

INSIGHTS

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When kids bend the truth

As a rule of thumb, step back and try to identify the purpose of a child's untruths. This indicates to parents how they should deal with the behaviour.



Children often bend the truth to suit themselves. They sometimes tell fibs to escape punishment or avoid being caught when misbehaviour occurs. Some kids fantasise about their exploits to make themselves appear bigger, more daring or more exciting than they really are. These children often think that they are not much good and so invent a few tales to make themselves seem more interesting. Of course, some children fantasise purely because it is fun to stretch the truth a little. It is more fun to run away from 'a ferocious man-eating tiger' than be scared of the next-door neighbour's moggie.

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Escaping negative consequences

Eight-year-old Pamela spilt a container of milk on the kitchen floor. She panicked, replaced the empty container in the refrigerator and went off to her bedroom to read. When her mother saw the mess, she asked Pamela if she knew what had happened. The child denied any knowledge of it. 'What milk do you mean, Mum?' said Pamela, with an innocent look on her face. Her mother, knowing immediately that her daughter was responsible, asked her to help to clean up the mess. Avoiding a scene, she made sure that her daughter didn't escape the consequence of cleaning up the mess that she had made.

A matter of trust

Thirteen-year-old Britta was refused permission to visit an older friend after school, as her mother thought the friend unsuitable company for her daughter. Resenting her mother's interference Britta frequently visited her older friend. When her mother asked her where she was going after school she would lie and tell her that she was visiting a friend that her mother approved of. Eventually her mother found out through an acquaintance that Britta had been lying to her about her visits. She confronted her daughter with the truth. Her mother dealt with the matter of the illicit visits. She was not permitted to go out after school for two weeks. This was an appropriate consequence that matched the misbehaviour. She dealt with the matter of lying separately; pointing out that it was difficult to trust her daughter when she didn't tell the truth.

Fantatising

Some children continually exaggerate to make everything appear bigger or better than in real life. In this way they appear more exciting or interesting than they think they are. This is a sign of discouragement. It is best to go along with these children's tales, although you should let them know that you are aware of the truth without bursting their bubble. It is fine to exaggerate, but they should never be too far away from reality. Persistent fantasisers often need plenty of encouragement. Let them know that they are OK as they are. Fantasising and telling tall tales may be fun but they don't need to fantasise to build themselves up. Youngest children in the family often tell whoppers in an effort to make themselves seem important in the eyes of older siblings.

Imaginary friends

Some children will use imaginary friends to avoid doing things they don't want to do. 'Mr. Bear says I don't have to go bed.' If it only happens once in a while then it's a bit of fun. It can become wearing if it's a continuous avoidance strategy. If that's the case, try the direct approach. 'Mr. Bear could be right. But I'm your mum and I know it's bedtime. Mr. Bear can join you if he likes.'

Don't overreact

Be careful not to overreact when children tell lies. It is better to recognise the child's goal and act in a way that prevents the behaviour from achieving its purpose. There is little point moralising about the evils of lying. Children know that they should be good; they don't need to be reminded all the time. Children will continue behaviours that serve a purpose, regardless of whether the actions are morally good or bad. It is more useful to ensure that lying doesn't achieve its goal and to encourage children at every conceivable occasion.

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