

Lies and fibs

Almost everyone tells lies from time to time for a variety of reasons, from avoiding hurting someone else's feelings to getting out of an awkward situation. There are many reasons why children may not tell the truth.

When children don't tell the truth it can be very worrying for parents. It is easy to become upset about the lie and to overlook what it means to the child. It is important to understand the reasons why your child might lie before you react.

Why children lie

Learning about the truth

These ages are only guides - it depends on the child's individual rate of development.

- Telling lies has no meaning for children under three. Children under about three years of age do not understand that thinking is private. They believe that their parents can read their minds. A two year old in a shop may say "*Why did you lose me, Mummy?*" because he thinks that his mother knows where he is, even when she is out of sight.
- Three to four year olds are learning that other people don't know what they are thinking. Children of this age have a very strong imagination and enjoy practising their new knowledge and skills so they often test it out by telling 'stories', eg "*The big bad wolf did it*". It is normal for young children to blame someone else or make up a story.
- Children in the early years of school usually want to please their parents more than they want to do the 'right thing', so they are less likely to tell the truth if they think it will make their parents cross.
- By eight or nine when they understand about Father Christmas, children also have some understanding of the difference between the truth and fantasy. A child's sense of right and wrong is usually developed by about nine or ten years of age.

Imaginary friends

Some children at about three or four have an imaginary friend. This is quite normal for this age and usually disappears as the child grows older. Children talk to and play with this friend when they are upset and sometimes blame the friend when they do something wrong. There is no need for concern unless your child seems really withdrawn and unable to get on with other children and adults. You can help by seeing that your child has opportunities for fun and enjoyment and to play with other children (see the topic **Imaginary friends** for more information).

Reasons why children lie

- They are young and children of their age do not yet understand the difference between truth and untruth and right or wrong.
- Fear of punishment or fear of losing their parents' affection.
- Having low self-esteem and wanting to make themselves sound better.
- To impress their friends and be accepted in the group.
- Sometimes that is how it really seems - they believe that what they are saying is true.
- Copying other people in the family who tell lies. Parents might say that lying is wrong but not always tell the truth themselves, eg when someone is at the door and a parent says to the child, "*Tell them I am not at home*".

- Wishing. Sometimes children will say what they wish was true. For example, *"My dad always takes me to the football"*.
- Teenagers may tell lies because they fear that if they tell the truth they will not be allowed to do something they really want to do.
- Older children, and especially teenagers, have a need to keep some parts of their lives private and not share them with parents. If parents ask too many questions an older child or teenager may lie to protect this privacy.

What parents can do

- Try not to get into a battle about telling the truth.
- Teach children why it is important to tell the truth, eg "When people tell us the truth it helps us to trust them". Let them know that in your family it is safe to tell the truth. That you will not be very angry if something wrong has happened. You know children are still learning how to do things right.
- For younger children, teach the difference between truth and fantasy, eg "That was a good story" or "I can see you make up lovely stories, perhaps we can write them down to keep".
- If you think your child is afraid of punishment, talk with her about other ways that you will deal with mistakes so that she knows not to be afraid to be honest.
- It is often more helpful to defuse a small incident by saying, "I see there's been an accident with the milk, let's clean it up / or can you clean it up?" rather than "Did you spill the milk?"
- Show your child that you understand that some lies are wishes. For example, if a child says that his dad is ringing him up all the time and you know this is not so, you could say "It sounds like you wish Daddy could be here all the time".
- Don't label your child 'a liar' because labels tend to encourage the kind of behaviour that you don't want.
- Notice when children tell the truth and let them know that you are pleased.
- Give older children and teenagers some personal privacy. Ask what you need to know about in order to protect them, but don't pry too much. Often they will talk to you when the time is right and they feel you will listen without judging.
- If your child is continually lying for any reason or unable to accept the truth when it is presented in a caring way, it would be wise to seek some counselling.

Reminders

- Telling the truth is something that children learn over years, not something they know from birth.
- Young children want to please parents more than anything else. They may avoid telling the truth if they think it will make parents cross.
- Teach children the difference between truth and untruth, but remember that it takes time before children are able to really understand.
- Explain why telling the truth is important to you.
- Set a good example by telling the truth yourself.