

When Children Tell Lies

From the "little white lie" to prevent hurt feelings, to the denial of wrongdoing in order to avoid punishment, to the silly whopper that seems to serve no particular purpose, probably everyone lies at one time or another. And children are no exception. What does it mean when a child tells a lie? Do children lie on purpose – or do they just not know any better? At what age can they learn the concept and value of honesty? Is lying ever a sign of serious emotional problems? And what should parents do when they catch their child spinning a tall tale? Here are answers from Marti:

I. Issues underlying dishonesty in children and teens

- Developmental considerations
 - Preschool children can't distinguish between reality and fantasy
 - Later, they know the difference but may not have learned the value of honesty
 - Teens may withhold information to protect their increasing need for privacy (challenging parents' right to know everything)
- Context
 - Children may tell what they wish were true
 - They may lie to avoid punishment
 - They may tell a "white lie" to avoid hurting feelings
- Severity and frequency
 - When a child lies for no apparent reason and when it becomes a pattern, that is a risk sign
 - It may indicate serious insecurity, a cry for help or significant family problems

II. 5 tips for parents

- 1) Model honesty
- 2) Teach honesty as a virtue
- 3) Teach children the concept of trust (*The Boy Who Cried Wolf*)
- 4) Make honesty worthwhile for the child
- 5) Confront lies consistently