

Responding to Lying

When the child lies, ask yourself the following:

- Is the child scared?
- Is the child angry?
- What is the child's immediate reason for lying?
- What other motivation might cause the child to lie?
- Are there certain situations that predictably lead to lying?
- What are my feelings when this happens?
- Are my feelings/reactions a clue to why the child feels or behaves this way?
- Do I need to gather more information about the situation before taking action or making a response?

Given the child's reason for lying, respond in one or more of the following ways:

- Use reflective listening to demonstrate your understanding of the child's underlying needs/feelings.
- Meet the child's underlying need(s) without addressing the specific lie, or once the need is identified, help the child meet his or her needs by exploring alternatives
- Ignore the lie and acknowledge the child's good behavior
- Use an I-message to share your honest feelings about the child's behavior.
- Offer the child accurate information so he or she does not have to rely on imagination to fill in the gaps.
- Establish rules and enforce them consistently if the child is testing your reaction to certain behavior.

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To confront a lie directly:

- Be absolutely certain the child has in fact lied. Rely on what *you* saw or what you heard, not on what others said they saw or heard, especially other children.
- Do not accuse the child of lying or being a liar.
- Use I-messages to clearly describe the specific behavior you want to change; i.e., “I am concerned (puzzled/worried) when you tell me you’re at Jane’s when you are not,” is much more effective than saying in an angry tone of voice, “You lied to me about being at Jane’s.”

To prevent or reduce lying:

- Demonstrate/model honesty yourself.
- Demonstrate acceptance so that you do not impose excessive consequences on the child.
- Give attention when the child is *not* lying.
- Promote the child’s attachment to significant others by building a trusting relationship.
- Promote the child’s connection to accurate information.
- Reflect the feelings and behavior that will help the child deal honestly with his or her emotions.
- Build the self-concept of the child with conditional and unconditional acknowledgments and strokes.
- Clearly and directly communicate expectations, limits, and rules. Enforce them consistently so the child does not have to test them.

Note: The techniques suggested in item 4 above should be practiced on a day-to-day basis and in a variety of situations in order **to** prevent/reduce lying in the long run. It is possible that the child in care has a long habit of lying for self-protection. If progress is being made, do not be overly concerned when he or she slips occasionally.

However, you may want to emphasize to the child that while at home you understand and are working with the child on his or her tendency to tell untruths, at school the child’s teachers expect truthfulness. Try to help the child understand and accept this. You may also want to make this the subject of a teacher conference if you feel the child is making progress but is still “telling stories” at school.