



WHEN TEENS LIE

"I don't know how to get my teen to stop lying. We have tried very hard to teach high moral standards. The more I punish him, the more he lies. I'm really worried."

Start with an apology. Wouldn't it be nice if she heard something like, "Honey, do you know that I love you no matter what? I'm sorry you feel the need to lie to me. I wonder what is going on for you. Are you scared you'll get into trouble, or that I'll be disappointed in you? Maybe you feel embarrassed about your behavior and haven't learned that making a mistake doesn't mean you are a bad person. What could we do to create a safe place for you to tell the truth?"

Understanding Your Teen, Yourself, and the Situation

We have searched and searched and can't find a single adult who never told a lie as a teen. Actually, we can't find many adults who never lie now. Isn't it interesting how upset parents get when teens have not mastered a virtue, they have not mastered themselves? We do not make this point to justify lying, but to show that teens who lie are not defective or immoral. We need to deal with the reasons teens lie before we can help them give up their need to lie. Usually they lie for the same reasons adults do--they feel trapped, are scared of punishment or rejection, feel threatened, or just think lying will make things easier for everyone. Often lying is a sign of low self esteem. People think they need to make themselves look better because they don't know they are good enough as they are.

Suggestions

1. Stop asking set-up 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 notice you didn't clean your room. Would you like to work on a plan for cleaning it?"

2. 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. I wonder how I might be making you feel that it isn't safe to tell the truth? Why don't we take some time off right now? Later I'll be available if you would like to share with me what is going on for you."

3. Focus on solutions to problems instead of blame. "What should we do about getting the chores done?" instead of "Did you do your chores?"

4. Another possibility is to ignore the "lie" and help your teen explore cause and effect through "curiosity" questions. When he says he hasn't eaten all day, ask, "What happened? Anything else? How do you feel about it? What ideas do you have to solve the problem?" These questions can be effective only if you are truly curious about their point of view. Do not use these questions to "catch" him in a lie. If at any time you think it is a fabrication, go back to suggestion No. 2.

5. Respect your teen's privacy when they don't want to share with you. This eliminates their need to lie to protect their privacy.

Planning Ahead to Prevent Future Problems

1. Help teens believe that mistakes are opportunities to learn so they won't believe they are bad and need to cover up their mistakes.

2. Set an example in telling the truth. Share with your teen times when it was difficult for you to tell the truth, but you decided it was more important to experience the consequences and keep your self-respect. Be sure this is honest sharing instead of a lecture.

3. Let teens know they are unconditionally loved. Many lie because they are afraid the truth will disappoint their parents.

4. Show appreciation. "Thank you for telling me 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."

5. Stop trying to control them. Many teens 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 while they are doing what they want to do.

Life Skills Teens Can Learn

Teens can learn that it is safe to tell the truth in their family. Even when they forget that they are reminded with gentleness and love. They can learn that their parents care about their fears and mistaken beliefs and will help them overcome them.

Parenting Pointers

Most of us would lie to protect ourselves from punishment or disapproval. Parents who punish, judge, or lecture increase the chances that their teen will lie as a defense mechanism. All of the above suggestions are designed to create a non-threatening environment where they can feel safe to tell the truth.

Many teens 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 teen is now is not who he/she will be forever. If your teen tells a lie, don't overreact to the behavior by calling her a liar. She is not a "liar", but a person who has told a lie. There is a huge difference.

Focus on building closeness and trust in the relationship instead of on the behavior problem. This is usually the quickest way to diminish the behavior that you find objectionable.



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