Lying or "Truthiness?"

The dictionary defines "lying" as "presenting false information with the intention of deceiving". The word "truthiness", as defined by the American Dialect Society, means "preferring facts one wishes to be true, rather than ones that are known to be true". Younger children tend to prefer "truthiness" over truth, but as they get older this tends to be perceived as lying.

So why do children lie? There are many reasons-attachment issues, executive brain function impairments, survival, to avoid punishment, etc. As your child's parent, you have to pick apart their stories to determine what is true and what is false. And when you find out your child is lying, you need to figure out how to make the behavior stop and what consequences need to be applied. This newsletter will detail why children lie, and how parents can take steps to ensure their children's lies will lessen over time.

Why Children Lie

Attachment Disorders

Children with an insecure attachment learned at a young age that they could not rely on their parents. Their needs were not met in some way-emotionally, physically- and the child convinces himself/herself that he/she does not need their parents, and that they can survive on their own. This, of course, is a lie. But they convince themselves this is a truth in order to avoid their painful reality and survive. Then, when they are placed in an adoptive home, they have a hard time breaking the habit of lying since before it was integral to their survival. They have difficulty attaching. They are convinced that they need to continue living their lies that no one loves or cares for them in order to survive. Parents can find this behavior incredibly frustrating. They have created a lifestyle where the truth is important in their family, and then they have a child who dismisses the truth. The truth has never mattered to this child before, so they have hard time figuring out why it is relevant now.

Cognitive Impairments

Children who are diagnosed with certain mental health disorders may have a hard time distinguishing between a lie and a truth, due to their diagnoses. As a result, they may have trouble interpreting things in an age-appropriate manner. Diagnoses such as FAE, OCD, Sensory Integration Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder, learning and developmental disabilities may hinder a child's ability to "know better". These children tend to prefer to say what they would like to be true, rather than what is actually true for the following reasons:

- **They aren't sure what is true** - Children who have trouble with language processing or sensory issues may not understand what was asked, or they only are able to tell you how they feel.

They don't want to make you angry - A child may recognize that telling you the truth may make you upset with them, and they want to avoid that at all costs. Instead, he/she will tell you what they believe will make you happy.

- **Stress** - If your child doesn't handle stressful situations very well, he/she may not think clearly which results in them not telling the truth.
- **They don't tell the difference between fantasy and reality** - What you may understand as objective, your child may perceive as subjective. Your child may choose what truth seems to best fit the situation.
- **They have trouble understanding cause and effect** - If your child has trouble understanding cause-and-effect, they may believe that if they didn't intend to do something, it means that they didn't do it.
- **They want to feel like they are part of the conversation** - A child with a limited vocabulary may create a story just so they can participate in a conversation.
- **They're telling their truth** - Children with special needs experience things differently, and so what may seem untrue to you may feel true to them. Just because they experience life differently, doesn't mean what they are experiencing or feeling is incorrect.

Dealing With Lying

Conveying positive messages - Children may lie because that is how they survived. It is so ingrained in their behaviors, it becomes automatic. For most people, they cannot love someone who lies. Lying becomes a "deal-breaker" behavior. However, this is not the message that you can convey to your child. Instead, you need to let him/her know that you love them in spite of their lying. Statements like "I can still love you even when I can't trust you" let your child know that they do not need to lie to you because they can depend on you.

Tell them you know what happened - Don't ask your child if they did something, or why they did something. They will lie or they will tell you that they have no idea. Instead, tell them that you know what they did, and why you didn't appreciate it. Then, instead of instituting a punishment yourself, have them come up with one on their own. For example, "I know you tracked mud into the kitchen. I just spent the last 20 minutes cleaning, and now I have to do it all over again which creates more work for me. While I re-clean the floor, you can stand here with me and think of a way you can make my day a little easier". This allows the child to think about why they did what they did, and recognize the consequences of their actions. It teaches them that for every "wrong" they do to another person, they must make it right.

Positive behavior modeling - Children learn a lot by watching their parents. If you tell lies, then it teaches them that it's ok for them to tell lies, too. Try and model good behavior around your children, and avoid even telling white lies, if possible.

Teach caring - Along with positive behavior modeling, teach your child caring. Many foster children did not receive this lesson early life like many children do, so they don't think about it. In order to decrease lying behaviors, you will need to "teach" your child how to care. You can do this by pointing out positive caring behaviors that occur: cooking dinner, doing laundry, taking them to school, helping with homework, etc. This will show your child how many caring behaviors you exhibit, and allow them to think about what caring behaviors they show you in return. Acknowledge when your child shows you a caring behavior.

It is important to note that these techniques will not work on all children, and some children's lying behaviors will be more severe than others. If you try various techniques and are not finding success, reach out to a mental health professional for guidance and alternative ideas.

Resources

Please refer to the following resources for additional information:

Fostering Perspectives: Children Who Lie and Steal by Katherine Leslie

Foster Care & Adoptive Community: Antecedents to Lying and Teaching the Truth by Deborah Hage, MSW

Peace and Craziness blog: Because Foster Kids Lie

Children with Special Needs: Lying vs. "Truthiness" by Terri Mauro

Child Matching Events

Child Matching Events are a great way to connect one-on-one with a child's caseworker to introduce your family to the worker, and learn more about the children on their caseload! Families are required to pre-register and must have a current home study to participate. You can learn more about our upcoming matching events and register here.

Upcoming Child Matching Events:

Wednesday, March 5th, 2014 at 1pm PST. See the children that will be featured in the event here. Please register here.

**If you don't see any children listed on the event page, please continue to check back for updates.
If you have any questions about our Matching Events, please contact our Recruitment Coordinator Lisa Kinser-Wehr at lisa.kinser@afamilyforeverychild.org