

# The Truth About Lying

**Learning to fib is an important step in your child's development.**

By Frances Stott PhD



Three-year-old Sally was playing happily in the kitchen while her mother cleaned up the dinner dishes. As Sally's mom turned to collect another plate from the table, she noticed a puddle on the floor under Sally's feet. "Sally, honey, did you wet your pants?" Sally shook her head and said, "My shoes did it."

Clearly, Sally has told her mother a lie. Like most parents, you might feel shocked — angry, hurt, or even betrayed — when you first discover your child has lied. But if you can step back and view lying as a part of your child's emotional and intellectual development, you will find that **telling lies doesn't condemn your child to a life of betrayal or serious behavior problems.** In fact, recent research has shown that lying plays a positive role in normal development. Essential human skills — independence, perspective taking, and emotional control — are the same skills that enable children to lie.

Conventional wisdom long held that young children were not capable of lying. More recent research, however, has found that most children learn to lie effectively between the ages of 2 and 4. The first successful lie can be pegged as a developmental achievement because it marks the child's discovery that her mind and thinking are separate from her parents'. This same understanding is marked by the discovery of the word *no*, which helps young children delineate the boundaries between their own desires, thoughts, and feelings, and those of others.

Like everything else, children learn to lie from the people around them. Parents and teachers show children in subtle — and not so subtle — ways to suppress their honesty.

"Look at that funny man," a child will yell. "I don't like this," she'll say of Grandma's gift. "Yuck," he says about food that doesn't taste good. Adults slowly teach children that this kind of honesty is not always welcome — that there is a fine line between telling the truth and not hurting other people. Children also observe active lying by the adults in their lives. (One research study found that adults admit to lying an average of 13 times a week!) We all tell lies of convenience, and our children watch and learn — but not always so literally.

### **How Lying Evolves**

From about age 4 on, children lie for many of the same reasons adults do: to avoid punishment, to gain an advantage, to protect against an unwanted consequence, and even to boost self-esteem. Youngsters, like adults, sometimes lie to demonstrate power, to maintain privacy, or to protect a friend. When a child lies, she is essentially trying to change a situation, to reconstruct things the way she wants them to be.

There is a developmental progression to lying. At the first level, the child wants to achieve some goal or reward by saying something that she knows or believes to be false. Her intention may be to affect the listener's behavior — to avoid punishment or receive a reward, for example.

Consider the following study: A number of 2- and 3-year-old children were seated in an empty room and told not to peek at a toy placed on table behind them. The researcher left and returned to the room five minutes later. Ninety percent of the children looked at the toy, and the majority — about two-thirds — concealed their peeking. One-third lied outright, saying they did not peek, while the other third didn't answer the question, pretending not to hear it.

At this age, wishes and imagination often get in the way of what is real. Sometimes a 3 year old will start to tell a story, and you will hear it get out of hand as he adds bits and pieces to fit the ideas in his head. Lies at this age might succeed, but 3 year olds are generally poor liars because they fail to lie appropriately. They do not consider that their listener will actually think about either the statement or their intention. As a result, they tend to lie at the wrong time or place, or neglect to think about other important facts, such as covering their tracks to conceal the deception.

By age 4, children know the difference between telling the truth and lying — and they know it's wrong to lie. So, generally, they're truthful, and when they're not it's obvious. But they also become more proficient at lying because they're more cognitively capable of taking into account the listener's belief of their statement.

When researchers conducted the same toy study with children aged 4 to 6, they found that older children were better at resisting the temptation to peek. But those who did look were more apt to lie about it. Videotapes showed another important difference in the older children: After they looked at the toy, they didn't look very happy. They did, however, change their facial expression once the researcher came back — they literally "put on a face."

By age 4 or 5, children understand the effects of a false message on a listener's mind, recognizing that the listener will interpret and evaluate a statement in the light of their existing knowledge. But they still have trouble knowing whether a listener thinks a statement is true. As one 5 year old said, "You should never tell a lie because the brains inside grown-ups' heads are so smart they always find out."

An even more sophisticated level of lying emerges between the ages of 6 and 8. Children can now understand something like, "John wants his mother to think he feels bad about Grandma not coming to visit." At this stage, it's not just the content of the lie, but the motive or attitude of the speaker that can be doubted, as well.

Looking ahead to ages 10 and 11, most children become able liars. The big difference at this stage is that parents and teachers are no longer seduced by the sound of a child's voice, the innocent look on her face, or an outlandish alibi.

## How To Respond When Your Child Lies

When your young child tells a lie, remind yourself that this is not a crisis of morality. It doesn't help to get outraged. Telling a lie is your child's way of getting what he wants, which is normal and healthy. It also doesn't help to investigate his story like a detective. This makes the child feel that he can't be trusted, or that he is devious. Even when a child is 4 to 5 years or older, and understands what truth is, you still may or may not get the truth if you ask for it directly. If you do get "the truth," however, it was because you made him tell. After he admits he licked the chocolate off your cake, what have you gained? You did not encourage him to take responsibility for his own behavior. In fact, pressuring your child can cause him to tell less than the truth the next time.

Helping your child develop morality and responsibility for his actions over the long haul is the goal. While lying is a normal aspect of growing up, that does not mean it should be dismissed. Here are some strategies that you can use to help your child develop a better understanding of truthfulness:

- **Model the behavior you expect to see in your child.** This sounds obvious, but it involves monitoring when and how you lie — not an easy task. If we want to foster a trusting, self-regulating child who cares about his own welfare and that of others, we have to do it the hard way: by being trusting, self-regulating, and respectful adults.
- **Cool down before doing anything.** The calmer you are, the better you'll communicate. The first step is to convey the message that a behavior — stealing, for example — is wrong. Then, address why your child lied about what he did. Remember that some children will lie to avoid anger even more than to avoid punishment.
- **Use consequences that promote the development of conscience.** Consider a kindergartener who has discarded several notes sent home by the teacher requesting a meeting. His father hasn't received any notes, and is shocked when the teacher calls. His child denies any knowledge of the notes. At this point, although we can imagine feeling emotions such as anger, despair, and resentment, it is best to stay calm. A logical short-term consequence might be to require the child to inform his teacher that he hasn't been giving the notes to his parents and that he is sorry. He can then ask for another note to bring home.
- **Consider the goal of your child's lie.** In the case of our kindergartener, was he trying to avoid punishment? Perhaps he was frightened by the consequences of what he did and of making a mistake. What might he be feeling? Anxious, guilty, ashamed, scared? There is always a motive and meaning for what children tell us. It won't hurt to ask yourself what your child is gaining by telling a lie.
- **Point out the logical consequences of lying.** Young children are very interested in the story of the boy who cried wolf so often that, when the boy really needed help, nobody paid any attention. When a child is able to change her story and tell you the truth, let her know that you are glad she was able to do so. This

will reinforce her confidence and make it easier for her to tell the truth the next time.

In the long run, the most effective solution is to try to discern what message the child is trying to convey with his lie. Occasionally, lying is a sign that a child needs more attention or, perhaps, stronger limits on daily activities. Longer-term strategies may be to create structured routines (for example, going to bed on time after a favorite read-aloud, or a limited amount of television time) to increase his sense of security within the family.

In the words of early childhood pioneer Erik Erikson, "It's a long haul bringing up our children to be good; you have to keep doing that — bring them up — and that means bringing things up with them: Asking, telling, sounding them out, sounding off yourself — finding, through experience, your own words, your own way of putting them together. You have to learn where you stand, and make sure your kids learn [where you stand], understand why, and soon, you hope, they'll be standing there beside you, with you."