

When Children Lie

understanding the motivation is key by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

One of the most frequent concerns expressed by parents about their children is lying. When children lie, it may indeed be serious, but not for the reasons that you may think.

For most parents, honesty is considered an essential character trait, so they become quite concerned when their child lies. On the other hand, lying is not an unusual occurrence in childhood. Lying itself is not a sign of moral weakness or poor character. At some time or another, children will lie. It may be about whether they cleaned their room, did their homework, or went to sleep on time. For the most part, these lies are fairly innocuous, especially if we deal with the lie as simply a misbehavior for which a consequence is appropriate. I will often suggest to families that a consequence be given for the original misdeed and another consequence for the lying.

Generally, children want to please their parents. If a child is not doing well, then we need to assume that there is some obstacle in her way. Therefore, if a child is lying more than occasionally, it is important that we look beyond the lie itself, to try and understand what the problem must be. Children lie sometimes as a way of getting out of a difficult situation in which they find themselves. However, if we angrily focus on the lying, we will miss the point entirely. Children do not know why they lied; they understand less about their behavior than we do. What we need to do is to try to find out what the child must have been thinking or feeling, to believe that lying was the best thing to do.

Often, children will lie to avoid punishment and to save face, such as when they lie about getting into trouble at school. This may seem to be a simple truth, but the fact of the matter is, for many children, having to face their parents with their troubles

or failings is too demoralizing to endure. How can they tell their parents that they have failed once again in school, with their peers, or with life altogether? In the same way, children may lie so they do not disappoint parents whose expectations for good behavior may be too high or unrealistic for the child's age. Children may also feel forced to lie if they sense that their parent's sense of self-worth is wrapped up in the child's achievements.

When we think about children lying, we should also take a look at the culture we may have created. We may have inadvertently created an atmosphere for lying when we deny our own inner experiences and feelings, whether pleasurable or painful. For example, men frequently put up a front, denying that they have problems, are upset about something, or that they have feelings altogether. Similarly as a culture, we do not always encourage people to really experience or share their feelings. For example, how often do we tell our children to stop whining about something, or that they shouldn't be bothered by the teasing of other children? Shouldn't they be upset? And, when children really are upset, do we allow them to express their feelings, or do we expect them to "be mature, act grown up" and get over it?

Sometimes we don't want to know how our children are feeling. For example, it is not unusual to hear a parent being angry at a child for "talking back" when in fact the child knows no other way of expressing their frustration, anger, or unhappiness. Maybe the child is legitimately upset. Perhaps the adult really wasn't listening to the child, or maybe the adult treated the child unfairly. But, by getting angry at the child, the parent sends the message that he doesn't want to hear what the child has to say and that he would rather have the child lie than to tell the truth.

We work on understanding all of these possibilities in therapy with children and

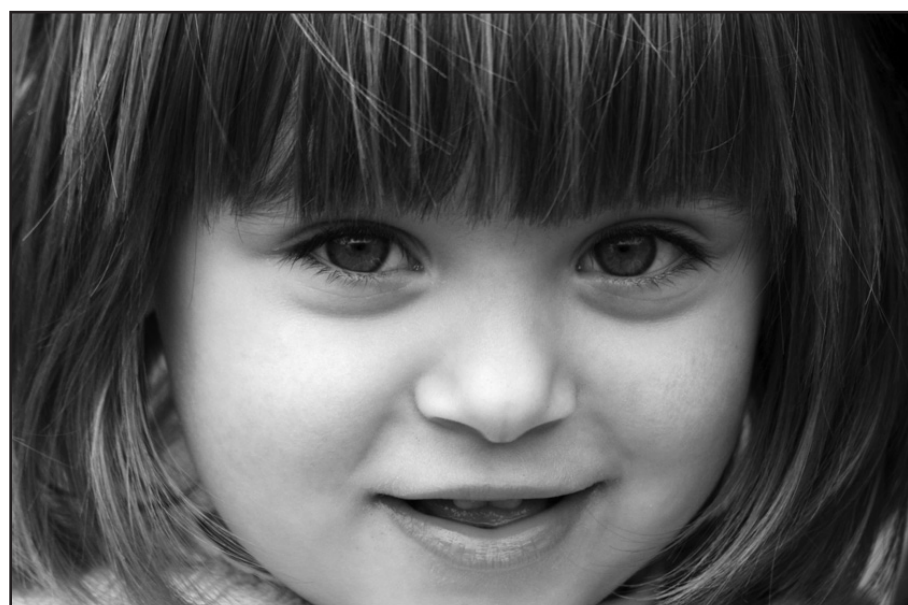
families. For example, if children lie about homework, it might be easy to figure out that they are frustrated with the work and are trying to avoid disappointing their parents and themselves at how "stupid" they must be.

If therapy focuses too quickly on the act of lying itself, trying to put a stop to it, then the message is missed. Rather, the time is better spent exploring what was going on in the child's mind. What was his perception of the situation, what had he thought about it, and how did he feel? As the parents come to better understand their child's inner life, they can then better understand what situations may cause their child to consider lying. With this knowledge, they can take steps to help their child deal with frustration, to help the child solve the problem, and to help the child develop better coping skills overall.

Next time you catch your child lying, as I'm sure you sometime will, take a moment first to talk gently to your child about what happened. What was your

child thinking, what was she feeling, and what did she think was going to happen? You may still need to give a consequence for the lying, but both you and your child will be closer for having taken the time to communicate and to understand the motivation behind the act of lying. ●

Dr. Jeffrey Katz is a clinical psychologist who practices in Va. Beach. Dr. Katz works with children, adolescents, adults, and their families. He specializes in the evaluation and treatment of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and learning and behavioral problems. He is on the national board of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD) and is the co-chair of the national public policy committee.



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