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The Truth About Lying  
By Rick Delaney, Ph.D.

A couple of years ago a discouraged foster parent told me, "My son only lies when his lips move." Another parent, an adoptive mom, claimed that she's raised so many foster kids now that routinely her parrot squawks, "I didn't do it!" As comical as that sounds, many foster parents struggle with children who either will not or cannot come clean.

In fact, lying is the single most common child behavior problem I hear about from foster parents. Here's what they tell me: "My child can never tell the truth." "My son changes his stories more often than he changes his socks—much more often actually." "My teen 'lies-and-denies' even when I catch her in the act." "I've told him a million times that I'll go easier on him, if he fesses up. But he says, 'That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.'" She went on, "Around our house, if truth was an animal, it would be an endangered species!" Truth is not the only thing in danger. At times lying can jeopardize the foster family itself, as in the following story:

At school, nine-year-old Sally depicted herself to her teachers as an overworked Cinderella in an uncaring foster home; and to the neighbors she spun libelous and fallacious fantasies about her unsuspecting and innocent foster parents. Reports to the local child welfare department brought it to the attention of the surprised and mortified foster parents, who questioned, "Why in the world would Sally say this about us?"

When it comes to your kids, honesty can be more the exception than the rule.

Whether it is twisting the truth, fabricating falsehoods, fashioning fibs, or whipping up whoppers-lying, by whatever name it's called, is complicated and confusing.

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Working with Birth Parents 1: Visitation

Does your child's behavior become problematic before, during or after visits with their birth parent? Can you help your child cope with the disappointments and fears that sometimes surround visitations? This new course explains why visits with birth parents can be difficult for both the child and the families; but it also points out why these visits are, in fact, beneficial.

In this course, Charley Joyce, clinical director of PATH, ND, provides insight to the distressing challenges of visitations, and offers practical suggestions for making them more positive for everyone involved.

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Why does Sally Lie? There could be several reasons why Sally—or others like her—lie. For example, Sally might have lied because it gets her sympathy. Or she might have been trying to sabotage her placement to get back home to her birth family. Honestly, from the short story supplied above, we really can’t tell exactly why Sally lied.

In response to lies, it is natural for foster parents to ask, "Why did you lie to me? Why don't you just tell me the truth?" Unfortunately this line of questioning often does not help and possibly may spawn even more lies. More frequently, the response is a shrug, and an "I-dunno" or a just a flat denial.

That’s why it is up to parents to answer these "why-lie-to-me" questions. In other words it is sometimes up to us to figure out these puzzles rather than quizzing the child. This requires our detective work, clue collecting and sorting things out. As a foster parent, it helps to be one part Inspector Sherlock Holmes and another part Dr. Sigmund Freud. And eventually the answer will emerge through an understanding of the child’s background, appreciating his/her fears, and uncovering the purpose of the lies.

A good first step is to understand several types of lying, and which type your child generally reflects. It’s helpful to examine his behavior. Usually we'll find there is a pattern to the lying. Another important factor is the child’s background. Keep in mind that lying, simply speaking, was most likely a survival skill which served an essential function: keeping himself safe.

In an effort to help parents to understand lying, I have developed two courses at www.FosterParentCollege.com. The first course offers a general overview of lying that explains types of lying and beginning steps to take in working with a truth-challenged child. My second course goes in depth on how to work towards a solution. It is an online workshop with a more interactive approach that teaches how to be a good detective and to devise a plan to address the lying problem. In these courses you will gain many helpful tools, such as:

- Make the child feel as safe as possible.
- Realize this behavior may be a survival behavior from the past.
- Pinpoint the type of lying and its function or purpose.
- Avoid endless cross examination. That may frustrate you and give the child practice at digging in his heels.
- If you know the facts, state them.
- Do not specialize in catching the child at lying.
- Avoid questions which trigger reflexive lying.
- Understand your own expectations, and don't take the lying personally.

In the end, there is nothing more rewarding for a foster parent than to set the stage for a child to tell the truth. The adage, "The truth will set you free" may accurately describe how uplifting the child will eventually feel to confidently speak his mind, voice his feelings, and communicate the truth. Just as uplifting is the feeling when the foster parents work to help set the child free—and that’s no lie.

Related Resources on Lying

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"I am a PRIDE trainer and parent, and very impressed with the training I took here. It was confirming, informative, economical and convenient. I couldn't be happier with my experience here. I really feel that I walked away with some important information very relative to three cases I have right now. Thanks so much for your help."

–Ollie, Richmond VA

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