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Call them fibs, whoppers or straight-up untruths: However you label them, kids are likely to lie somewhere along the way. While a younger child may conjure up an elaborate tale about how they couldn't possibly have kicked a younger sibling, older kids may flat-out lie about [doing their homework](#).

Sometimes the onset of lying is sudden and intense, reports Matthew Rouse, PhD, a clinical psychologist. "It's a new thing where they were pretty truthful most of the time before and then suddenly they're lying about a lot of stuff," he says. This, of course, is concerning to parents. But if caregivers can understand why kids lie and be prepared to deal with the issue, the truth can come out.

Why kids lie

Most parents think children lie to get something they want, avoid a consequence or get out of something they don't want to do. These are common motivations, but there are also some less obvious reasons why kids might not tell the truth — or at least the whole truth.

To test out a new behavior

Dr. Rouse says one reason children lie is because they've discovered this novel idea and are trying it out, just as they do with most kinds of behaviors, to see what happens.

"They'll wonder, what happens if I lie about this situation?" he says. "What will it do for me? What does it get me out of? What does it get me?"

To enhance self-esteem and gain approval

Children who [lack confidence](#) may tell grandiose lies to make themselves seem more impressive, special, or talented to inflate their self-esteem and make themselves look good in the eyes of others. Dr. Rouse recalls treating an eighth-grader who was exaggerating wildly about 80 percent of the time: "They were kind of incredible experiences that weren't within the bounds of plausible at all." For instance, the boy would say he'd gone to a party and everyone had started to chant for him when he came in the door.

To get the focus off themselves

Children with [anxiety](#) or [depression](#) might lie about their symptoms to get the spotlight off them, Dr. Rouse notes. Or they might minimize their issues, saying something like "No, no I slept fine last night" because they don't want people worrying about them.

Speaking before they think

Carol Brady, PhD, a clinical psychologist and regular columnist for *ADDitude* magazine who works with a lot of kids with [ADHD](#), says they may lie out of impulsivity. "One of the hallmarks of the impulsive type of *ADHD* is to talk before they think," she says, "so a lot of times you're going to get this lying issue."

Sometimes kids can really believe they've done something and tell what sounds like a lie, Dr. Brady adds. "Sometimes they'll really just forget. I have kids who say, 'To tell you the truth, Dr. Brady, I thought I did my homework. I really thought I did. I didn't remember I had that extra work.'" When this happens, she says, they need help [supplementing their memory](#) by using techniques such as checklists, time limits, and organizers.

And then there are white lies

Just to make things even trickier, in certain situations parents might actually encourage children to tell a white lie in order to spare someone's feelings. In this case, the white lie and when to use it fall under the umbrella of social skills.

What parents can do about lying

Both Dr. Rouse and Dr. Brady say it's first important to think

about the function of the lie. "When I'm doing an evaluation, there are questions on our intake forms where parents can check off whether the child lies," Dr. Rouse says. "It's something I might spend 20 minutes delving into. What kinds of lies, what are the circumstances of the lies?" He says behavioral treatments depend on the function of the lies and [the severity of the problem](#). "There are no hard and fast guidelines," he says. "Different levels mean different repercussions."

Level 1 lie

When it comes to attention-seeking lying, Dr. Rouse says that, generally speaking, it's best to ignore it. Rather than saying harshly, "That's a lie. I know that didn't happen to you," he suggests a gentle approach where parents don't necessarily have a consequence but they're also not trying to feed it a lot of attention.

This is especially true if the lying is coming from place of low self-esteem. "So if they're saying, 'I scored 10 goals today at recess in soccer and everybody put me on their shoulders and it was amazing,' and you think it's not true, then I would say don't ask a bunch of follow-up questions." For these kind of low-level lies that aren't really hurting anyone but aren't good behavior, ignoring and redirecting to something that you know is more factual is the way to go.

