



Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!
How to help your child stop lying

By Angela Sullivan

Liar, liar, pants on fire!

Have you ever caught your child in a lie?

Did you know that children learn to lie as early as 2 – 3 years old?

Did you know that lying is unofficially a developmental milestone because it requires smarts!

Think of it this way, in order to lie, a child has to recognize a reason or motivation for lying, think of an alternate reality (the lie) then convince their parent of the alternate reality. That's pretty complex thinking for a 2 year old, don't you agree? For a parent, lying is a dichotomy – it is bad behavior but a good sign that their kid is using his brain. In fact, as they grow older it is the more intellectual and socially savvy child who often becomes a habitual liar.

What researchers have discovered is that almost all children have learned how to lie by age 4 in order to avoid punishment. Because of this strong motivation, they will often lie, "I didn't do it" even though the parent saw them do it. But as they grow, they get better at lying and do it more often.

According to research, 4 year olds lie about once every 2 hours, where 6 year olds lie once every 1 ½ hours. By the time children reach school age, they develop more reasons to lie. Although their main reason is still to avoid punishment, now they learn that lying increases their power and sense of control. They learn to manipulate friends, teachers, and parents as well as brag and exaggerate to get what they want or increase in popularity.

About half of the children age 6 will grow out of the lying habit by their next birthday. However, for those kids who found lying to be advantageous - meaning they were good at it, rarely called out on it, and it brought about the desired results - they will continue to lie for the rest of their childhood and possibly into

adulthood. The question is what can parents do to help their children be honest in their interaction with others?

Unfortunately, parents often model lying behavior for their children. From the lies we tell telemarketers to get them off the phone to the polite yet undeserved compliments we give someone we care about. (“Yes, those muffins taste wonderful!” ...yuk) Let’s explore a few more ways we tell our children it is ok to lie (sometimes).

Tattle-tale!

Most parents are guilty of this one. We teach children that tattling is NOT ok. We do this because we want them to learn how to settle their own differences and learn problem solving skills. We think we are teaching them social skills by refusing to allow them to tattle on one another. We do this because we think a tattler is running to us about every little thing. However, research has shown that for every time a child attempts to tattle there are on average fourteen instances where they did not tell. This means that more than likely, a child is tattling because they have reached their limit and do not know what else to do. They come to us for help and the message we send back to them is “don’t bother me with your problems!” “Solve this on your own.”

The pressure to not tattle heats up in peer groups as the children get older – they are seen as a traitor or an informant on the playground if they should tell an adult anything that is going on. But what is really happening when a child tells on another child? Most of the time (nine out of ten times, according to research), the child is being honest. Yet that honesty is being met with “don’t be tattlers!” As the child grows, the offenses for which he could be tattling grow into vandalism, drug use, shoplifting, and other serious behaviors. It’s much easier for a teenager to keep his mouth closed rather than rat out his peers because that’s what we taught him. And doesn’t lying encompass the withholding of truth?

As parents, it is our job to look for teachable moments where our children can learn life skills and social skills to carry them into adulthood. When a child tattles, a parent needs to first LISTEN to their child. The last thing we want to do is send a message that what they have to say is not important to us.

The same parents who communicate to their children that what they have to say is unimportant will later lament over the fact they can't get their teenager to talk to them!

After we listen to the chief complaint, we may find an opportunity to teach the children how to problem solve rather than fixing it for them or intervening in a situation they can handle themselves. But until you know what is happening, you can't determine what opportunity for teaching exists. Listen to your child! Do not encourage tattling, but when it happens, find out if it is warranted rather than just making it a general rule.

Another way we teach our children to not be honest is in how we expect him to react when he receives a gift that he doesn't like. Of course we expect him to smile all the while suppressing his disappointment.

We do this as adults – thus we invented “re-gifting.”

In the research on childhood lying, a group of children were told they would win a prize for performing a certain task. When they completed the task, they were given a bar of soap. After giving the children a moment to overcome their shock, the researchers asked them how they liked the bar of soap. As least a quarter of the pre-school children were able to lie about liking the prize and half the elementary school students were able to fake their response. On-looking parents were pleased with their children who respond “politely.” It was obvious to the researchers that the children who lied about liking the soap, felt very uncomfortable with the situation, particularly when pressed to offer reasons why they liked the soap, making them lie even more.

