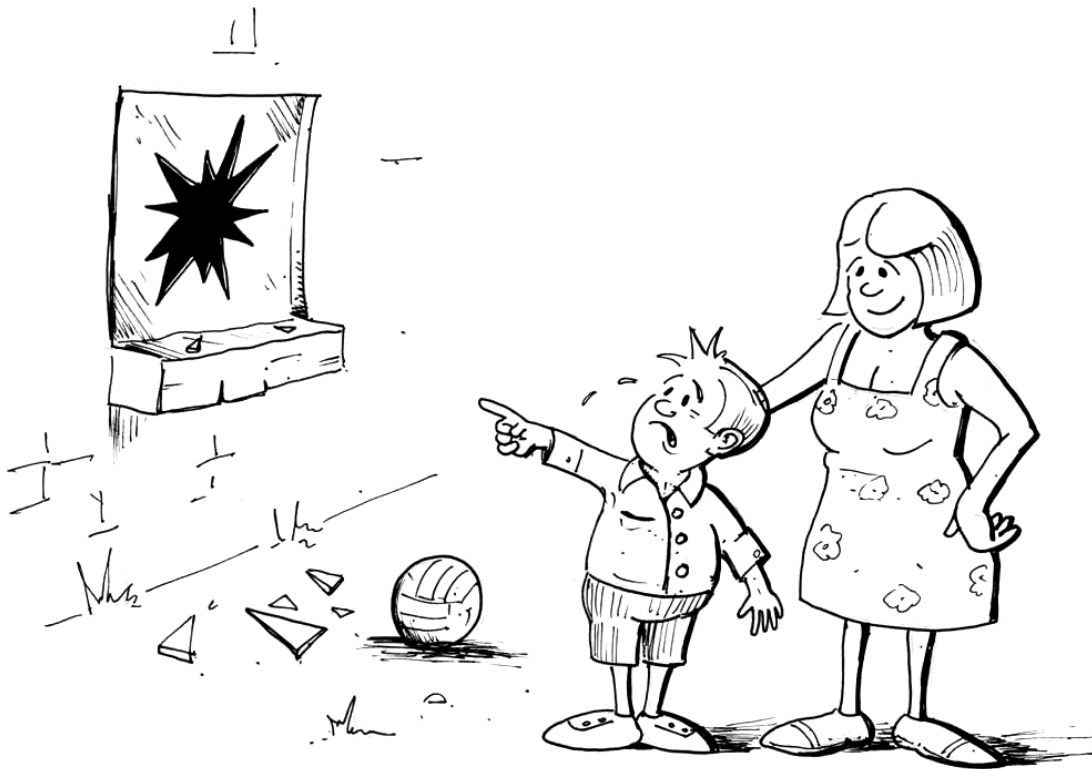


# Dealing with dishonesty, lying, cheating and stealing

A guide for parents



West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)

## **Introduction**

All parents have a natural wish to raise children who follow the rules, and who are honest and trustworthy. It is important to realise that these skills do not come naturally. They need to be learned. It is very shocking and upsetting for parents when their children lie, steal and cheat. How parents react if this happens will help children learn right from wrong. It takes time for them to learn these lessons, so don't expect them to get it right immediately. Remember that we all make mistakes and hopefully we learn from them. This booklet gives some tips and hints for dealing with each of these problems.

## **Lying and 'making up stories'**

We all exaggerate stories and 'spin yarns'. Young children and those with good imagination often blur the boundary between fact and fantasy. However, children learn what is acceptable by observing adults. In fact, learning to use 'white' lies is an important social skill. People who are brutally honest can often cause unnecessary hurt and offence.

However, lies that are designed to manipulate other people, or to avoid responsibility for deceitful behaviours and keep wrong-doing a secret, are the sort of lies we need to teach our children not to use.

It is often easier to tell when a young child is telling a lie. As children get older, they can become quite skilled in 'being fly.'

## **Signs that your child may be lying or making things up**

- They refuse to make eye contact or look away
- They look uneasy and uncomfortable, a 'guilty' look
- They are restless and shift from foot to foot
- They change their story several times.

## **Ways to encourage your child to be truthful**

### **Always use praise and encouragement:**

- Praise and compliment children as much as possible, so they do not feel the need to make up stories in order to attract attention. It is important to give them attention before they demand it
- Tell your child you know he/she can be honest: e.g. "I know you can tell the truth."
- Praise your child at times when they are telling the truth. If possible, avoid punishing them when they have made a mistake, but they have been honest and told you about it.

### **Be sensible:**

- Have sensible expectations of your child. If your expectations for your child are too high, he/she may be tempted to 'cover up' so as not to disappoint and upset you
- Stay calm. If you are becoming angry, count to 10. If you go over the top, you may in fact encourage more lying by giving the behaviour too much attention.

### **Find out the facts:**

- Be a good listener. Pay attention to what your child says and keep eye contact. Let them finish what they are saying without interruption
- Take a minute to try to imagine the situation from their point of view
- Before you judge or give advice, ask questions that will help you find out the facts. But, don't grill your child, or get upset and angry, if the facts are not coming freely
- Help them find out why they lied or told a story.

