



Dealing with Lying: The Do's and Don'ts

by Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller

Jason Roberts listened to his son's explanation of the missing cookies and then called him a liar. Brenda Taylor thought her three-year-old's lies were cute, so she ignored them. Yee Chen told her daughter that if she told the truth this time, she would let it go.

While all of these parents love their children and want them to develop truth telling as a virtue, each violated one of the eighteen do's and don'ts of dealing with lying. Read on to find out how.

- 1. Do understand that all children lie.** Dogs bark. Cats meow. And children lie. Your neighbors' children lie. Your sister's children lie. And, yes, your own children lie.
- 2. Don't confuse exaggeration with lying.** Young children often exaggerate. Embellished stories are more a sign of a creative imagination than of a person who doesn't tell the truth. Preschoolers are spontaneous and impulsive with their explanations and stories. Don't confuse this with lying.
- 3. Don't label your child verbally or mentally brand your child as a liar.** A liar is something one is—a part of one's being. Telling a lie is a behavior one does once in awhile. An occasional lie does not make your child a liar. It is a behavior your child chose, not a permanent part of his or her essence.
- 4. Don't ask questions that set your child up to lie.** If the last piece of cake is gone and your daughter has cake crumbs on her face, don't ask if she ate the cake. That's laying a trap, expecting her to lie. Say instead, "I'm disappointed that you ate the cake. There will be no more snacks today."
- 5. Do be honest.** If you're unsure whether your child broke the dish, say, "That doesn't sound like the truth to me," or "I can't think of another way it could have happened." Using this language, you refrain from accusing your child and simply share your thoughts about the situation from your perspective.
- 6. Don't jump immediately to the conclusion that your child is lying** as he or she relates a story. Your child's perspective on a situation may be different from yours. He may be seeing an event from one narrow point of view. Although your child's viewpoint may be markedly different from yours, that doesn't mean that she is lying.
- 7. Do recognize that a child who lies frequently is often struggling with low self-esteem.** This child has problems with identity and self-worth. Lying is a strategy to protect the self from feelings of not being good enough. Lying is the symptom, not the problem.
- 8. Do help your child be successful.** Even the child who seems to lie frequently is looking for a chance and a way to be successful. If the child is feeling successful, he will feel less need to lie.
- 9. Don't ignore lying.** The lies as well as the problems that underlie them will get bigger if lying is unaddressed. Since lying is often about needing attention, a child who tells lies always has something to say, whether his comments are accurate or not. If little lies don't get your attention, don't be surprised if the lies increase in size and intensity.

10. Do recognize a lie as a call for help. Your child is attempting to communicate. She is saying, "Help me be successful," "Help me feel good about myself," "Help me feel like I belong," "Help me get attention." Hear the words that lie beneath the lie.

11. Do reduce the power struggle over lying by saying, "I don't believe you," rather than "You're lying." When you accuse children of lying by saying, "You're a liar," or "You're lying," it's easy for them to argue that they were telling the truth. They can't argue, however, with your beliefs. "I don't believe you" is about you and what *you* believe.

12. Don't try to rationalize with your child as a way to deal with the lies. Lies aren't always rational, and the child who engages in lying is not in a rational frame of mind. You might understand rational, logical thinking at this point. Your child will not.

13. Do implement consequences that connect responsibilities to opportunities. "If you choose to lie about what you were doing on the Internet, you choose to lose that privilege for a week." "When you choose not to tell the truth about what you prepared for dinner, you lose my trust and the opportunity to prepare your own dinner."

14. Do follow through on the consequences of lying. If your child has lost her bicycle opportunities for two days, make sure the two days is two days.

15. Don't make rules that will punish future lying or use threats to try to stop a child from lying. When you threaten a child with, "If you lie one more time . . .," the child hears, "I expect you to do that one more time."

16. Don't promise your child that if he tells the truth, the consequence will be lighter. This is a form of plea-bargaining that confuses children. Hold your child accountable for his behavior (for example, breaking a window) as well as for the lie that attempted to cover it up. Refuse to be distracted from the original behavior.

17. Don't assume that everything your child says is a lie. If you always treat your child's words as lies, why should she ever want to tell the truth? What incentive exists for truth telling if you're going to think that what she says is a lie anyway?

18. Do realize that transforming lying behavior takes time. Look for improvement in the behavior rather than for its complete elimination. As the child gains self-confidence, the reasons for lying diminish. As he recognizes that he is telling fewer lies, your child will feel better about himself and the lying will decrease even more.

Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller are the authors *The Parent Talk System*, a style of communicating that creates emotionally healthy relationships and teaches parents respectful and effective verbal strategies for raising children who are responsible, caring and confident. To find out how Parent Talk Facilitator Kathy Salazar can help you or your group learn *Parent Talk Skills* contact her at practicalparenttalk@gmail.com, (714) 803-9928 or visit: www.practicalparenttalk.com. Group, in-person or online video conference classes available.