

## Perspectives for Parents

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Many of us remember going through our own adolescence living by the creed "what my parents don't know won't hurt them or me." Yet somehow we thought things would be different with our own children. We would be understanding and caring and our children would never lie to us. Unfortunately this is a parenting myth.

Although most parents recognize their tweens and teens will occasionally lie, they don't understand the developmental issues that encourage it. As a child turns towards a more independent life, she struggles to figure out who she is and how she differs from her parents. This process requires a teen to gain more control over her life, determine her own values, and make her own decisions. Because these are big issues, a teen may feel the need to defy parental limits, which can present a real dilemma. By doing this she is deciding whose needs are more important and when you keep in mind her powerful developmental needs, it's no surprise that the teen's needs win out!

But there is more to it than budding independence. The motivations for lying are more complex.

- **To conceal the truth in order to avoid consequences imposed by parents.** Teens believe that their parents will be unable to see their point of view. Even though there may be a chance they can change their parents' mind, it is a risk they are often unwilling to take. Teens know that parents can react to defiant behavior with punishment; so lying is seen as the easy way out.
- **To test the boundaries.** If teens always followed the rules, parents would be less inclined to allow new freedoms and privileges. Often it is when the envelope is pushed that parents find their teen has the ability and skill to successfully handle what they are requesting. Because the world is a scary place, parents often tighten the reins just as their teens need more control over their lives and new freedoms. Again, the lie is seen as a way to acquire more freedom, especially when a teen feels she can handle what she is asking for.
- **To get what they want.** Teens lie to take care of their own needs. "Everyone is going to the R-rated movie." "Everyone else's mother lets them".
- **To impress or to avoid disappointing their parents.** Because teens are often insecure and self-conscious, image can become everything, they may boast or tell lies in order to project a certain image to the world. Often, they are projecting whom they wish they were, but other times they are trying to be the teen they believe their parents are wishing for.
- **To protect friends.** Teens don't snitch on their friends. As they move away from their family of origin, they have an intense desire to belong to a new family--their peer group. Being part of a group requires loyalty. As teens mature and become more self-confident the need for acceptance by the group lessens and they are more likely to stand-alone.
- **To gain psychological privacy.** One way teens separate from their family is to keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves. If teens share the details of their life with parents, parents have then become a part of this life.

- **To protect parents.** Sometimes teens really don't want their parents to worry about them, especially when they are taking risks. This is particularly true when parents have appeared overly anxious when their teen has previously ventured out into the world.

When you discover a lie the way you react is extremely important. Try to view lying as a mistake in judgment. Your tween or teen will make many poor decisions, lying is merely one of them. When parents react with screaming or negative comments about their teen's character, a valuable opportunity to have a meaningful discussion about lying and trust has been lost. Keep your emotions in check and take time to calm down before you talk about the incident. When you do talk, here are some things to keep in mind.

- **Don't ask questions you already know the answer to.** Remember, your teen is trying to get away with something, and she may continue to cover her tracks. Tell your teen what you are aware of.
- **Never call your teen a liar.** A teen may internalize that message and live down to it. Instead, address the act of lying. "I know that you lied to me".
- **Look behind the lie.** Listen carefully to your teen's side of the story along with the rationale or rationalization. Focus less on the lie and more on why it was told. This may allow you to reconsider a rule or see a boundary in a new light.
- **Listening to your teen is the best way to encourage a dialogue, an exchange of information and feelings.** Teens don't listen to parental lecture; they simply endure them and wait for them to end. When parents stop insisting they are 100 percent right then they can listen better and learn from another's point of view and experience. While parents should trust their judgments, they should never believe that they are so right that they become unwilling to make some adjustments.
- **Figure out what you're going to do about it.** Your reaction will probably depend upon whether you have a teen who mostly tells the truth or one who does not. Most adolescents feel awful after they have told a lie. Their guilt is great and it goes against the image they have of themselves. Parents of well-adjusted teens can assume that their teens will probably do some self-monitoring and rope themselves in.
- **Think about what you would like to teach your teen.** Keep in mind that a teen's reaction to harsh punishment is generally negative and does not cause her to examine her behavior. Instead she may focus on how mean and unfair your response is and may seek ways to find revenge. One of the benefits of self-generated guilt is the opportunity to learn from a mistake and self-correct. Why upstage this natural, internal process!
- **There are two issues that parents need to deal with: (1) the lie, and (2) the rule infraction.** Tell your teen that you expect honesty and that you will try to resolve underlying problems and conflicts. Assure her that you are more likely to negotiate or grant her request when you can sit and talk about them. Emphasize that your trust is conditional and will need to be re-earned. For example, you may make phone checks until you feel confident she is going where she's said. When addressing the infraction, you may want to impose a reasonable and logical consequence. If your teen abused a privilege and lied about it, briefly taking away the privilege can make sense.

While we all hope for close, open relationships with our tweens and teens, it is good to have thought about how to handle the issue of lying when it comes up. Hopefully the suggestions above will help you and your child work through the problem together.

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