

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

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Children lie for a reason, whether they or their parents know it or not. There are underlying factors when children chronically lie, despite consequences and repercussions. It is not enough to know that the child is lying. It is important to know what is behind the child's thinking that the lie makes sense.

Lying and Teaching the Truth

by Deborah Hage, MSW

"If I listened long enough to you,
I'd find a way to believe it was true.
Knowing that you lied, straight-faced while I cried.
Still I look to find a reason to believe."

Rod Stewart

The majority of healthy parents have a moral code which precludes lying as an acceptable behavior. They abhor it. They avoid it at all costs. They admire and practice integrity and honesty. With the huge mandate and model in the home that telling the truth is essential and lying is forbidden, why then do so many children lie? When they lie, the children are subjected to consequences and disciplined in various ways. Parents beg, implore their children to tell the truth, even promising the consequence will be lessened if they just come clean. Yet, the lying persists. Some children lie when they do not want to take responsibility for their behavior. Some lie when they want something. Some lie to manipulate and triangulate others around them. Some lie to test the intelligence of their listener. Some lie in the face of the truth - with frosting on their face and fingers - they state unequivocally, they did not have a piece of cake. Some do all of the above and simply lie about everything all the time. What internal workings of the brain tell children that lying is an acceptable form of speech?

By looking at the workings of the brain, some answers can be obtained. The first two years of life are pivotal to brain development and personality growth. It is during these critical months foundations are laid which determine, to a great extent, future patterns of behavior. The way a child learns to think about life, himself and others in these first years will affect how he behaves during his life and the nature of the relationships he establishes. He will learn to trust or not... love or not...fear or not...think or not...tell the truth or not.

Babies learn to tell the truth or to lie in the first few months of life. During the first year of life a baby is a bundle of needs. He needs to be fed, kept warm, comforted, held, rocked, cuddled and attended to. He is totally dependent on others for his survival and emotional growth. When that care is consistent with his needs he learns to trust. When that care is not consistent with his needs he learns to not trust. He begins to tell himself the first lies. The infant signals he is hungry and no one comes. He cries and no one comes. He cries some more and no one comes. He stops crying and the internal messages he must give himself in order to survive are, "I am no longer hungry. I am not cold." The internal

lying messages continue, "I am not worthy of being kept warm, comforted, held, cuddled, rocked. The world is unsafe. No one cares." The lies enter his psyche and embed themselves in his brain. The distinct line between truth and falsehood begins to blur.

During the second year of life a child begins to focus on wants in addition to needs. He wants his mother to stay with him. He wants to play with toys. He wants to laugh and giggle with someone who cares. Yet, despite his wants his mother leaves, there are no toys and no one giggles and coos with him. He cries and no one comes. He cries some more and no one comes. He stops crying and the internal messages he must give himself in order to survive are, "I don't want my mother to stay. It is OK that she is gone." The internal lying messages continue. "I don't want toys and games. I don't want anyone to coo and giggle with me. Life is fine exactly the way it is." The difference between the truth and the lies becomes even fuzzier. The message to his brain is reinforced and the thought pattern becomes more habitual.

In subsequent years a child learns to distinguish feelings and emotions. These are confirmed by those around him. His mother says, "I love you" and follows that up with a safe home, nutritious food and warm clothes. It is not only the words which convey a feeling of love, it is the actions which give meaning to the words. Contrast that to the child whose mother says, "I love you" and then proceeds to neglect him, perhaps beat him. The actions make a lie of the loving words. The actions make a lie of the emotion. The child questions, "If this is love, then why does it hurt so bad? What is the truth here?" As a predictable, safe, caring world crumbles about him he gets angry, enraged. However, such strong feelings in so small a person are very frightening. In order to protect himself from his own fear, grief and rage he must tell himself that he is a strong little boy, capable of taking care of himself. He denies he is angry, scared or grief stricken. To give himself permission to feel these feelings, to even acknowledge their existence, is to make himself vulnerable to an uncaring world. He must find a way to take control so others cannot hurt him anymore. The lies he tells himself in order to survive continue. "I am happy. I am not angry. I am not scared. I am not sad. I must have been a bad baby or else my mother would have kept me." Truth becomes a taboo topic for him to consider. Truth becomes irrelevant. Survival is all that matters. The rut in his brain deepens and lying becomes habitual. It has no good or bad connotations. Like the moon and the stars, it is just there.

