

RAISING KIDS

Why Honesty Is Good for Our Kids' Health

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Liar, liar, pants on fire! Remember when lying was a negative thing? Now our culture is flooded with alternative facts and fake news – i.e., lies – wherever we turn. Lying may make people feel good about themselves and help them get ahead temporarily, but in the long run lying is damaging to our physical and mental health.

Lying is part of human nature. In fact, it's essential to children's development and can even have some surprising benefits. Studies have found that the average person lies 1.65 times per day or 11 times per week. The problem is when our children get too comfortable with lying and it becomes a habit. Ultimately, the lying can begin to negatively impact their body and mind.

How do we know this?

Back in 2012, critical research uncovered a link between lying and health. Anita E. Kelly, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Notre Dame, led a groundbreaking "Science of Honesty" study that found that people can significantly improve their health if they purposefully and dramatically reduce how often they lie.

The research team observed a group of 110 people for a period of 10 weeks. Half the participants were asked to stop telling major and minor lies during the 10 weeks. The other half of the group served as a control group that received no instructions about lying. Both groups came to the research lab each week to complete health and relationship surveys and to take a polygraph test to assess the number of major and white lies they had told that week (so they couldn't lie about lying).

Over the course of 10 weeks, researchers found that people in the non-lying group experienced better physical and mental health than those who were in the control group. Specifically, when the test subjects told three fewer lies than they did in other weeks, they experienced about four fewer mental and physical health complaints. These symptoms included feeling tense or melancholy and ailments like sore throats, headaches, and nausea. Additionally, during the weeks when participants told fewer lies, they reported that their close personal relationships improved and their social interactions went more smoothly.

Why does this happen?

Lying is a ton of work and can take a toll on us both physically and mentally. When we tell a lie, we start to feel tense, fidgety, and sweaty. Our heart rate speeds up, our body temperature rises, and our eyes may even dilate. Our brain senses that we are doing something wrong and could possibly be in danger, so it causes our body to create these automatic responses similar to the fight-or-flight response.

According to Dr. Arthur Markman quoted in *Shape* magazine, the minute we lie, our nervous system kicks in and releases the stress hormone cortisol into our brain. We prepare to defend ourselves and create additional lies to supplement the first lie, as lies tend to easily multiply. We become stressed and anxious as a result of being dishonest. We may also feel anger, irritation, or paranoia towards the person we lied to because we do not want to get caught. Also, we may end up feeling negative emotions like disdain, disappointment, and embarrassment for lying in the first place.

For those who end up in a downward spiral of lying often, the burden of living a lie can cause chronic anxiety that takes the form of physical symptoms like having a worn-down immune system, insomnia, headaches, dizziness, and heart palpitations. Our emotional health can also be impacted, leading to depression, anti-social behavior, and fear, because we want to avoid those who we lied to.

As the research pointed out, lying also affects our interpersonal relationships. Without a foundation of trust, our children could lose the love and support of friends and family.

What can we do?

It's up to us to tell our kids that, no matter how many lies they see on television, online, and in the news, honesty is the best policy. Although they will be tempted to lie at times, we can let them know that it will only cause them stress and anxiety and prevent them from being as happy as possible. Here are some ways that you can fill your home with truth:

- **Be an honest role model.** As the primary role models in our children's lives, we play a vital part in showing them how to be truthful every day. This means that you should avoid lying to your children even when they ask you difficult and uncomfortable questions about topics like sex, drugs, and death. Instead of lying or ignoring them, let them know that those are difficult issues to explain to children and you need to get back to them after you do some research to find out the best books and other resources that you can review together.
- **Read and discuss stories about lying.** Some good ones are "The Emperor's New Clothes," "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," and "Pinocchio."
- **Play fact-checking games.** When children are young, you can purposely mess up facts in a story they know. For example, you can tell them that Mary had a little "dog" and ask if they can spot the lie, or make a statement like they have a certain color hair even though it's not true. For older children, challenge them to fact check news stories and political debates using sites like www.factcheck.org, [Snopes](http://Snopes.com), and [Politifact](http://Politifact.com).
- **Talk about how lying makes them feel.** Given the science discussed above, it's critical that we let our children know how lying can cause them to feel sick and unhappy. Ask them: is it really worth it?
- **Set consequences for lying.** Be careful not to brand your child as a liar, but also make it clear that lying is wrong and they will face consequences when they do it. For example, if they lie about finishing the cookies in the cookie jar, take away desserts for one week. Ask them to talk about why they lied to address any feelings of shame, fear, or disappointment that they are struggling with.
- **Develop open and honest communication with your children.** The most crucial step we can take as parents is to build a special relationship with our children so they can come to us about anything. When children don't trust us or are afraid of our

reaction, they will lie. On the other hand, if kids are emotionally intelligent, they will have the tools and confidence to be talk to us about what is going on in their lives.



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