



THE TRUTH BEHIND LYING

You may consider truth bending just part of the territory of raising teenagers. But how much should you worry if your teen is dishonest? The answer may start with understanding his motives—and his stage of adolescence.

By Abby Hill

When a child lies, parents are understandably concerned. There are feelings of hurt, disappointment, fear, and even anger once the deception has been uncovered. But understanding where teenagers are coming from when it comes to lying can help build a stronger, more trusting relationship with your son or daughter.

Grasping the concepts of lying and truth are a normal part of a child's development. During the adolescent years, not only are teens developing physically, but also cognitively, emotionally, and morally. Their thinking and reasoning becomes increasingly more complex and abstract. Teens begin to question why things are the way they are and develop their own views on how things should be. Autonomy is everything to a teen, and lying may be one way for them to exercise their right to make their own decisions. Understanding your teenager's stage of adolescence can help understand his motivations.

YOUNG TEENS (13-15)

Young teens are most likely to be untruthful through omission

rather than through outright lying. Much of their daily activity is still controlled by parents and much of their time is spent in school. They are not yet able to drive a car and they still tend to socialize in organized groups. Their opportunities for any covert activities are limited, which creates less room for lying.

Instead, young teens more often omit or withhold information from their parents about things like grades, or whether they have homework. They may omit—or lie—to avoid getting into trouble, to keep from disappointing their parents, or to get what they want. Young teens are developmentally on the fence between childhood and adolescence, often shifting from teen to toddler in a matter of seconds. Their lies are not generally premeditated, but more an impulsive response in a tight situation.

What to do:

- Clearly define for your teen what constitutes a lie. Do omissions count as lies? Provide specific and relevant examples. Answer any questions.

APPROACH LYING AS A MATTER OF ACCOUNTABILITY RATHER THAN GUILT. ESTABLISH EARLY A FAMILY STANDARD OF HONESTY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND TRUST, ALONG WITH CONSEQUENCE AND FORGIVENESS.

- Make “No Lying” one of the house rules—one that applies to everyone in the family.
- Address a suspected lie with your teenager privately, without friends, siblings, or others around. Allow your teen the opportunity to come clean, keeping in mind that it’s extremely important for a teen to be able to save face.
- Model your own truthful behavior in front of your teen and acknowledge that telling the truth is not always easy.

MIDDLE TEEN (16-17)

For teens in the middle stage of adolescence, lies extend beyond the self to the social circle. Teens are now out of the house more and away from parent supervision. They are off with friends, driving or riding in cars, dating, and going to parties. Because of the additional freedom, there may be more for the teen to lie about (and more for parents to worry about). Concerns about risky or dangerous behaviors come into play.

As you rely more and more on your teen as your source for information, you may ramp up the questions as a matter of necessity. Teens may respond with a lie just to silence what they perceive as an interrogation. Omission and partial disclosure are tactics also used by mid-stage teens as they assert their independence in selecting the information shared with parents on a need-to-know basis.

What to do:

- Make it clear to your teen what you do indeed need (and expect) to know. Provide specific examples.
- Make it about safety. Explain to your teen that, should they ever need you in an emergency, you have to know where they are and whom they are with.
- Assure your teen that both lying and concealing bad behavior bring consequences.
- Accept the fact that your teen is probably not always and completely truthful with you. Reflect on your own experience as a teen in order to have realistic expectations.

OLDER TEEN (18-20)

Older teens are continuing to build their independent lives. At this stage of adolescence, teens are off to college or work, and may be living away from home. Ironically, there is comparatively less lying at this stage, but that may be because there is less of a need to hide behaviors and activities.

When lying does occur in older teens, it’s usually in the form of omission as a way of protecting parents’ feelings or to prevent parents from worrying. Lying for older teens is not so much about avoiding punishment as it is about their need for privacy and a perspective of their parents’ diminishing right to know.

What to do:

- Ask your older teen only for the information you really need to know. Ask open-ended questions that command a response more in-depth than just “yes” or “no” in order to get the most information from the least number of questions. Thank him or her for being willing to share the details of their life with you.
- Let your older teen in on the “secret” that you are going to worry about them no matter how old they get or where they live. Let them know that you would appreciate accurate information so at least your worrying can be on-point!
- Approach lying as a matter of accountability rather than guilt. Establish early a family standard of honesty, responsibility, and trust, along with consequence and forgiveness. Just as we are all to be accountable to one another as part of the body of Christ, expect and encourage all family members to be accountable to each other as well. As this is practiced, you will likely find that not only is lying reduced, but behavior and actions to lie about are diminished.

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