

## CHILDREN & LYING

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.  
Psychologist

- Young children (ages 4-5) often make up stories and tell tall tales, this is a normal activity because they enjoy hearing stories and making up stories for fun
- These young children may blur the distinction between fantasy and reality
- Older children or adolescents 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 adolescent 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 do not 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

### **Lying that may indicate emotional problems:**

- Some children and adolescents, who are otherwise responsible, fall into a pattern of repetitive lying
- These children 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

### **What to do if your 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 following:
  - ✓ The difference between make believe and reality and telling the truth
  - ✓ The importance of honesty at home and in the community
  - ✓ Alternative to lying

- Suggestions:
  - ✓ Stop asking questions that invite lying. A set-up question is one to which you already know the answer. *“Did you clean your room?”* Instead say, *“I noticed you didn’t clean your room. Would you like to work on a plan for cleaning it?”*
  - ✓ Focus on solutions to problems instead of blame. *“What should we do about getting the chores done?”* instead of *“Did you do your chores?”*
  - ✓ Be honest yourself. Say *“That doesn’t sound like the truth to me. Most of us don’t tell the truth when we are feeling trapped, scared, or threatened in some way. Why don’t we take some time off from this right now? Later I’ll be available if you would like to share with me what is going on for you.”*
  - ✓ Respect your children’s or adolescent’s privacy when they don’t want to share with you.
  
- Planning Ahead to Prevent Future Problems:
  - ✓ Help children believe that mistakes are opportunities to learn so they won’t believe they are bad and need to cover up their mistakes
  - ✓ Set an example in telling the truth. Be sure that this is honest sharing instead of lecturing.
  - ✓ Let children know they are unconditionally loved. Many children lie because they are afraid the truth will disappoint their parents.
  - ✓ Show appreciation. *“Thank you for telling the truth. I know that was difficult. I admire the way you are willing to face the consequences, and I know you can handle them and learn from them.”*
  - ✓ Stop trying to control children. Many children lie so they can find out who they are and do what they want to do. At the same time, they are trying to please their parents by making them think they are doing what they are supposed to do.
  
- Parenting Pointers:
  - ✓ Many children lie to protect themselves from judgment and criticism because they believe it when adults say they are bad. Of course they want to avoid this kind of pain.
  - ✓ Remember that who your child is now is not who your child will be forever. If your child tells a lie, don’t overreact to the behavior by calling your child a liar.

- ✓ Focus on building closeness and trust in the relationship instead of on the behavioral problems. This is usually the quickest way to diminish the behaviors that you find objectionable.