When the child enters a home where truth is very relevant. The concept is so foreign to him it is rejected. The truth has never mattered before, why should it suddenly become important? He has blocked out the difference between truth and lies to the point where he does not even consider it worth his while to pay attention to which is which. Parents and the rest of society however, tend to feel differently so it must be addressed.

Central to helping a child deal with lying behaviors is a message which runs counter to prevailing thought. Most people develop relationships with people they can trust and have been known to say something like, "I could never love someone I didn't trust." Obviously, that is not the message a child who lies needs to hear. Parents can be extremely therapeutic when they change their thought processes and words to, "I can love you even when I don't trust you." And, "I am such a great mom that you are not going to keep me from loving you just because you lie." Parents are not being therapeutic when they say the words without truly accepting the child exactly as he is, lies and all. The child can see through such transparency and knows the parent is lying to them, which is counter productive to healing.

Being honest about a child's history is pivotal to effective therapy. Parents must know everything that is known about the child's history, otherwise concealing it becomes part of the problem. When a therapist or caseworker knows something about a child that the parents don't know then the child continues the lying stance by repeating the internal message, "If they really knew me, all about me, then they would no longer love me." There can be no secrets between a therapist and the parents if the child's lying behaviors are to change. After all, the child reasons, if even the therapist knows the parents can't handle the truth, the child is certainly not going to risk revealing it! Parents can be upfront and even teasing about it by asking the child, "Do you think I am the kind of mom that can't love a child who has hurt other children/been sexually abused/ stolen money from foster parents? Well, I'm not. I can love you no matter what you have done or what has happened to you. How long do you think you need to keep up your lying behaviors until you figure that out?"

Naturally, the goal of therapeutic parenting is to help a child increase his ability to tell the truth. However, in the beginning, it is often helpful for parents to diffuse a potentially frustrating situation by not asking a child, who typically lies, questions regarding the facts around events or behaviors when the answer is known, in hopes the child will tell the truth. It is a set up for the child. He lies. The parent pounces triumphantly on his lie. He feels betrayed. If the answer is known, don't ask. By the same token, never ask when the answer is not known as the answer cannot be trusted anyway. In other words, be careful when asking a child who lies a question. It can entrench the lying and can add a layer of guilt which further damages the relationship. Instead, parents can act on what they believe to be the truth and leave it go at that. Here is a sample of an effective, therapeutic conversation:

Parent - Greg said you hit him.

Child - Well, I didn't.

P - What do you think I believe?

C - You think I hit him.

P - Right. I believe you hit him. As long as I believe you hit him you need to do his chores for him today.

A sample conversation that is typical of the amount of arguing that a child and parent can engage in before it is resolved would continue:

C - But I didn't.

P - Would a jury of your peers convict you? Is the evidence there to indicate you did? Did you have opportunity? Did you have motive? Does Greg say you did?

C - Greg lies.

P - In this household, who tells the truth more? You or Greg?

C - Greg. You never believe me. You don't trust me.

P - Right. Fortunately I am such a great mom I can love a boy I do not trust.

C - But it's not fair.

P - Have you ever lied to me and not got caught?

C - Yes.

P - Well, then this makes up for it. Over the course of time it will all work out. If I'm wrong I will make it up to you.

C - You don't love me as much as Greg.

P - Nice try. Now scoot to (whatever the consequence is)

All of the points as the conversation continues are valid. The problem is that the child has taken control of the situation by continually interjecting and arguing. Every time the child disputes with his parent he is challenging his parent's leadership. A conversation such as this is no longer about lying. It has become a test of the child's trust in the parent to make good decisions. This type of conversation wears parents out as they try to stay ahead of the thoughts and words of the child. The child is exhibiting an increasing level of disrespect and the more the parent buys into it the less trust the child has of the parent's ability to be an effective and fair judge of the situation and a leader in the home. The child's sense of safety goes down, not up.