## **Dealing with the act:**

- **Never** call your child a liar. But, do point out that lies are not acceptable
- A young child (less than five years old) who tells a lie, does not need to be punished. It is enough to tell them you know they have lied and it is not acceptable. With older children some form of consequence may be necessary, e.g. missing a favourite TV programme
- Deal with the lie quickly and then forget it. Don't go on about it for ages
- If your child has a vivid imagination and cannot resist making up lots of stories, set aside some special time to allow their imagination to 'go wild', e.g. they could put on a show or make up a story for you. This gives an outlet for their creativity and can boost their self-esteem.

## **Things to avoid**

### **Firstly:**

- Don't panic. Lying is part of growing up and dealing with it calmly will help your child learn to accept responsibility
- Don't punish children for mistakes and accidents. If you punish them for being clumsy, they are more likely to lie the next time an accident happens.

### **Don't over react:**

- You should never call your child a 'liar'. If you do, he/she may begin to believe this is true and feel they cannot stop. In fact, the lies may become more frequent.
- Don't force confessions out of your child. If you know they have lied, simply tell them that and deal with it
- Do not ridicule your child

- Do not be unreasonable with punishment, go overboard or give long lectures.

### **Deal with the incident and then forget it:**

- Do not turn a blind eye to the lie
- Once you have dealt with the lie, don't keep going on about it. Do not broadcast their mistake to other people.

### **Show the way:**

- Be a good model. Do not tell lies in front of your child
- **Never** ask children to lie for you
- Do not refuse to admit your mistakes. If they see that everybody makes mistakes and it is OK, they are less likely to feel the need to cover up.

## **Cheating**

Children, especially young children, are not good losers. When competition and winning are over-encouraged, they may be tempted to cheat. As in all behaviour, children observe the adults around them and use them as their models. To discourage cheating, parents need to demonstrate that it is not possible to win **every** time and that losing is not the end of the world.

Sometimes adults cheat themselves, often for fun, but this still encourages children to do the same. The problem is they are not so good at deciding when it is for fun.

Cheating is not the same as deciding to change the rules of a game, in order to make the game more fun or easier. It is also important to remember that most young children under the age of four years cannot play games that have strict rules. They should play simpler games, or you should allow the rules to be flexible.

## **How to discourage cheating**

### **Setting the scene:**

- Encourage co-operation between children, e.g. a younger child could be on the same team as an older child. Make a point of praising their attempts to co-operate

- Explain the rules. Sometimes children do not understand or know the rules and this may look like cheating
- Model being a good loser. It helps children behave the same way when they do not win
- In addition to playing games, encourage co-operative play that doesn't involve winning and losing, such as working together to build a house from blocks
- Encourage team games, such as a team of children working together against a team of adults. Praise their co-operation and perhaps reward it by letting them win
- Don't always let children win. But if, by chance, young children haven't won for a while, do try to let them win.

### **Deal with the cheating calmly:**

- Calmly stop your child cheating when you see it happening
- Explain that it is wrong
- Ask them to try and imagine how they would feel if they were on the receiving end.

### **Use praise:**

Remember to praise your child when he/she is playing by the rules. Praise and encourage attempts to apologise for cheating. Don't force an apology as this often leads to anger and rivalry.

### **Stealing**

Parents are often very shocked when they discover that their child has stolen. However, stealing is happening more than most people think. When tempted, most children will try to steal items, such as a friend's toy, a pencil from school or even a favourite sweet from a shop. This sort of petty theft should have stopped by about 10 years of age. If it has not, then it may be important to seek professional help through your GP or Health Visitor.

Pre-school children have no real sense of ownership. They tend to just take things, not knowing about the need to ask first. However, in these young children there is no point in labelling this act as stealing. Simply say: “We don’t take things that belong to other people” and encourage the child to return the item to its owner. Praise them when they have returned the item.

It is inappropriate to label some acts (such as taking a forbidden biscuit before dinner or taking extra juice from the fridge) as stealing. However, taking something that specifically belongs to someone else, is stealing, as is taking items from a shop without paying.

Some parents feel that asking local policemen to speak to their child, or even taking the child to a police station, is a good way of stopping petty stealing. But, think very carefully before asking a policeman to speak to your child. It can work as a shock tactic, but it may backfire: e.g. the child may begin to boast to their friends about being “cool”, or the child may see a “talking to” by a policeman as getting off and may try stealing again. Discuss this step with your Health Visitor or other professional.

## **How to deal with stealing**

### **Don’t over-react:**

- Stay calm and don’t over-react. Stealing is seldom a personal attack or a failure of your parenting skills
- Don’t shame, criticise or “force” confessions
- Try to find out calmly why the item was taken. If the act was to get attention for any reason, then you need to reassure and deal with this issue, to avoid the act being repeated.

### **Dealing with the incident:**

- Confront the child calmly and label the act as stealing. Never call your child a thief and don’t humiliate him/her
- Help them to imagine how they would feel if a treasured possession of theirs was stolen

- Stealing should result in appropriate consequences for older children: e.g. they should be expected to return or replace the item and apologise
- If your child has lied to cover up the theft, it is OK to provide a separate consequence: e.g. removal of privilege.

## **Finally...**

Lying, cheating and stealing are very shocking to parents, but we must remember that they are in fact common and part of learning the rules.

If you can deal with any incident calmly and fairly, you will encourage your child to learn from their mistakes and make them less likely to repeat the act.



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