

# Lies and fibs



**When children don't tell the truth it can upset and worry parents. It is important to understand what the lie means to your child before you react.**

## Learning about the truth

Children's understanding of the truth is related to their development.

- Telling lies has no meaning for children under three. They do not understand that thinking is private and they believe their parents can read their minds. A two year old in a shop may say 'Why did you lose me, Mummy?'. They think mum knows where they are even when they're out of sight.
- Three to four year olds are learning that other people don't know what they are thinking. Children this age have a very strong imagination. They enjoy using their new knowledge and testing it out by telling 'stories', eg 'The big bad wolf did it'. It is normal for young children to blame someone else or make up a story.
- Children in the early years of school usually want to connect with and please their parents more than they want to do the 'right thing'. They can worry about making parents angry or upset.
- By eight or nine years of age children may have some understanding of the difference between truth and fantasy.
- A child's sense of right and wrong is usually developed by about nine or ten years of age.

**Understanding and telling the truth is something that children learn over years, not something they know from birth.**

## Imaginary friends

Some children at about three or four have an imaginary friend. This friend usually disappears as the child grows older. Children talk to and play with the friend. They might talk to the friend when they are upset or blame the friend when they do something wrong. There is no need for concern unless your child seems really withdrawn and unable to get on with other children and adults.

## Why children lie

Children might lie because they:

- are not old enough to understand the difference between truth and untruth, or right and wrong
- fear getting into trouble and losing parents' love and affection
- have not yet learned the skills they need to deal with a situation in a better way. This is a chance to help them learn
- have low self-esteem and want to make themselves sound better
- want to impress their friends and fit in with the group
- really believe what they are saying is true – it is how things seem to them
- want to have fun, see how you react, or get something they want
- are copying other people. Parents might say that lying is wrong but not always tell the truth themselves, eg saying 'Tell them I am not home' when someone rings the doorbell
- are saying what they wish was true, eg 'My dad always takes me to the football'.

Older children and teenagers might lie because they:

- fear that if they tell the truth they will not be allowed to do something they really want to do
- have a need to keep some parts of their lives private and not share them with parents.



**Noticing when your child lies, such as when they are upset or with friends, can help you understand the reasons and how you can help.**

## Polite, social or 'white' lying

Most parents teach children it is OK not to tell the truth when it is not polite or could be hurtful, eg:

- saying 'Thank you for the lovely present' whether they like it or not, or to say they like food offered to them whether they like it or not
- avoiding using hurtful or insulting words about another person who they are upset with or is different to them.

It takes a long time for children to learn the difference between lies to be kind and lies for other reasons.

## What parents can do

- Make it clear that you value honesty in your family.
- Talk about why being honest and truthful is important. You could say 'When people tell the truth it helps us to trust them'.
- Tell children it is safe to tell you the truth. Say you will listen and understand and not be angry. Talk about how you will respond when they make a mistake. You understand they are young and still learning, and that mistakes are for learning from.
- Work out why your child lied and help them learn skills for handling the situation better next time. If you think they lied 'for attention', their strong need for closeness and connection with you may be driving their behaviour. Spending special time with them in positive ways can help.
- Praise children for telling the truth – it can take courage.
- For younger children, teach the difference between truth and fantasy, eg 'I can see you make up lovely stories, maybe we can write them down to keep'.
- Try not to accuse children of mistakes. Say 'I see there's been an accident with the milk, let's clean it up' rather than 'Did you spill the milk?'
- Show your child you understand that some lies are wishes. If they say their dad is phoning all the time and you know this is not true, you could say 'It sounds like you wish Dad could be here all the time'.
- Give older children and teenagers some personal privacy. Ask what you need to know to protect them, but don't pry too much. Often they will talk to you when the time is right and they feel you will listen without judging.
- Tell the truth yourself. Don't break promises because to a child that seems like telling a lie. If you can't do what you promised, give a good reason.
- If your child's lying is becoming a habit, they seem unable to accept the truth when it is shown to them in a caring way or it is part of bigger behavioural problems, you may want to seek professional help to explore what is happening for them.

**Notice when your child tells the truth and let them know you are pleased. Don't label your child 'a liar' because labels tend to encourage the kind of behaviour you don't want.**

## Want more information?

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on your child's health and development, and parenting

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4:30pm, Mon-Fri to make an appointment. The child health nurses can talk with you about your child's development and behaviour [www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au)

### Raising Children's Network

For information on raising children including children lying [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years', 'Living with toddlers', 'Coping skills (resilience)', 'Self-esteem', 'Children's mental health' and 'Pocket money' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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