

Lying and Stealing

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Lying and stealing are common, but inappropriate, behaviors in school-aged children. While some severe forms of these behaviors can indicate a more serious psychological problem, most of the time it is simply a common behavior that will be outgrown. Lying and stealing are more common in boys than girls, and happen most often in children ages 5 to 8 years.

Handling the situation when your child is lying

When confronted with a child who is lying, it is important to first remember the child's age and developmental stage. Children under the age of 3 don't lie on purpose. This age group does not understand what they are saying and instead are just experimenting with language and new-found facts about the world. They might also lie to avoid punishment because they understand the consequences but have an undeveloped moral code. Children from the ages of 3 to 7 often have problems separating the real world from fantasy. They might have imaginary playmates at this age and enjoy fairy tales and make-believe play. The lies told by this age group are mostly tales that they have made up, not intentional lies. By the age of 6 or 7, however, children understand what lying is, but will continue to cheat if able. Children from the ages of 6 to 12 understand what lying is and the moral wrongness of this behavior. However, children may continue to lie in order to test adult rules and limits. The child may admit to telling a lie, but usually he or she has many reasons for having done so. Rules are very important at this age, so cheating becomes less important.

Other factors that may cause a child to lie

These factors include:

- Children may lie if their parents' expectations of them are too high.
- Children may lie about their grades if parents assume that they are doing better in school than they really are.
- If a child is asked why he or she did some bad behavior, the child may lie because he or she is unable to explain the actions.
- Children who are not disciplined on a consistent basis may lie.
- Children who don't receive praise and rewards may lie to get this attention.

When does lying become a concern?

Multiple situations may cause concern. If any of these apply to your child, it is important to talk with your child's healthcare provider:

- A child who is lying and at the same time having other behavioral problems, such as setting things on fire, being mean to people or animals, having sleep problems, or is very hyperactive, may have more psychological problems.
- A child who lies and does not have many friends or does not want to play in groups may have poor self-esteem and be depressed.

- A child who lies to get something from someone else and does not show any signs of regret.

Handling the situation when your child is stealing

Stealing often causes more concern to parents because it may happen outside the home and may affect other people. During the school years, stealing may be a sign of a problem, but it may also be a result of peer pressure and the need for the child to fit in. It is important to look at the whole situation. Children under the age of 3 take things because they don't understand fully the difference between what is "mine" and what is not. They then may become possessive of their things and protect them. They don't steal with bad intentions. Children between the ages of 3 and 7 start to respect things that belong to others. However, this age group will trade property without regard to value if something else is wanted. The respect for property continues in the school-aged child. By the time the child is 9, the child should respect the possessions of others and understand that stealing is wrong. Children in this age group may continue to steal because of several factors, including the following:

- They may feel peer pressure and the need to fit in.
- They may have low self-esteem.
- They may not have any friends and may be trying to "buy" their friends.
- They may try to become good at stealing to feel proud of something they have done if they don't receive positive feedback from their parents.

When does stealing become a concern?

Multiple situations may cause concern. If any of these apply to your child, it is important to talk with your child's healthcare provider:

- An older child that steals and does not feel bad about it
- A child who constantly steals
- If other behavioral problems also exist in the child

Children older than age of 3 should be confronted with any lying or stealing, but it is important to remember that most of these behaviors are part of growing up and do not represent severe problems. Each child is unique, and your child's healthcare provider should be involved with any concerns.