Level 2 lie

If that doesn't work, Dr. Rouse says, parents can be more transparent about it by offering a mild reprimand. "I've had situations where it's an inflated kind of fantastical type of lie," he says. "I'll have parents label it and call it a tall tale. If the child is telling one of these stories, a parent will gently say, 'Hey, this sounds like a tall tale, why don't you try again and tell me what really happened?'" It's about pointing out the behavior and encouraging kids to try again.

Level 3 lie

If something is more serious, like older kids lying about where they've been or whether they've done their homework, parents can think about [having a consequence](#). Kids should be clear that there will be repercussions for this kind of lie, so it's not coming out of the blue. Like all consequences, Dr. Rouse recommends it should be something short-lived, not overblown, which gives the child a chance to get back to practicing better behaviors. Some examples: losing their phone for an hour or having to do a chore

Also, depending on the severity, there also has to be a component of addressing what they were lying about. If a child has said they didn't have any homework all week and then the parent finds out they had homework every day,

there needs to be some kind of consequence for the lying and they also have to sit down and do all the work. If they've hit another child and lied about it, there's a consequence for the lying and also for hitting. In this case, Dr. Rouse says, you would also have your child write an apology letter to the other child.

Ways to help your kids avoid lying in the first place

Let them know the truth reduces consequences

For instance, if teens have been drinking at a party, the parent will want them to call to be picked up. But kids know there also has to be a consequence for the drinking. "There's a hard balance to strike between having the [open dialogue](#) but also setting appropriate limits when necessary," Dr. Rouse says.

In this situation, where lying would have been easier, when parents are doling out the consequence they can also praise the child for telling the truth and tell them it makes them more trustworthy. They might also reduce the consequence, such as letting kids know they're taking their phone away for a day instead of a week.

Dr. Rouse adds one caveat: Children and teens should not

think consequences are negotiable. "Sometimes the kid will say, 'But I told you the truth,'" he says. "They'll get manipulative, saying, 'This is just making me want to never tell the truth again.'" Parents shouldn't give in at that point.

Use truth checks

Let's say parents have been told by a teacher their child didn't do their homework. Dr. Brady suggests that they give their kid a chance to tell the truth. If they don't at first, the parents could say, "I'm going to walk away and give you 10 minutes and then I'm going to come back and ask you again. If you change your mind and want to give me a different answer, it's just a truth check and you won't get in trouble."

This way, if a child gives an off-the-cuff answer because they're scared of consequences or they don't want to disappoint a parent, they have the chance to really think about whether they want to lie or fess up without the consequences. Dr. Brady notes that this technique isn't for a child who chronically lies.

Use the preamble method

Parents can also set up kids to tell the truth by reminding them that they don't expect perfection, Dr. Brady notes. Parents could say, "I'm going to ask you a question and maybe you're going to tell me something I don't really want

to hear. But remember, your behavior is not who you are. I love you no matter what, and sometimes people make mistakes. So I want you to think about giving me an honest answer." Giving kids a chance to reflect on this may lead to them telling the truth.

Give kids with ADHD more time to think

Dr. Brady says kids with ADHD, who are prone to giving impulsive answers that come out as lies, need some extra time to think things through before speaking. Impulsivity can be a problem both at home and in school, when a teacher asks if a child has finished an assignment and the child answers yes without even looking at their paper. That's when he needs to be taught to slow down and check their work.

What parents *shouldn't* do

Don't ever corner your child

Putting a child on the spot can set him up to lie. If parents know the true story, Dr. Brady recommends, they should go right to the issue and discuss it. Instead of asking a child if they didn't do their homework, a parent could just say, "I know you didn't do it. Let's talk about why that's not a good idea."

Don't label your child a liar

It's a big mistake to call a child a liar, Dr Brady argues. The wound it creates is bigger than dealing with what they lied about in the first place. It causes the child to think, "Mom won't believe me." It makes them feel bad about themselves and may set up a pattern of lying.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do children lie?

How can parents deal with a lying child?