Valuing Honesty - Responding to Lying, Cheating and Stealing

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Is honesty one of your family’s *top moral values*? Honesty rises to the top for many families because it is a cornerstone of intimate relationships. It allows relationships to be deep and loving.

However, being honest is quite challenging for most people. Dan Ariely, a professor at Duke University, describes clever experiments to measure dishonesty in his book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*. For example, when given the opportunity to cheat on solving math matrices, the average person reports solving 70% more problems correctly than the control group who couldn’t cheat. Wow!

**Beginning To Lie**

Developmental researcher Kang Lee studies kids’ lying. In his TED Talk “*Can you really tell if a kid is lying?*” Lee states that good lying requires two key ingredients:

1. “The first key ingredient is theory of mind or the mind-reading ability. Mind reading is the ability to know that different people have different knowledge about the situation and the ability to differentiate between what I know and what you know.
2. The second key ingredient for good lying is self-control. It is the ability to control your speech, your facial expression and your body language, so that you can tell a convincing lie.”

In one study kids were told they’d win a prize if they could guess the numbers on two face-down cards. The researchers then left the room telling the kids not to peek at the cards. Hidden cameras showed that 90% of kids peeked. When the researchers came back in the room and asked kids if they had peeked, what did they say?

Lee stated “We found that regardless of gender, country, religion, at two years of age, 30 percent lie, 70 percent tell the truth about their transgression. At three years of age, 50 percent lie and 50 percent tell the truth. At four years of age, more than 80 percent lie. And after four years of age, most children lie.”

They also wanted to know if adults could detect which kids were lying. They showed videos where some kids were lying and some were telling the truth. They found that from social workers, child-protection lawyers to parents, adults were poor at detecting who was lying.

**Catching Your Kids Lying**

So what do you do if you catch your kids lying? Your response will depend on the situation. When young children lie it is often obvious.

There are many YouTube videos with kids who have eaten sweets without permission and then claim they didn’t eat it although the evidence is on their faces. In these cases, asking the child if they ate the treat encourages lying. Instead state what you know along with any consequence. For example, “I see that you’ve eaten one of the cupcakes before dinner so you’ve had your cupcake for the day.”

What if the situation involving your children’s lying is more serious? There will probably be consequences directly related to the lie. For example, one mom whose daughter lied to her about skipping school attended school with her daughter for the next few days. As you can guess she was strongly motivated to avoid having her mom in her classes anytime again!
The cost of lies is the destruction of trust. When your children lie, they need to find ways to rebuild trust. Having them figure out how they will do this helps them learn how to make amends for their mistakes.

**Responding to Stealing**

How do you respond if you think your child is stealing? You aren’t likely to get too far if you begin with “I think you’re stealing.”

Mark strongly believed his son, Jake, was stealing money from his wallet. He began by saying “I'm concerned because there has been money missing out of my wallet lately. What are your thoughts on this?”

Starting off this way instead of immediately blaming Jake created a sense of safety. Jake confessed to taking the money in order to give it to a classmate as payment for not being bullied. They proceeded to have a deep conversation about why Jake made these choices and what other options were available.

**Cheating For Better Grades**

Although getting good grades is important, is it more important than being honest? Many students think so. While the old fashioned tactic of leaning over to glance at someone else’s paper still works, it’s often replaced by more sophisticated approaches. From using cellphones to smart watches, there are plenty of high tech ways kids use to cheat.

Another way some students improve their performance is by taking “study drugs” to increase their focus. These drugs are available either from other students or by getting a prescription from a doctor as explained in the article “Risky Rise of the Good-Grade Pill”. When parents pressure doctors to prescribe these drugs, kids get the unspoken message that cheating is okay.

People are very good at justifying their dishonesty. Kids cheating on a test may reason that everyone else is doing it so the only way to get a decent grade is to also cheat a little.

Ariely’s research has found that people don’t cheat as much as they possibly could but cheat just enough that they can still feel good about themselves. Ariely states, “We human beings are torn by a fundamental conflict – our deeply ingrained propensity to lie to ourselves and to others, and the desire to think of ourselves as good and honest people. So we justify our dishonesty by telling ourselves stories about why our actions are acceptable and sometimes even admirable.”

**Improving Honesty**

Given the prevalence of lying and cheating, is it worth dealing with minor infractions? Yes. Ignoring minor infractions encourages even greater acts of dishonesty.

The standard for honesty quickly spreads between people. Ariely says “Passed from person to person, dishonesty has a slow, creeping, socially erosive effect. As the ‘virus’ mutates and spreads from one person to another, a new, less ethical code of conduct develops. And although it is subtle and gradual, the final outcome can be disastrous. This is the real cost of even minor instances of cheating and the reason we need to be more vigilant in our efforts to curb even small infractions.”

Your children look to you for guidance on acceptable versus unacceptable behavior. By curbing even small acts of dishonesty, you can set a high standard for honesty within your family.

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