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Introduction: We Can Teach Honesty to Children

Truthfulness is the foundation of our lives. On it rests our relations with others and our trust and security in those around us, in our community, in our institutions, and in our ability to organize, function, and govern our society. Without it as a foundation, we have no firm basis to build our relationships or institutions. Does this sound overblown to you?

Let's do a thought experiment together. Imagine there is a fire in your office tower. One of your colleagues is the designated fire warden for your floor, and they are giving you directions. You follow their directions; there is no time to lose, and you trust your colleague to guide you. You get to the ground floor, and firefighters are rushing in through the doors. They, too, give you directions. Again, you follow those directions and get to safety. You trust that they are trying to communicate information and directions to help you. You trust they are giving you truthful, accurate guidance—that they are trying to help you, not deliberately mislead you. You may not have time to think this consciously; you just react with the assumption that you can trust what they are saying. In this case, this assumption helps you move quickly and protect your life.

Because honesty is a foundation for relationships and institutions, we want our children to be honest. We have relationships of trust that we build with our children. When children lie, we can feel indignant, upset, frustrated, angry, or even betrayed. These are natural feelings when we discover someone has lied

to us. However, with our children, these feelings can be even more acute and are mixed with concern: Why is my child lying to me? What does this mean about my child, about our relationship? What should I do to stop this behavior? This book aims to answer these questions for parents and adults who care for children.

If we want children to grow up to be truthful and caring adults, we have to teach them. Children acquire behaviors, abilities, and knowledge through education. We teach children many things: how to cross safely at street corners, how to do multiplication, how to write an essay. We must also actively teach them to be helpful, actively engaged adults who exemplify qualities of character we feel are vital to their positive growth and to our world. Expecting children to notice these lessons on their own is neglecting and leaving to chance the very behaviors and qualities that make a difference to their success.

If you value honesty and want your children to be truthful, you must talk to them about it, teach them what it looks like in different situations, and help them to develop their own understanding and value of this quality. You must discuss different situations and how you can practice honesty. Given the temptation to lie that we all can face, the complexities of our social interactions, and our desire to act with concern for others as well as our own interests, children need help to navigate how to be truthful and honest in different situations as they grow and encounter new social contexts and new friends, and as their own self-identity develops.

We can teach children to be honest. As a psychological scientist, I have spent years studying children's lying and truth-telling. Based on my studies and those of other researchers, we know what works and what doesn't. In this book, I present practical, proven ways to foster children's truthfulness from early childhood to the late teens, when children are transitioning to adulthood. This includes both proactive approaches, such as talking to children about honesty and modeling it for them, as well as how to respond when lying does occur (as it inevitably will!). I have written this book primarily for parents. It is also a

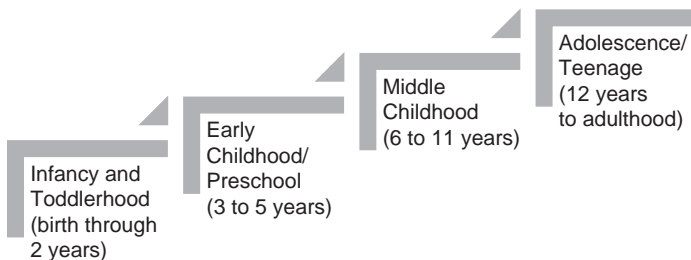
valuable resource for teachers, counselors, youth group leaders, and others who work with children.

Because my recommendations are based on psychological studies, I also describe some of the most interesting experiments that are relevant to my recommendations. Readers who are more academically minded may wish to read the original studies, so I provide citations where they are relevant. However, the book remains solidly geared toward parents and those who work with children, so the emphasis is on practical recommendations that you can use to foster honesty in children.

When there is specific advice for different ages or research findings that are about a specific developmental stage, I refer to the specific ages of the children involved or refer to the developmental stages depicted in the figure. When speaking in general terms that apply to your children across ages (whether 7 or 14 years of age) or referring to the relationship between parent and their offspring, I use the term “child.”

The first three chapters of the book, which collectively make up Part I—What You Need to Know About Children’s Lies—provide essential background information. To teach children effectively to be honest, you must first have a broader perspective about how common (or uncommon) lying is in adults. As Chapter 1 explains, most adults are honest most of the time, but even adults who are honest almost all the time will tell an occasional lie. Knowing this will hopefully help you develop a wise and compassionate stance toward children while teaching them to be honest.

Ages and Stages



Chapter 2 examines how children develop the ability to tell lies and what influences their decisions to tell the truth or lie. Very young children do not initially tell lies. This ability is one that actually emerges as their verbal and cognitive skills become increasingly sophisticated. By understanding how lying emerges and develops, you can know what typical behavior in children is at different ages.

Chapter 3 examines what motivates people to lie. Understanding motivations helps us to see the underlying conditions that make lying desirable over and above any concern for and value of truthfulness. If we know why a child lies, we can address the underlying motivation and create conditions that promote truthfulness.

Part II—Teaching Honesty to Children—is the heart of the book in which I share practical strategies to promote honesty in children. Because many parents are primarily concerned with what to do when a child lies, we begin there. Chapters 4 and 5 explain how to respond to lies in a way that develops truthfulness and other positive qualities in children. The goal is to remain calm, respond to the underlying motivation, and focus on teaching the child rather than making them suffer.

Reactive strategies are necessary, but we also need proactive strategies. Chapters 6 through 10 present proactive strategies for teaching honesty to children. These strategies include talking to children about honesty (Chapter 6), acknowledging when children tell the truth (Chapter 7), modeling truthfulness (Chapter 8), encouraging open communication with children (Chapter 9), and building a foundation for moral character (Chapter 10).

Although most lies that children tell are clearly undesirable and can be handled using the strategies in Chapters 4 and 5, there are some gray areas, which Part III—The Gray Zone—addresses. For example, depending on the situation, it may be appropriate or inappropriate to tell secrets or to tattletale. Chapter 11 explores these issues. In addition, while telling lies is a normal part of child development (even if we do not like it!), sometimes lies can be a sign of other underlying problems.

This is especially true when lies are chronic or compulsive. Chapter 12 considers when lying may be a serious problem behavior and how it may be related to different childhood disorders as well as risky and antisocial behavior in teenagers.

The book closes with remarks on how teaching children honesty is a process and how to manage our expectations. There is no one “fix” or one perfect approach. And perfection is not attainable. However, as is discussed throughout the book, we can teach children to be honest, and, with care and compassion, we can create bonds of trust within our relationships in which truthfulness is valued, practiced, and nurtured.