Parents abhor calling anyone, particularly their child, a liar. Far better to say, "I don't believe you" and make an "I message" around it. After all, there often truly is no way to determine if the child is telling the truth. Saying, "I don't believe you" diminishes the controlling effect a child has when he lies.

Lying becomes a way to take control. By distorting the truth the child can cause the parents' world to spin. The child can then take the chaos in his own brain and impose it on someone else. Children can also use lying as a means to test the parent-child relationship. How truthful are the parents being when they say this is a forever home? If the child's behaviors are disruptive enough can they force the issue and contribute to having the child moved? Maybe the child wants to be moved and is using the lying as a means to push his parents away to the point where they give up on him and ask that he be moved.

The old adage of, "You can't push a river upstream," can be applied to lying. Parents cannot control lying. All they can control is whether or not they believe the child and how to impose an appropriate consequence. Several parenting techniques can be used with success. One is to predict for the child when he is going to lie and then give permission for him to do it. For many children lying is so habitual they lie before they even think about what else they could say. A parent can say, "I want to talk to you and I know you don't tend to tell the truth when I ask you questions. So, I want you to know I expect you to come up with a really good lie in answer to my question. Ready?" (then ask the question). This accomplishes several things. One, it gives a child time to make a decision of whether to lie or not instead of letting the first words, which are usually lies, tumble out. Two, it removes lying from the control battle realm. Three, since the parent has given the child permission to lie, it doesn't make sense for them (parent) to get angry or upset about it. Just praise the child for a great lie and go on with life. Or, if perchance the child happened to tell the truth, cover him with glory. Pop a piece of candy in his mouth with a hug so he connects telling the truth with sweet goodness and relationship. Remember, whenever a habit needs to be broken it requires that the brain be "rewired" around the new behavior.

Parents can practice with a child around the truth. Play a lying/truth game. Have the child tell the answers to obvious questions which have no emotional content. For example, "How old are you. What is your teacher's name, etc." Every time the child tells the truth he gets a treat. Key to giving treats is the treat must pass from the parent's hand to the child's mouth while they are looking into each other's eyes. Do not let the child take the candy and put it in his own

mouth as part of the meaning becomes lost. The connection must be clearly made that the parent is a source of goodness and light and pleasing the parent makes good things happen for the child.

Because lying is often habitual for kids, parents can make an attempt to get in touch with how difficult it is to change a habit by changing one of their own. Explain to the child that everyone has habits, some good and some bad. Changing a habit takes thought and effort. Do you put on both of your socks and then both your shoes or do you put on one sock and shoe and then the other sock and shoe? Do you mix everything up on your plate when you eat or eat one thing until it is gone and then eat the next item? Parents can find something they do habitually - even if it is something like where they store the car keys - and make a commitment to store them in a different place. Parents need to accept the challenge to change a habit of their own before they ask a child to change an engrained habit. Challenge the child to change a habit, other than lying, and then compare notes as to each other's progress. Sympathize with your child as he struggles to change an innocuous habit so you can be sincerely appreciative of whatever efforts he makes to change a deeply entrenched habit, like lying, that has emotional overtones. Accept that changing any habit, particularly one that has been so useful to survival, is going to take a long time. A very long time. Years and years later parents will still be left wondering exactly what of all their child said was the truth. Expecting it to change any more quickly than that sets the parents and child up for disappointment and anger - two emotions which get in the way of instilling a sense in the child that he is loved and cherished exactly as he is. The message is that he needs to change his lying in order to make it in the world - not to make him more lovable to his parents.

Have fun with the lying. For example, when you know a child habitually lies ask him if wants a bowl of ice cream. When he says, "Yes," give him a bowl of cold cereal. When he asks what happened to the ice cream, happily remind him that since he always lies you never know what the truth is. When he said he wanted ice cream you knew he never told the truth so that must mean he didn't want ice cream. Since you didn't know what he really wanted you just guessed and thought cold cereal would be OK.

