulse control, they must learn to tell the truth. The route, though, may contain more self discipline training than some of the other suggestions.

4. A courtesy generally given in relationships is called, "the benefit of the doubt." When a child has developed a pattern of lying we don't automatically give that courtesy. Believing someone requires trust and it's a privilege, which is earned. Privilege and responsibility go together and when a child is irresponsible then privileges are taken away. For a time, the things your child says are suspect. You may even question something that is found to be true later. A child may be hurt by this; but that hurt is the natural consequence of mistrust which in turn comes from lying. Being believed is a privilege earned when children are responsible in telling the truth on a regular basis. Not believing your child may seem mean but your child must learn that people who don't tell the truth can't be trusted. Tell your child that you would like to believe him or her but you cannot until he or she earns that privilege.

5. Some situations won't be clear and some children will deliberately lie to avoid punishment. You find yourself in a predicament because proof seems impossible yet you have a sense that this child is not telling the truth. When possible, don't choose that battleground. It's too sticky and you will usually have other clearer opportunities later. Children who have a problem with lying demonstrate it often. Choose the clearer battles and use those situations to discipline firmly. Use Taking a Break and the Positive Conclusion and maybe other consequences if necessary.

6. Confrontation should result in repentance. This may seem unrealistic at first but keep it in mind as your goal. Children who are confronted with the fact that they are telling a lie should immediately agree and apologize. A child who is defensive is relying on arguing and justifying as

manipulative techniques in order to avoid taking responsibility. This is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. Use Taking a Break to motivate the child to repentance.

7. You may, for an introductory period of time, in order to motivate repentance when confronted, withhold further discipline if a child responds properly to correction. “If you can admit it was a lie and that you were wrong when I confront you, I will not further discipline you for that lie.” This is a temporary approach to teach a proper response to correction.

8. Be proactive in teaching about honesty. Tell stories from your life or read stories like:

- The Emperor’s New Clothes
- The Boy who Cried Wolf
- Pinocchio
- Ananias and Sapphira from the Bible

There are several good books at your local library on this subject that are written for children and are well illustrated to capture their interest.

9. Give an outlet for creative writing or storytelling to further emphasize the difference between fantasy and reality and a proper use of fantasy.

10. Memorizing proverbs dealing with honesty is a way to appeal to a child’s conscience.

These suggestions will go a long way toward helping a child tell the truth. Don’t let this problem go. It only gets worse.

Continual, persistent work will pay off in the end. Other helpful ideas can be found in the book, *Good and Angry, Exchanging Frustration for Character in You and Your Kids*, by Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN.

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