



Little Lies, Big Learning

It's very common for young children to lie when caught doing something they shouldn't. What should parents do?

Young children don't think like we do

Children under five do not fully understand right and wrong. They also don't fully understand what is real and what is pretend. Monsters, fairies, and dragons may still feel "real" to them. Magic and fantasy shape their understanding of the world.

This is why children may tell others that they have a pet dinosaur. It's because they *wish* it was true. This is also why children might tell you, "Daddy said I could have cake for dinner."

In these moments, avoid big reactions or arguments. Keep it matter-of-fact. "I know you wish that were true. Cake is yummy. But we don't eat sweets before dinner. How about some apple slices?"



Children don't want to upset you

Children under five years old can't control their impulses all of the time. Your preschooler probably knew not to draw with your lipstick. But the impulse overwhelmed her ability to stop. When you see the result, she knows you're not happy. Often, children will come up with a lie to explain: "Superman did it."

Be clear about the limit in a calm way: "I don't think Superman was here. I think you wanted to draw with the lipstick. And you couldn't stop your body, even though it wasn't a good choice. Let's clean it up together."

Avoid big, scary reactions to children's lies. Children will lie more if they are afraid to tell you the truth. It's best if they know they can be honest. Say what the problem is and suggest a way your child can help fix it: "I see that Spotty's water bowl got tipped over. Let's get a towel. You can help wipe it up."

Your child's brain is still growing

Self-control is the last part of your child's brain to develop. That means that making mistakes and sometimes lying about them is a normal part of growing up. Kids learn to tell the truth when grown-ups teach them right from wrong. That works better than getting mad and giving punishments.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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