Afterward, the parents were interviewed and most were unwilling to admit that the children were lying and instead considered it being polite. If parents are unable to recognize that even “white lies” are still lies, how can we expect children to understand that?

Again, the job of the parent is to teach children to be socially competent.

It is possible to be honest and be polite at the same time.

In fact, if we could manage to bring up a new generation of people who understood the art of mixing honesty with tact, perhaps we would not be a nation so possessed with the idea of being politically correct! And, women would stop asking “does this outfit make me look fat?” It would add value to compliments if we knew they were sincere and not just an attempt to be polite and placate our fragile psyche!

Another way in which parents inadvertently teach children to be dishonest is through the practice of suppressing discussion or argument between parent and child.

“Because I said so” is a lazy parent’s way around the task of parenting children.

If a child is angry and says “I hate you!” they are firmly reprimanded and often punished for the outburst. Dialog is discouraged any time it includes a difference of opinion and butting of wills. We say that we are simply demanding respect; however, again, our job is to teach children and *earn* respect.

It is possible to disagree with someone or state your negative feelings in a respectful manner.

But that type of communication must go both ways. We speak down to our children, do not allow them to express frustration or difference of opinion, then we wonder why they won't talk to us when they are teenagers or why they lie to us about things that will upset us.

According to research, most teenagers lie about the following subjects:

- What they spend money on
- Whether they have started dating
- What clothes they put on away from the home
- What movie they went to see
- Who they saw the movie with
- Alcohol and drug use
- How they spent the afternoon when parents are working
- Whether a party was chaperoned
- Whether they rode in a car driven by a drunken teen

As you can imagine, this is information parents need most in order to keep their child safe. However, we've taught them their entire lives to not talk to us about subjects we cannot agree upon.

Before we discuss ways to curb the tendency to lie, let's discuss one more way I've noticed parents teaching children to lie. Remember, the most common motivation for lying is to avoid punishment. For this reason, do not test your child or tempt them to lie to you – because they will. Never ask a child a question you already know the answer to. If you see your child write on the wall with his crayon, the question should not be, "Did you write on the wall?" He is going to say "NO!" even if you saw him do it - even if there's no one else in the room and he's an only child!

So what's a parent to do? Of course, as with any form of social improvement the change begins with **you**. Do you model lying to your children? Have you learned the art of tactful honesty? Do you know how to have a disagreement without being disrespectful? Please don't try to fix something in your child before you have addressed your own issues in that area. Kids are pros at spotting an imposter!



Therefore, step number one: Model honesty for your children.

During one study on childhood lying, the researchers conducted a study with a group of preschoolers where they asked each child not to peek at something while the researcher left the room for a moment. When they returned, they asked the child if they had peeked at an object there were trying to guess. Of course a hidden camera revealed whether or not the child was lying. In this control group, 67% of the kids peeked and of those 95% lied about doing it.

The study was conducted again, but this time before the experiment, the researcher read aloud the story about the boy who cried wolf using the version where both the boy and the sheep were eaten by the wolf because of the boy's lying. The third time, the study was conducted with the researcher reading aloud the story of George Washington chopping down his father's prized cherry tree, in which in the end, the father praised his son for telling the truth. You would assume that the first story would have discouraged lying because of the reminder that bad things happen when we lie. However, with the group who listened to this story, the children lied more than the control group who heard no story at all. In the group who heard the story of George Washington, the children lied 43% less than the first group!



The lesson we can learn from this gives us step two: don't just teach children that lying is wrong – also teach them and demonstrate that you VALUE honesty.

Never let a lie slide. This is particularly true for children around age six, but goes for everyone – if you hear a lie, call it out. If you hear an exaggeration, call them out on it. Never reward lying by ignoring it. When you ignore lies, even “white lies,” you are devaluing honesty and making lying a viable option.



Step three involves communication skills.

First, demonstrate that you value your children's opinion by being a good listener. Watch for teachable moments where you can help your child communicate honestly with respect. Help your child expand his vocabulary so he can tell you how he is feeling without feeling the need to yell or lie. Don't punish a child for having a difference of opinion.



Step four requires that you not trick your children into lying.

Don't ask questions that will cause them to choose between getting in trouble and lying.

Even if you personally never tell lies and have always been completely honest, and even if you employ all four of these steps in dealing with your children, it's likely that your child will lie. It's part of our human nature to try to get away with it. But if you do your part as a parent, you can help instill honesty into your child's future – what a beautiful and lasting gift!