

# The Truth About Your Child's Lies

BY KAY KOSAK ABRAMS, PH.D.

## Dear Dr. Kay:

Last October, just before Halloween, we found 20 dollars in our son's room. When we asked him where the cash came from, he said he "did not know." Henry is 6 years old, and it frightens us that he is lying. We told him that he would not be able to go trick-or-treating if he was not honest about where he got the money. We did not find out the truth, and he has not hesitated to lie on other occasions when we know he fears punishment. Aside from this concern, our son is a happy boy and well behaved. Please advise us on how to encourage honesty in the face of a mistake.

## Dear Parent:

Lying is about denial, omitting the truth or creating your own truth in order to avoid feelings of shame and to avoid negative consequences, such as punishment. A 6-year-old child is capable



of engaging in magical thinking. The truth can be lost in the face of fear and the drama of his parents' reaction.

Before too long, a parent can feel trapped with no answers about a particular situation. There is then no genuine opportunity for teaching moral lessons along with lessons about how to solve problems. The key to finding the truth is in how you approach your child.

Henry might have found the money. He might have had cash his mother forgot he received. Alternatively, he might have taken the money, on impulse, from a teacher or from his parents. Whatever occurred, there is no way for honesty to pour from the con-

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science if we as parents simply react and threaten to punish. We run the risk of not only losing the truth, but of harming the relationship of trust.

Finding an appropriate consequence that has corrective power may be important, yet it takes time to listen and to think before deciding on a consequence that is relevant. When we raise the stakes in a reactive fashion in order to put pressure on our children, we run the risk of making it easier for them to focus on being mad at us for their punishment. In this manner, the important lessons are lost.

The power of parenting is in the observation and the contemplation as the truth unfolds. The goal of discipline is to teach. Our children mature as they learn from their mistakes. To teach effectively, we need to understand the thoughts, feelings and situational triggers that lead to an inappro-

appropriate choice. To get the details we have to remain a safe guiding post, which requires us to avoid a punitive and reactive stance.

Next time you feel astonished about a misbehavior or lack of consideration, try to breathe and scratch your head rather than reacting. If you feel a strong reaction, let your son know that you are disappointed or angry and you will get back to him after you feel calmer. This is a good modeling of how to cope with conflict in general. We all need some distance from our emotions in order to be open to listening and thinking rationally.

If your son is accustomed to getting a big punitive and emotional reaction out of you, your renewed sense of calm is going to throw him for a loop. Sometimes, our children continue a “naughty” behavior just for the negative attention. It may take some time to undo this habitual scenario.

So let’s take the money example. Here are some ideas for working the situation in a manner that teaches accountability and helps your son feel safe in bringing his mistakes to you.

- First off, it is more effective to approach a child with certainty when you are fairly sure that something inappropriate has occurred. So you would say something like, “Henry, I see that you have a lot of cash, but we have not given you any money.” This is what I call “holding up the mirror.” Simply comment on the situation. Be quiet and breathe. No anger necessary. Just be present and clear. Wait and listen.

- If your son initially attempts to dupe both himself and you, respond with “hmmm” and listen. Let him go on and on, and listen for what might be revealed. Try to avoid any judgment. At times you can just engage in active listening and watch what happens, “...so you were at your friend’s house, and he had money to share...so you helped yourself to some...because he told you that you could have some.” The goal here is to play it cool and listen long enough that you can get to the truth.

- Try to reassure your child that he is not going to be punished. Rather, your goal is to help him sort out what happened so you and he can determine what action to take. Let him know that he is going to make

mistakes at times, and it is important that he come to you or his dad to talk when he needs to in order to make a wrong situation right.

- Once you have a handle on what occurred, you can count on his conscience to help you figure out how to remedy the situation. Perhaps he needs to give the money back and learn a lesson about accepting gifts when it is not his birthday. Perhaps he needs to learn a lesson about how to stop himself from acting on an impulse to take something that does not rightly belong to him. Perhaps he needs to apologize to someone face-to-face.

- It is fine to tell a third person story about another boy’s mistake or about your own mistake as a young child.

- When children are fully attached to parents and the relationship is largely positive, and when parents are not overly dramatic and reactive, honesty wins over lying.

- When lying is a habit and a child claims to not care, it is time to look beyond the surface to reasons for anger and angry acting out. In such a case, the repetitive lying may be a “red flag” for more serious problems that need to be addressed in the family.

The lessons that stem from honest searching and revelation are far more powerful than threats and punishment, which can lead to more frequent lying. Even when our children do not reveal the whole truth, we have the power to convey that we know something is not right. We can state our expectations with calm and clarity, and we can expect our children will reveal a mistake when they feel safe to do so. Their mistake is the key to learning and maturation. It is our job to make sure that key is not thrown away.

**Kay Kosak Abrams** is a psychologist in private practice in Garrett Park, Md. “Parenting with Confidence” coffeehouse sessions take place on-site at area schools, as well as on the second Wednesday of each month at the Garrett Park Town Hall, October through June. Visit [www.kayabrams.com](http://www.kayabrams.com) for more information.

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