

Lying

Why children lie is as complicated as any other aspect of human behavior. There can be several reasons for any single piece of behavior. Understanding the reasons and motives for children lying helps us to appreciate how ambiguous behaviour can be.

All children make up stories and sometimes they can have difficulties distinguishing fact from fantasy. This is part of their normal learning and would be wrong to class this as lying. By lying we usually mean a conscious act of deception.

Learning to Lie

Children can be taught mixed messages about lying. When they express their feelings honestly they can be told not to say such nasty things as they do not really mean it. Children can learn that it is better to lie than to say what they really feel. A more helpful approach is for them to learn that there are times when 'if you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all'. Also children can learn that when they do tell the truth that they will be punished. Learning that telling the truth can result in punishment, whereas lying avoided punishment.

Why do children lie?

To make any sense of why children lie we need to understand some key aspects of child development. There are two relevant aspects controlling and influencing how children develop. These are their internal emotional needs and their ability to learn.

All children have fundamental emotional needs:

- To gain acceptance and feel valued
- To avoid rejection and feelings of inferiority

This needs to belong and to feel valued can be seen as the motivation for certain types of lying.

Namely lying to:

- Enhance status
- Be in control
- Displace anger
- Hurt others

Learning is the second key process that strongly influences us. We learn that certain behaviours lead to positive outcomes and others to unpleasant ones. Children are motivated towards those behaviours that obtain pleasure and to avoid those that cause pain. Children learn through their experiences the value of telling the truth. Such learning can be seen in other types of lying.

Namely lying to:

- Avoid doing something I do not like
- Avoid being punished
- Avoid reactions of adults

The value of telling the Truth

It is important to remember that when children lie it often shows they are aware that they have done something wrong. The child who does not care, understand or fear the consequences does not lie. Children who lie know what is wrong however are unable to resist temptation.

When we know a child is vulnerable to lying we need to catch them telling the truth and to praise them. Tell them how proud we are that they 'owned up when lying might have been an easier option'.

The Role of Punishment

If children know that the adults who care for them are volatile and likely to shout excessively, then it is not surprising that some children will lie to avoid such outbursts. The child's solution to the fear of punishment becomes associated with being found out and not lying. Their way forward is to not over-focus on the lie itself, but the reason for the lie.

Lying and Defence Mechanisms

There will be times when children, especially those with a low self-esteem, will be self-motivated to lie as a way of protecting their weak self-images. This will also enable them to avoid taking responsibility for their behavior.