

When Young Children Lie



It is very common for young children to lie. They tell tall tales and deny the obvious when they get caught doing something they shouldn't. Why do they react like this? How should you respond?

MAKE-BELIEVE AND WISHFUL THINKING

Young children think differently about the world than adults. Children under five do not have a firm grasp of right and wrong. They still confuse reality with fantasy and engage in magical thinking. Monsters and fairies still inhabit their world.

Young children are creative storytellers because there is no clear line between what they wish for and what they have. They may say they have a pet dinosaur. Or that their friend is a real princess. Respond matter-of-factly to these “wishful-thinking” lies. Your child may tell you, “Daddy said

I could have cake before dinner.” You might respond, “I know you wish that were true, but we don't eat sweets before dinner.”

BUILDING SELF-CONTROL

It is very common for young children to lie when caught doing something they shouldn't. The part of their brains that allow for self-control is still developing. Unlike older children, toddlers do not fully understand that telling lies is wrong. Not yet. But don't worry. There will be plenty of chances to teach them to be honest when their brain is more developed.

Kids may also lie to avoid punishment. If you catch them red-handed and they lie about it, stay calm and state the limit. Say, “No helping yourself cookies—ask first.” Help them understand what they did wrong instead of focusing on the lie. If you respond with anger and shame, they'll pay more attention to your reaction than the lesson.

HOW TO RESPOND

Don't ask your child if they did it (whatever “it” is). Because it's very likely they will deny it. Instead, observe and offer a solution. If you find a toddler guilty of getting into something they

shouldn't have, just state the obvious. Say, "I see you found the pen. The walls are not for art and you may not draw on them. Let's clean this up." Afterward, it's good to re-connect. Say, "I see you like drawing. I can get you some paper and crayons."

THE TRUTH IS

A toddler's big imagination is great fun. Lies at this age are typical and not a cause for concern. However, send clear messages about being honest. Say, "The rule in our family is we tell the truth." You can help by making your general approach to discipline a positive one.

