



Honesty Deficit Disorder (HDD) ... or, What to Do When Your Kids Lie

By Charles Fay, Ph.D.

How's a parent to respond when their child comes down with the fibber's flu? There are few things that hit the "parental nerve" more soundly than when our kids tell a big fat lie! Responsible parents begin to wonder and worry: "Why did he lie?" "Where did he learn that? We don't live our lives that way!" "What kind of life is he going to have if he keeps this up?"

Wise parents are wise to be worried. But wise parents also know that kids are like scientists, constantly experimenting with varying mixtures of misbehavior. To learn about the wonderful world of cause and effect, they must experiment. To help them learn that crime doesn't pay, parents must caringly show them that consequences will follow. Stated differently, it's a kid's job to test limits. It's a parent's job to enforce these limits in a loving way.

But what's a parent to do when their child lies? Let's take a look at what doesn't work:

Mom: "You told me that you were going over to Shawn's to study! I called over there, and his Mom said you two went to the mall. You lied to me!"

April: "We did not! We studied first ... then we just went to hang out for a while."

Mom: "Let's see your homework. Show me what you did."

April: "Well ... umm ..."

Mom: "You lied! Admit it."

April: "No I didn't! Why are you always on my case? You never trust me!"

Mom: "Well, if you would just tell the truth, then I'd trust you! That's it! You're grounded!"

April: "Not fair!"

Mom: "Yes it is fair! It's about time that ..."

This parent fell into the trap of ranting, raving, and trying to make her child admit to a lie. Why is this a problem? Simply because it drains valuable energy, creates greater parent-child resentment, and shows the child that the best way to get an exciting display of parental frustration and anger is to lie ... and then lie about lying. Did I also mention how this approach takes years off of the parent's life?

Let's take a look at a lower stress, more successful approach. Pay close attention as the parent gives her child the gift of knowing that honesty is the best policy:



WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Mom: "You told me that you were going over to Shawn's to study. I called over there, and his Mom said you two went to the mall."

April: "We did not! We studied first ... then we just went to hang out for a while."

Mom: "Well, I need to think about this more before I do something. We'll talk later."

April: "What are you gonna do?"

Mom: (walking away) "I'm not sure. I need some time to think."

FRIDAY EVENING

April: "Mom! We're late! It's time to leave for the rec center! Remember the dance?"

Mom: (with sincere empathy) "This is such a drag. I'll be happy to do the special things I do for you when I can trust that you have been telling the truth."

April: "Not fair!"

Mom: (calmly) "I love you too much to argue."

April: "But it's not fair!"

Mom: (still calmly) "I love you too much to argue ..."

Listed below are a few tips for handling lying without raising your blood pressure.

Instead of responding with anger, lectures, or threats, delay the consequence.

When April caught her off-guard, and Mom was too angry to think straight, she delayed the consequence. This bought her time to visit with friends and to formulate a watertight plan.

Use a strong dose of empathy to show that lying makes your child's life stink.

When Mom responded to April's lie with anger and frustration, she allowed her daughter to reason, "When I lie, it makes my parents really mad. I better not get caught next time."

Something very different happened when Mom responded with empathy. Down deep, April was forced to reason, "When I lie, it makes my life really stink. I better make better decisions in the future."

In essence, empathy ups the odds that our kids will make wise decisions even when we aren't around!

Go on strike and negotiate for better working conditions.



April's mom chose a consequence requiring no one else's cooperation than her own. In fact, the only thing we can actually control beyond a shadow of a doubt is our own behavior. This counts double when we're parents of children way too large to carry!

Without lectures, anger, or sarcasm, Mom stopped doing many of the extra things April had become accustomed to. Isn't this similar to what happens in the adult world when one lies to friends, coworkers, etc.?

In just over a week, Mom noticed that April's attitude had become much sweeter. She also noticed that April was willing to do some extra chores to repay the energy she had drained by being dishonest. As April became more responsible, Mom became more willing to drive her where she wanted to go, buy the kind of food she liked, etc.

Trust your parental instincts.

Too many parents doubt themselves when their gut tells them that their kids have lied. Too frequently today's parents feel like they must make their case, beyond a "reasonable doubt," before they feel justified in providing consequences. As a result, their kids are forever leading them on wild goose chases. Soon their children begin to believe that it's okay to lie as long as you can provide a convincing ... or confusing ... counterargument.

Our homes are not courtrooms, and our children should not be treated like defense attorneys or defendants. While Love and Logic parents do their best to listen, be fair, and consider their children's views, they realize that there are times when we must "convict" even when the evidence is merely circumstantial.

When parents apply these practical tips, most kids quickly realize that lying creates more problems for them than it solves. With a sincere serving of Love and Logic, most kids learn that their lives are much happier keeping honesty as their motto.

There are exceptions, however. For various reasons, some children lack good cause-and-effect reasoning when it comes to honesty. Kids who've been abused or neglected sometimes come to believe that lying is the only way they can protect themselves and get their needs met. Children with some types of neurological conditions lack the impulse-control to routinely choose the delayed gratification of being honest over the immediate gratification of lying and getting oneself off the hook ... albeit temporarily. If your child continues to lie on a chronic basis, despite your diligent application of Love and Logic, seek professional help.

The sooner you do, the better.

Fortunately, most kids, even those with emotional or behavioral problems, eventually learn that lying to a Love and Logic adult does not pay. One mother of a particularly difficult teenager put it this way:

Love and Logic

Once in a while Conner will try to pull something over on me. It's like he needs a little "tune up" from time to time. But now I know how to make sure he regrets his poor decisions. And the great part is that the empathy keeps me the good guy.

During one of his mother's lie-related work slow-downs, Conner asked her, "How come you're making such a big deal out of this? How come on the news all them politicians and business guys get to lie?"

Like a true master of Love and Logic, she hugged him, smiled warmly, and answered:

I guess those guys just didn't have great Mommas like yours.

People who are really successful implementing this skill purchased [Childhood Lying, Stealing and Cheating](#)



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