

The Lies of Children

Parents and teachers are generally unhappy when children tell lies. We try to teach our children the importance of telling the truth by reading them stories about a boy whose nose gets bigger each time he lies or about a boy who lied so often that no one would believe him when he was actually telling the truth. We may even punish our children for telling a lie. And yet children lie. Most children are capable of telling a lie by the time they are three-years-old and many three-year-olds do tell lies. The first lies of children are usually produced as a way of denying some misbehavior - "I didn't knock the plate of cookies off of the counter; the dog did it!" It doesn't take long for children to begin telling "white lies," particularly the ones used to avoid hurting another person's feelings. And as children get older, they get better at telling these deliberate untruths.

We may not like it when a child tells a lie and we may view the act through a lens of morality, but becoming a teller of lies is related to some basic and natural aspects of the developmental process, particularly pretend play. When children engage in pretend play, they are practicing behaviors that are closely related to the telling of lies. For example, when a child picks up a cardboard box and makes believe that it is a briefcase and then makes believe he is the father of a family leaving the house to go to work, he is, for that moment, "suspending reality." The cardboard box is no longer a box and the four-year-old is no longer a child. Both the box and the boy have been transformed by the ideas and desires of the child. To satisfy the requirements of his pretend story, the box needs to be *something* else and he needs to be *someone* else.

In essence, a lie is also a suspension of reality. The reality of the situation was that the child himself, in an effort to get a cookie that he wasn't supposed to have, knocked the plate to the floor. In telling the lie, the child is able to set that reality aside and transform what happened to suit his needs at the moment - the need to avoid the displeasure of his parent. Similarly, when a child tells his aunt that she loves the doll she just received as a present - even though she really thinks it is ugly - she is suspending the reality of her reaction in order to meet the needs of the situation and avoid hurting her aunt's feelings.

Becoming a teller of lies, then, is one of those "double-edged swords" of development. We may not like it when our children lie but the emergence of

the ability is actually a mark of developmental progress. In fact, the absence of the ability to lie can be an indicator of developmental problems. Some children with autism, for example, are unable to tell lies; not because of an adherence to a moral code but because they have not developed some of the cognitive and social skills underlying the ability to lie.

Children also develop as liars because they have had some good teachers. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we aren't always honest with our children. They hear us telling white lies to other people and we also tell white lies to them. We often do so as a way of dealing with behavior. When a child is pestering us in the store for a particular toy, words like these may come out of our mouths: "I'm sorry but we can't buy that toy right now because I don't have enough money in my wallet." The money is there but lying can be easier than arguing.

All of this isn't to say that we should just ignore the lying of children. Telling the truth is usually the right course of action. Sometimes it is necessary to help children understand that telling a lie can be harmful and perhaps hurtful. What is important to consider, however, is that when children do begin to tell lies, it isn't an indication of their failures as human beings. The telling of lies is really a basic human activity.

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