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# Lying and stealing

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Children under seven may tell tall stories or take things that don't belong to them - but are unlikely to understand why adults disapprove. However, in middle childhood children should know better.

## Why?

Older children may lie and steal:

- **To gain more attention** - lying that he feels ill, in order to be comforted, or taking and hiding a toy belonging to a sibling, knowing it will be noticed.
- **To avoid something undesirable** - a tummyache invented on Monday morning to avoid going back to school, money taken from a purse to avoid embarrassment with friends who have more.
- **To test adults** - telling a teacher he's going to live in another country to see whether she can be fooled.
- **Wishful thinking** - telling friends he's off to an exotic island in the holidays because he really wishes it were true.
- **To get even** - lying about a friend or stealing their favourite game if they have upset him.
- **To show bravado** - boys, especially, might do this by taking something from a neighbour's garden or 'exaggerating' to friends about an exploit.

## Stealing in school age children

It's not really surprising young children sometimes take money - it seems to have a magical quality and they can see that it gets you almost all you want!

You need to explain how hard it is to earn, why it's important to have enough and why we can't just take it from others.

Children need to learn about money and possessions - most importantly about the moral side. You need to teach your child that life would be impossible if we all just grabbed each other's things.

It's much better to explain why it's inappropriate to take money or possessions from others than it is to impose strict rules. For example, saying: "You'll be in big trouble if you ever touch my purse" uses fear of punishment to control the behavior.

Eight-year-olds and above should have an understanding of why stealing is wrong. But if your child does steal nonetheless, you should insist he returns the items he's taken and makes an apology. You should talk to your child about why this behavior isn't acceptable and you may wish to punish him - for example, less time on the computer, not having friends to stay, early bedtime.

## **Lying in school-age children**

Fibs told by younger preschool children - "The doll broke the toy" or "I saw a giant at the park" - show either they muddle up fact and fantasy, or demonstrate an understandable desire to avoid getting into trouble. In middle childhood, though, we generally expect our children to be more honest.

It's only from about seven to eight years of age that children can fully understand the difference between truth and lies - before that they're not 'lying' in the adult sense, as they may genuinely believe they saw a fairy in the garden!

By about eight or nine years of age most children have an understanding of right and wrong. The development of conscience means your child will feel bad when he tells a lie - even though he may still do it.

## **For ages five to ten (approximately)**

At the younger end, children begin to understand the difference between fact and fiction. A six-year-old knows he's not really in a space ship when he plays at going to the moon.

However, it's sometimes easier for him to go back to the type of fantasies that worked well when he was younger - particularly to avoid unpleasant experiences. If the truth is too painful, he may use fantasy to make it go away.

Your child may also lie to avoid getting into trouble or for fear of being punished: "It wasn't me that broke it".

## **Reasons your child might lie**

- Wishful thinking - this lets your child impress his friends and allows him to imagine that a dream can really come true. If a friend has an enviable new computer game, he may insist he has it also. This tends to lessen around eight or nine years.

- Difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality - younger children under eight years of age often believe if they really want something badly enough it can happen - "My daddy is taking me to see lions in Africa".
- Trying to please parents - "I have done my homework" or "I did wash my face". A child older than seven knows you'll check but wants to make you happy! This may feel more important than being caught out in the lie.
- Suspects your love and approval are conditional - "I was the best at Math" or "I made it for the football team" - he thinks it's more important to gain your approval than be truthful.
- To avoid punishment - the more harshly a child is punished, the more he'll lie to avoid it - "Jack did it, it wasn't me."

Your child needs to understand that you'll still love him even if when he does something wrong. He needs to learn that honesty is the best policy.

## **How to deal with problems**

- Respond to 'wishes' - recognize when your child is expressing a 'wish' - say 'you wish you could go to an exotic island, maybe one day'.
- Be clear - stress that you don't want your child to lie and would prefer honesty, even if the truth is sometimes unpleasant.
- Show love - make it clear you'll love your child no matter how he does in school or how successful or unsuccessful he is at games.
- Check your reactions aren't too harsh - the fear of punishment can turn a child into a habitual liar; he must be able to trust you not to scream or hit him.
- Show your disapproval - let your child know you take stealing very seriously.
- Discuss each incident with your child and explain why the behavior is wrong.
- Avoid harsh punishments - try to be calm in your reaction, don't overreact. Punishments should suit your child's age.
- Get the facts - always listen to your child's side of the story.
- Stress how bad it makes others feel to lose their possessions.
- Don't allow your child to profit from wrongdoing - take away any stolen object.
- Teach your child about money - think about giving pocket money in return for chores (such as folding washing) as this will help him appreciate that money is earned. Don't leave cash lying around if you know it will tempt him.
- Work out better ways for your child to get attention - if his bad behavior seems to be an attempt to get you to take more notice of him.