**Help! My Child Is Lying!**

By Kathryn Kvols

Four-year-old Chandler sheepishly strolls into mom’s bedroom with pouched cheeks and crumbs still clinging to his lips. Mom interrogates, “Are you eating a cookie?” Chandler smiles guiltily, the way only a youngster can, and shakes his head no. “Stop lying, Chandler Adams. I see those crumbs on your mouth. Now you go to time out and stay there until you are ready to tell the truth, young man. When are you going to learn it is not nice to lie?”

Sound familiar? Does anything like this happen in your household? Let’s dissect this scenario with Chandler. There are two important issues here. The first issue we have must face is that lying is an annoying, but developmentally appropriate behavior at this stage. The second issue is, how to handle Chandler’s behavior more effectively.

Developmentally it is normal for children to lie from the ages of 4-7. Seven year-olds try to tell the truth but may still have lapses. Eight year-olds can distinguish clearly between fantasy and truth. Of course, you want to teach your child the important value of honesty. However, if you make too big of issue about it between the ages of 4-7, your child may continue to lie in order to avoid punishment and may try to be something he is not in order to get you to love him. How do we teach children to tell the truth?

Here are some alternative ways to handle lying effectively.

1. **Use non-judgmental statements** like, "Oh, I see. You really wished that....." or as in the situation with Chandler, it would have been more effective if Mom would have said, “I see you ate a cookie. Eating cookies before dinner is not a good idea.” Children, like most of us, are afraid of judgment. This fear can be so strong that children will lie in order to shun this feeling. Recognizing that lying may be a developmental stage, which passes with time, can help you to stay calm and keep the behavior in perspective.

2. **Help children to distinguish the difference between truth and a story**. You can effectively do this by telling one of each and then ask them to tell you which one is the truth and which one is a story. Or ask in a playful manner, "That’s a great story. Can you make up another one?" Carefully refrain from all sarcasm.

3. **Using self-reflective questions** like, “How does your heart feel?” Then explain further, “Sometimes, I notice when I don’t tell the truth, my heart hurts or I feel tight inside. And the only thing that gets it to stop is if I tell the truth.” It is best to use internal motivation by putting the emphasis on self-reflection. Using external motivation such as anger and threats that create fear of punishment or even worse, your disapproval will only exacerbate the problem. External motivations may work in the short term but do not teach values and can cause distance in the relationship. They can cause also lower self-esteem and an unwillingness to accept responsibility for his actions. Helping your child to get in touch with his feelings is a skill that he will be able to use for a lifetime.

4. **Establish safety**. If you have been punishing your child up until now, you might want to say, “Please tell me the truth. I promise I won’t punish you or get mad if you tell me the truth.”

5. **Set your child up for success.** Don’t set him up to lie by asking him if he ate the cookies when you know he ate the cookie. Let’s take another scenario: washing hands before dinner. Instead of saying “Did you wash your hands?” when you know he didn’t, simply, restate the request, “Please wash your hands.” Do not get into a debate. If he persists in arguing, gently guide him to the bathroom without using any further words on the subject and a smile on your face.

6. **Ask about it in a round about way.** For example, if something got broken or a mess was made, ask the question, “How did it happen?” This question is more likely to elicit a more truthful response than, "Who broke it?"

7. **Read stories to children that reinforce the lesson you want your child to learn.** Such as *The Little Boy Who Cried Wolf* story. This story illustrates a boy who learns the consequence of telling a lie.

8. **Create a play with puppets**. Some children get the message better if the lesson is playful and not directly aimed at them. For example, have a mama bear and a baby bear enact a scene where the baby bear lies to mama bear. Ask your child how he thinks mama bear feels. Make sure to use a matter of fact tone of voice rather then giving a guilt-ridden message.

9. **Teach him the value of trust.** Trust is an essential ingredient in all relationships. Help your child to understand that once trust is broken, it can be difficult to earn back.

The biggest deterrent to lying is for the child to learn good things happen when he tells the truth. He will feel better about himself and others will be more willing to trust him. Teaching the importance of telling the truth is a long process. It is not something that can be taught one or two times and be expected to “sink in.” It is important that you view your child’s lying as an opportunity to teach rather than something to be admonished or punished.

Kathryn Kvols is the author of the popular book and parenting course, "Redirecting Children's Behavior." She is an international speaker and the president of the International Network for Children and Families. She can be reached at 877-375-6498 or you can visit her website at [www.incaf.com](http://www.redirectingbehavior.com) for more helpful parenting articles.