

Dear Santa: Why is My Child Naughty?

A parent recently asked me why their 4-year-old was lying to them about cleaning her room. The long and short of my answer? All children lie at some point.

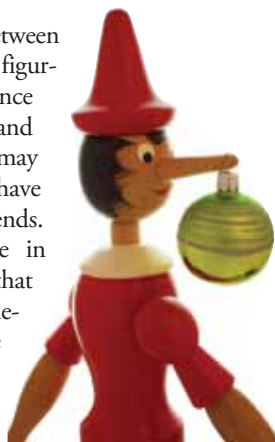
BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.

IN FACT, MANY CHILDREN LIE at many points. While the fibbing upsets many parents, lying is a common childhood behavior and rarely results in adult problems. More important is understanding why your child is lying. A lot, of course, depends on a child's age and the circumstances surrounding the fibs.

Children under 3 often lie as a way to cover-up mistakes or protect themselves from an angry adult. Children of this age depend upon the adults with whom they live and don't want to upset them. As a result, "Who broke this jar?" often triggers responses like "Not me!" or "I didn't do it." This type of lie is common and not necessarily a reason for significant concern. These moments, how-

ever, should be used to teach the child what is right and wrong. This is how kids learn over time.

Children between 3 and 6 are still figuring out the difference between truth and fantasy. They may tell tall tales and have imaginary friends. They may engage in elaborate stories that blend real and made-up events. Some may even insist that their imaginary friends



made the mess in the living room. Again, these behaviors are typical of these ages and really aren't signs of concern.

As they grow, children between 6 and 10 begin to learn what it means to lie. They come to understand that school, home and games have rules. They also quickly learn that they, like adults, become upset if others cheat or lie to win. Because they are learning right and wrong and the importance of truth telling, these children are quick to tell on other kids who are lying. Issues of fairness are paramount at this age.

Children older than 10 typically know when they are lying, yet this doesn't necessarily make their lying less common. Sometimes tweens and early teens lie as a way to get themselves out of a jam. Yet it's often done without thoroughly thinking about the consequences of the lies. Other times kids lie to procrastinate or avoid unpleasant responsibilities like homework. Other children lie as a way to fit in and be cool with their peers.

So what should parents do?

First, you should try to stay calm and not overreact. Try to figure out the reason underlying the lie. Explain the importance of telling the truth and the ramifications of lying. If consequences are in order, make sure that they are appropriate and not over-blown. Parents should also understand that moral development takes time, and it's certainly not complete at age 13 or 16. Parents should also avoid labeling their children as liars because this can become self-fulfilling. Children who are berated this way may end up viewing themselves as bad kids. They then may feel compelled to act accordingly.

Last, there are some mental health conditions that may be at the root of continuous lying. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is a common condition that is characterized by impulsive behavior and difficulties with thinking about future consequences. If a child's lying is frequent and impulsive and other attention and self-organization problems are evident, a consultation with a mental health professional may be needed. Most important, however, parents should remember that most children – even skillful fibbers – usually do not grow up to become pathological liars or anti-social individuals.

So go ahead and strike them off that naughty list.

No lie.



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