



# Liar Liar

## LYING children

How parents should handle their children's lying depends on what is motivating them to lie, writes psychologist Jutta Dempsey

When you catch your child lying it's natural to feel betrayed, hurt, angry and frustrated. If your child is under five years of age you don't need to be too concerned because they have difficulty understanding the difference between reality and imagination.

However, for school-aged children it's important to find out why they are lying and address the source of the problem rather than the symptom. Yelling will only worsen the situation so give yourself some time away from your child to calm down and think about how to handle the situation.

**Here are some of the reasons why children lie and what you can do about it:**

### [1] Fear

Lying to cover up the truth of a wrongdoing is very common, especially among children with parents who tend to be angry, restrictive and rigid. The problem with punishing lying sourced by fear is that the punishment is not associated with lying but being found out. These children usually know they've done something wrong so parents need to get beyond the lying and address the original behavior that caused them to lie in the first place eg. hitting their sibling. Rather than getting angry with your child, listen before accusing and allow room for negotiation and compromise. This usually helps to pave the way for more honest communication.

### [2] Habit

Sometimes lying becomes such a habit that a child may even insist it's the truth when they're confronted with it. There are a myriad of possible causes including low self esteem, a need to be perfect, not liking being wrong or attention seeking (eg. if a new baby arrives). It often starts with exaggeration and white lies.

This kind of lying is often strengthened by hostile confrontation so it's more effective to give the child an opportunity to retract the lie without

fear of consequences. If this is unsuccessful then punish and teach the child a different way of problem solving and then praise them when they use it.

### [3] Over-prediction

Some children lie because they over-predict the reaction of teacher's and parents finding out the truth. One of the most productive ways of addressing this is to provide a child with clear boundaries, and yet emphasise that these boundaries are negotiable. Talk through the child's thought process to help to gain an understanding of their thinking.

### [4] Modelling

Parents telling 'white' lies can be confusing for children because the mind of a child is a lot more black and white. They don't comprehend 'grey' areas.

### [5] Compulsive liars

When children become compulsive liars they tell lies by reflex. It may indicate underlying problems such as ADHD (impulsiveness), depression, anxiety, adjustment difficulties, family stress (eg. difficult divorce) or bipolar, antisocial or conduct disorder which typically manifest for the first time during adolescence. If compulsive lying continues into adulthood, it can cause significant social and personal problems.

The psychological pattern of the compulsive liar destroys the bond of trust between a child and parents. Once it has been assimilated into a child's temperament it becomes increasingly difficult to stop so the immediate intervention of a psychologist or psychiatrist who works with children is required. They will provide parents with specific parenting styles and a deeper understanding of the problem they face whilst giving age-appropriate psychotherapy for the child.