

INSIGHTS

Respond honestly to dishonesty



You enter the kitchen. Your child looks at you like she's hiding something. You see cake crumbs on the bench and the tips of her fingers. 'Did you eat the chocolate cake?' Your child smiles at you, with chocolate stuck in her teeth, and innocently replies, 'No.'

You know your child is not telling the truth. The evidence is everywhere! So, what do you do?

Honesty is an essential value for children and young people to develop as it's central to building trust and community cohesion. Here are some simple, effective ways to encourage your child to be honest.

Remember, telling fibs is normal

Catching your child in a lie can be frustrating, but remembering that it's a normal part of growing up can help you keep calm. While there is a moral aspect to honesty, children in the early years of primary school tend to be very concrete thinkers, responding better to your immediate concerns such as 'I need to know you are telling the truth' instead of the moral aspects of right and wrong. For older primary aged children and teenagers, the broader issues of trust and morality are parts of the conversations you should have.

Don't ask questions if you know the answer

If your son is smeared in chocolate cake, don't say, 'Did you eat the chocolate cake?' Instead try, 'I can see you ate some chocolate cake. You must have been hungry huh?' Then pause and ask, 'Do you think I'm pleased or upset? Why? What should we do next time?' Use the awkward situation as an opportunity to find out more about what your child may need.

Show the truth

If you are a parent of a teenager, you know how easily parent-teen relationships can be harmed by accusations and criticism. If you think that a teenager may have misled you about an area of concern such as not being where they said they were, then it's probably wisest to bring your young person's attention to evidence of the truth rather than back them into a corner with an accusation. "You said you were at Jana's, but her mum said that Jana didn't have any visitors yesterday" is a statement of truth from your perspective that's invites a response from a young person.

Listen to their side

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Things often aren't as they seem so if you think your child or young person is not being completely honest, be prepared to listen to their side of a story. This is not to suggest that you let them pull the proverbial wool over your eyes, but there are times when kids may believe they are telling the truth. Alternatively, they may have told a lie to keep themselves safe or to prevent them from following the crowd. Get your child talking, ascertain if they believe they are being truthful, and if they aren't, listen to why they bent the truth.

Let the consequences do the teaching

Acknowledge truthfulness when a child or young person owns up to doing the wrong thing. Help them fix the dishonesty and discuss how to do better in the future. Avoid punishment as this will cause more lying in the future. Allowing the consequences to do the work helps keep your relationship intact and ensures that lessons are experienced, and responsibility is taken.

Extract a simple promise

Studies show that children are less likely to be dishonest once they have promised to tell the truth. If they tell you the truth, and then you punish them severely, they will be less likely to tell the truth in the future, promise or not.

Model honesty

Many adults are guilty of social 'white' lies. Such 'little white lies' that conveniently bend the truth to your advantage are commonplace. Children and young people take their cues from parents, so these little white lies show them it's okay to bend the truth in certain circumstances. You don't get away with anything when you are parent – your behaviour is always on show so stick to the truth, even when it's difficult, if you want your kids to do the same

In closing

Honesty takes time and maturity to learn, especially in the face of the clearly tactical advantages of bending the truth. As parents, nurture honesty in kids by modelling, discussing its merits and acknowledging that it's not always easy to be honest. And maybe, avoid keeping the chocolate cake on the kitchen table.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.