Parents can look for other ways to confound the child's thinking about the value of his lying. One way is to lie to the child. The child asks to go to the movies and the parent says, "Yes". Later, the parent does not take the child to the movies and when the child asks why, the parent lightly says, "Oh, I thought the truth didn't matter. It was easier to tell you yes at the time, but I really didn't mean it. I thought that was how you wanted us to talk to each other in this family. Are you telling me it is important for me to tell the truth, but it is not important for you to tell the truth?"

The goal in dealing with lying is to put the child in conflict about his lying. When a child lies and the parents get upset and angry then they are in conflict about the child's lying and the child is not. The child says to himself, "No point in both of us being upset about this," and continues lying. When parents get emotionally involved with the lying the child gets the message that says, "When I lie my parents are hurt. When I lie others suffer." When a child does not have a conscience around lying, knowing that others are hurt may be irrelevant to or even please the child. The lying behaviors will not change until the child sees, in non-angry situations, that the lying is not working for him. He needs to see that he is the one who suffers when he lies. It is not getting him what he wants. Alcoholics do not cease acting out their alcoholic behaviors because they think it through and decide it is rational for them to change. They stop drinking when they see their lives are going down the tubes because of it. They have an emotional connection to the negative results of their behavior and then have to act themselves into a new way of thinking. They don't think their way into a new way of acting. In the same way, a child must feel and experience the negative results of his behavior in the presence of non-angry and non-emotionally involved people. Thinking about how lying doesn't work for him doesn't work. Experiencing the results is the only way to drive home that he, not anyone else, is the one who has the most adverse experiences when he lies.

Many parents can handle the lying at home through therapeutic parenting, however, they are at a loss when the child lies outside the home and is believed. Commonly children who are habitual liars lie to their therapists and caseworkers. It is imperative that lying children not be seen alone by either. Parents should not take their child to any therapist who insists on seeing the child alone. The potential for triangulation and manipulation are too great. The child can use the opportunity to fine tune their ability to lie and be believed by trusting adults, thus contributing to the deterioration of their mental health. Additionally, it is too easy for a child who lies to divert attention away from the therapeutic issues which need to be addressed and focus attention on an issue which is irrelevant. Too often it is a waste of parent time, energy and money when they are not present to keep the therapy on track and focused on the behaviors which the child is exhibiting which are dangerous or anti-social. When therapists let the child direct the therapy by choosing the topic it is too easy for the time to be wasted and the child empowered in blaming his parents or others for his behaviors. The situation becomes even dangerous for the parents when a lying child uses his private time with the therapist or caseworker to lodge false accusations of abuse and the parents are not there to counter them.

The most insidious lie occurs when a child falsely accuses his parents of abuse. Society and public policy are often supportive of the child when he does it. A child can have a file three inches thick detailing his anti-social, pathological behaviors, while the parents do not have so much as a traffic ticket on their record, and a well meaning caseworker can still be suckered. One way to turn the tables when confronted by an official is to state, "If the child is telling the truth, he is not safe with me. If the child is lying then I am not safe with him. Either way it is not in anyone's best interest for him to come home." Then, have him placed outside of the home while the legal processes wrangle. To do less is to compromise the entire family's well being and to send home the message to the child that there are no limits to the lies he can get away with. Loving a child and living with a child may not always be possible at the same time. Sometimes you have to feed a child with a long handled spoon.

Lying at school and in other situations can also be problematic for parents. Taking to heart the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," many people, outside of the home, believe a lying child and rush to rescue and save. It is imperative the treatment team stand behind the parents and defend them to the world if the placement is to not disrupt. While the results of believing a child who lies can be destructive to the adults, it is far more destructive to the child. When their lies are believed they lose their ability to trust anyone and thus they become less able to function in a healthy manner.

Lying can be addressed in meaningful ways, both by the parents and by professionals outside of the home. However, it takes a unified effort to get the child who lies to be in conflict about his behavior. If he is not in conflict, if he is not feeling the pain, if he thinks others are more in pain over his behavior than he is, he will not change. Regardless of whether or not the child lies, he must grow up knowing he is loved and cared for, even when he can't be trusted. Life has a way of imposing natural consequences on those who are habitual liars. Sometimes the best parents can do is to take care of themselves so they are not hurt by the lies, give it their best shot and leave the rest.

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