

# Redirect Lying, Cheating, & Exaggerating, Part 1/2



Is it a lie to say something which you later realize is mis-information? Is it a lie when you make arrangements with another person and later change your mind? Is it a lie if you forget or are unable to keep a promise that you made? Is it a lie when a four-year-old reports that he was bitten by a million mosquitoes?

What makes an untruth a lie? **Lying** means to speak a falsehood that intends to deceive. **Cheating** is a form of lying because it is a deliberate attempt to mis-represent reality. **Exaggeration** is a type of fantasy language that is common among pre-school age children. How do you handle these kinds of situations? What are helpful way to respond to your child if she lies, cheats, or exaggerates?

## LYING

Fantasy talk is characteristic of young children. Some children, however, practice a pattern of telling untruths because they are *unable* to distinguish between reality and fantasy and, therefore, are unaware that they tell lies. This is different from deliberate fantasy and may need professional guidance.

Intentional deceit is the distinguishing factor between an untruth and a lie. Motivations for lying vary. Some children lie because they want to avoid punishment. Parents can minimize lying that is due to fear of punishment by using logical, non-emotional consequences for mis-behavior in general, and for lying in particular.

- Consistently use moderate, logical, non-emotional consequences for misbehavior. Emotional, overly-severe parent responses make a child nervous; lying then becomes a self-protection mechanism.
- When the truth is already known, do not question him about the incident; that sets up conditions for defensive lying. Instead, use as few words as possible and a calm voice to let him acknowledge his behavior. Follow up with an appropriate consequence. Let your face and body language convey that you love him and that you are both going to take this incident in your stride.
- Let the child know that truthfulness is respected. Express admiration for her courage and sometimes reward her immediate truthfulness by sparing the consequence.

In addition to fear of punishment some children lie because they are imitating parental behavior. Some have a need to defend themselves with a cover-up or protective story. Still others are not developed enough to be able to integrate information from several sources, and so they tell the truth as they see it; but their perception is necessarily limited and, possibly, untrue to reality. Sometimes a child lies to impress others. She equates personal worth with achievement. The need to impress others can be healed if parents help her to focus on her strengths, discourage comparisons, and improve the skills that she considers valuable.

## CHEATING

Cheating is a form of lying. It breaks the trust that is essential to any relationship. A student who cheats misrepresents his knowledge, violates a teacher's trust, and is unfair to the students who were not cheating. Such a student deceives herself, those who care about her, her teacher, and her classmates.

A habit of cheating undermines self-confidence, self-respect, a sense of industry and self-esteem. The dynamics that motivate lying and the practices that minimize it apply to cheating as well. In both instances, children of the age of reason benefit from understanding that trust is the foundation of personal relationships. The temptation to cheat is lessened when a child understands that we need trust in order to communicate with each other, believe in each other, rely on each other, and to grow together in a loving, satisfying relationship.



## EXAGGERATING

Is the exaggeration of a young child a cause for worry? Imaginary playmates are not unusual to three-year-olds and four-year-olds. Tots are great tellers of tall tales.

Fictional tales are often indicators that the child perceives that he merits attention when he has something bigger or better to relate in order to receive attention. When parents acknowledge the core message without correcting the inaccuracies spoken, the child feels validated. Parents can then speak accurately about the topic and in that way instill a sense of reality while giving positive attention.

Once a child is capable of distinguishing fact from fiction a parent can ask, "Is this fact or fiction?"

Part Two of this topic offers parent-suggested advice for developing a truthful character.