

The core issue

Most children and young people don't set out to deliberately lie. Although it can seem that way at times, most times this is not the case, but a defense to being caught out. Janet Lehman refers to lying as a faulty problem solving response. It's our job as carers to teach kids how to develop a more constructive problem solving strategy and to maintain an environment that supports this learning.

Why lying gets us so upset

When we are lied to it's natural to feel hurt, betrayed and angry. For us as adults lying can be a strong moral issue – good people don't tell lies, the default being that bad people do. What we need to understand is that for children, they are rarely thinking through the impact that their lie has on others, they are just thinking of themselves and trying to fix their own issue. Their logic is much simpler – if I don't tell you the whole story, or if I deny my involvement, you may not find out and I may get out of being punished.

It is important to keep separate the person from the lie. We know all kids lie at some point. What we want to do is maintain an environment that will allow them to learn different problem solving strategies and to teach them not to lie. This requires us to guard our emotional responses because sometimes our own strong responses to lying can make it hard for the child to tell us the truth. We want to support them being honest with us and not to risk sending the message that we think they are bad people. If the child begins to think this, then they are likely to hide the truth from us even more rather than risk exposing themselves by owning up.

Issues for children with trauma

For foster and adopted children there are significant issues around being exposed. They likely already struggle to see themselves as good people and are easily tipped into feeling strong and intense shame at being caught out. "If I let you see what I have done and how bad I am, then I risk you rejecting me." Sitting in fear as intense as this is painful, so a strong defense to try to turn this off is to push the focus elsewhere by lying. Most kids know that what they are doing is wrong however under stress, brain research tells us that fear triggers automatic defense pathways. For foster and adopted children, these are often based on survival skills. They have learned from an early age that telling the truth does not necessarily help them. Their birth parents may have dished out harsh consequences whether they told the truth or not, and so telling the truth carries an enormous risk – will you still love me, care about me, keep me in your home, protect and keep me safe, or will you hate me, abandon me, abuse me and reject me? So strong is this fear, that lying becomes

the safer option – maybe if I lie you won't find out the truth.

Things that may help

Go with what you know – Don't set the child up by asking a question for which you already know the answer. E.G. Don't ask "Did you brush your teeth?" when you already know the toothbrush is still dry! Better to say "I noticed you may have forgotten to brush your teeth. Perhaps you'd like to go and do them now". This avoids exposing shame and still gets the teeth brushed.

Avoid yes/no questions – A good rule of thumb is to avoid asking questions that require a "yes" or "no" response. This eliminates the child going to their fear response and denying. The problem with this is once they say "no", where do you go next? You risk being locked in a debate, or needing to leave the issues without it really being addressed.

Be honest – If you know your child is lying, let them know, not in a judgmental way but neutral with a smile on your face! Children in care need clear messages about truth and honesty. Our relationships with them need to be grounded in this, as their past experiences were so often based on deceit and lies. If we are honest, the child does not have to guess what we know. Over time this will support their honesty with us.

Remain connected with "we" language – This emphasises the connection between you as the adult and them as the child. We want them to learn that they can trust us to help them learn better ways to solve their issues, so include yourself as part of the solution. Also try to avoid "you" language in the initial conversation and remain more neutral. E.G. "I imagine it would have been hard not to do that. How can I help you next time?" or "I think perhaps these don't belong in pockets. I wonder how we can fix this?" Joining with the child can feel less judgmental and reduce the risk of tipping into shame.

Using a third person can help – If your child is younger, or if they are highly sensitive to judgment and easily triggered into shame, it may be helpful to enlist the help of a soft toy or even an imaginary friend. E.G. "I think Bunny may have made a mistake and eaten all the chips and then lied about it. Do you think you could help Bunny to say sorry to everyone and tell him that next time he needs to share and tell the truth?" We both know it wasn't Bunny, however a young child will be able to hear this message more easily without tipping into shame. This allows them to get the message we are trying to teach them as the conversation feels much safer when it's about bunny and not about them.

Above all else, remain calm – Children in care are often highly sensitive to an emotional shift. Their brain

is used to reading the subtle change in emotions when things become more serious. They are especially sensitive to early signs of anger as in the past, these signs often led to abuse. So it is essential that we work hard on remaining calm if we want to leave them open to learning. If they tip into fear, then they will go to self-defense and this won't be helpful. So try to guard your emotions, keep your disappointment and frustration in check, avoid the "serious" tone and practice body language that conveys clear safety, warmth and support.

Stay on topic. Avoid debating or lecturing – The minute we start debating or lecturing we lose, so don't waste your breath. Kids in care are often skilled at deflecting. There will be many irresistible invitations to buy into their argument, but it is a no-win path and will generally only increase our frustration and anger. So don't take the bait, and stay on topic.

Encourage telling the truth – We need to have incentives for telling the truth because we want our kids to learn that telling the truth is ultimately the better option. You may consider telling them "You won't be in trouble if you tell me the truth". If a more serious misdemeanor, you may adjust this to "You won't be in as much trouble if you tell me the truth".

Consequences – Not everything will need a consequence but some things will and this can help the child to fix things up after their mistakes. So for example, an emotional meltdown after family contact may not deserve a consequence, but kicking a hole in the wall may. You may also want to consider separate consequences for the action versus the lie. So for example, helping you fix the hole in the wall, but if they can be honest and own up, then they may not get the other consequence for lying about it as well.

Provide clear messages about your motives – children in care may be very good at telling you that you are mean and uncaring. So be prepared and stay firm. This is only a defense. Counter this with clear messages about your motives even if they are not ready to hear them. E.G. "I care about you too much to let you lie". "I know this is hard for you but it is my job to help you because I love you".

Minimize the risks in the environment – Emotional pressures for children in care can be strong and hard for them to avoid. So often they struggle to be accepted by peers and to develop positive friendships. Their environment can also place many stressors on them, creating internal anxiety that is often elevated and easily triggered. Consider what steps you can take to manage problem situations to help the child experience successes and avoid situations that will result in them needing to lie. Examples could include sewing pockets closed to avoid 'collecting' items in them or making sure loose change is not left lying around.

Pre-empt lying behavior – When a child has difficulty telling the truth, it may be helpful to pre-empt this

and prepare them before you commence the conversation. E.G. "I'm going to ask you something that we know may be hard for you. It may be hard to tell the truth. Remember you won't be in trouble if we can be honest with each other". After all, our goal is not to catch them red handed, but to teach them that truth is always the better option.

Give words to the child's experience – Children from compromised beginnings in life have poor skills at understanding the link between their inner struggles and strong emotions and the resulting lie. It is important to help them to understand this link and the best way to do this is to lend them your brain. Provide frequent reflection back to the child about what you think may be going on – not big deep conversations, just wondering out loud and moving on. E.G. "I bet its hard trying to say no to your friends without risking feeling left out" "And I bet the reason you lied to us is because you knew we would feel disappointed and you worried that we would think you were bad". The child's body language will tell you if you have hit on a truth, and then be sure to provide lots of empathy. Repeated experiences of this type of insight will help the child to increase their understanding of themselves and lead to the possibility of more helpful responses.

Notice and celebrate even the small successes – We need to acknowledge even tiny shifts in the right direction, as small changes are the start of bigger ones. Initially these may be only attempts at telling the truth, or eventually owning up after multiple attempts at denial. For children in care, even a small change can be a huge step that needs to be nurtured and encouraged.

Repetition, repetition, repetition – It can be hard to keep going but persistence really does pay off. Some children take a long time to get there, but giving up will only shut down any possibility of success. And you have put too much in to do that!

References and Further Reading

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