

PARENTING  
ALL AGES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.



**ACT**  
Government

Community Services

**Almost everyone tells lies from time to time for a variety of reasons, from avoiding hurting someone else's feelings to getting out of an awkward situation.**

**When children don't tell the truth it can be very worrying for parents. It is easy to become upset about the lie and to overlook what it means to the child.**

**It is important to understand the reasons why your child might lie before you react.**

## Why children lie

### Learning about the truth

Children's understanding of the truth is related to their development.

The following is a guide only:

- Telling lies has no meaning for children less than three years of age. They do not understand that thinking is private and believe their parents can read their minds.
- A two-year-old in a shop may say 'Why did you lose me, Mummy?' because he thinks that his mother knows where he is, even when she is out of sight.
- Three to four-year-olds are learning that other people don't know what they are thinking. Children of this age have a very strong imagination. They enjoy using their new knowledge and often test it out by telling 'stories', for example, 'The big bad wolf did it'. It is normal for young children to blame someone else or make up a story.
- Children in the early years of school usually want to please their parents more than they want to do the 'right thing'. They are less likely to tell the truth if they think it will make their parents cross.
- By eight or nine years of age children may have some understanding of the difference between the truth and fantasy, such as Father Christmas.

### Imaginary friends

Some children at about three or four years of age have an imaginary friend. This friend usually disappears as the child grows older. Children talk to and play with this friend. They might talk to the friend when they are upset. They sometimes blame the friend when they do something wrong. There is no need for concern unless your child seems really withdrawn and unable to get on with other children and adults.

### Reasons why children lie

- They are not old enough to understand the difference between truth and untruth and right or wrong.
- Fear of punishment or fear of losing their parents' affection.
- Having low self-esteem and wanting to make themselves sound better.
- To impress their friends and fit in with the group.
- Sometimes that is how it really seems—they believe that what they are saying is true.
- Copying other people in the family who tell lies. Parents might say that lying is wrong but not always tell the truth themselves. For example, when someone is at the door and a parent says to the child, 'Tell them I am not at home'.
- Wishing. Sometimes children will say what they wish was true. For example, 'My dad always takes me to the football'.
- Teenagers may tell lies because they fear that if they tell the truth they will not be allowed to do something they really want to do.
- Older children, and especially teenagers, have a need to keep some parts of their lives private and not share them with parents. If parents ask too many questions an older child or teenager may lie to protect this privacy.

THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

## Polite lying or ‘white’ lying

Most parents teach their children as they get older that there are times when it is okay not to tell the truth, such as when it is not polite or could be hurtful. For example:

- teach children to say ‘Thank you for the lovely present’ whether they like it or not, or to say they like food offered to them whether they like it or not
- teach children to avoid using hurtful words such as ‘hating’ something or someone or that something or someone is ‘ugly’.

It takes a long time and help from parents for children to learn the difference between lies to be kind and lies for other reasons.

## What parents can do

- Try not to get into a battle about telling the truth.
  - Teach children why it is important to tell the truth. For example, ‘When people tell us the truth it helps us to trust them’. Let them know that in your family it is safe to tell the truth—that you will not be very angry if something wrong has happened. You know that children are still learning how to do things.
  - For younger children, teach the difference between truth and fantasy. For example, ‘That was a good story’ or ‘I can see you make up lovely stories, perhaps we can write them down to keep’.
  - If you think your child is afraid of punishment, talk with her about other ways that you will deal with mistakes so that she knows not to be afraid to be honest.
- Try not to accuse the child of mistakes. ‘I see there’s been an accident with the milk, let’s clean it up’ or ‘Can you clean it up?’ rather than ‘Did you spill the milk?’
  - Show your child that you understand that some lies are wishes. For example, if a child says that his dad is ringing him up all the time and you know this is not so, you could say ‘It sounds like you wish daddy could be here all the time’.
  - Don’t label your child ‘a liar’ because labels tend to encourage the kind of behaviour that you don’t want.
  - Notice when children tell the truth and let them know that you are pleased.
  - If you take note when your child lies it may help you to understand why. For example, is it when she is with friends, just to one person, or when she is upset?
  - Give older children and adolescents some personal privacy. Ask what you need to know about in order to protect them, but don’t pry too much. Often they will talk to you when the time is right and they feel you will listen without judging.
  - Tell the truth. This includes not breaking promises to children because to a child that seems like telling a lie. So, if you say you will do something try to do it and if you can’t do it, give the child a good reason.
  - If your child keeps lying for any reason or unable to accept the truth when it is presented in a caring way, it would be wise to seek some counselling.

## What parents can do *continued*

## Reminders

- Telling the truth is something that children learn over years, not something they know from birth.
- Young children want to please parents more than anything else. They may avoid telling the truth if they think it will make parents cross.
- Teach children the difference between truth and untruth, but remember that it takes time before children are able to really understand.
- Explain why telling the truth is important to you.
- Try to understand why your child is not telling the truth. There may be something you can help with.
- Set a good example by telling the truth yourself.

## Contacts

<b>Child and Family Centres</b> (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	24-hour	1800 55 1800
<b>Parentline ACT</b>	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

## Websites

<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>	Kids helpline
<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	Other parenting guides including Discipline (birth to 12 years), Discipline (teens), Living with teens
<a href="http://www.raisingchildren.net.au">www.raisingchildren.net.au</a>	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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