

## **Lying and Stealing and Cheating, Oh My!** **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Caught your seven-year-old telling a whopper of a tale lately? And, does the kid seem determined to stick to his story no matter how many holes you can poke in it? Notice that the more he's backed into a corner the greater he professes that he's telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Or, how about your ten-year-old niece's recent sticky-fingers incident that took place at the neighbor's house? She came home with a new music CD, swearing that her friend "had two of them and gave her the extra." Was this an incidence of stealing, borrowing or bartering?

And then there's the fourteen-year-old boy in the ninth grade biology class that you teach at the local high school. This kid insists that he wasn't cheating when he and his buddy each did half of the work sheet and gave the other the answers to the rest of the items. Sure sounds like cheating to you or at the least—devious behavior. But the kid and his folks saw nothing unethical about it when you brought it to their attention at the parent-teacher conference last week.

Are these behaviors deceitful or normal? Well...yes to both. Lying, stealing and cheating are dishonest, inappropriate and deceitful, but they are also normal, at least in a statistical sense. At some time during the growing years many kids will tell stories that range from fudging to outright fibs, borrow or actually steal others' possessions or look at a classmate's test for an answer or copy homework. In fact, a study of 8,600 high school students found that 71% admitted to cheating on at least one exam in the previous year and 92% had lied to their parents within that same time frame.

And, these behaviors are not begun in adolescence. Children as young as three-years of age will take shortcuts to task completion or engage in a lie or two. Let's take a look at these not-so-charming behaviors in an effort to understand why kids of all ages can engage in deceitful conduct.

### **Cheating:**

The urge to bend the rules is often seen in children both at play as well as at school. Most of us like to win and kids enjoy being seen as achievers, meriting others' approval. Children will cheat at games, often denying that a rule was broken, or if it was then they may claim innocence since they didn't really understand the rules to begin with.

Although they may indeed win the game or receive an "A" grade on a test, children and teenagers don't seem to understand that they are really cheating themselves, not just their classmates or competitors. Kids who cheat academically tend to not understand the material, and fall behind their classmates in terms of grasping the concepts.

## **What to do:**

*Clarify exactly what cheating is.* Many kids would agree that copying others' answers during a test is dishonest, but may not consider bringing in a "cheat sheet" to class or writing an acronym on their hand as a memory aid to be deceitful. Some children even consider these as "victimless crimes"—they are not taking anyone else's answers so who's hurt by it? Another area of cheating that is often seen as acceptable by children is to skim a book, or to not even read it, and to pass off a quick review as a book report. Let your child know that not completing the work, taking short cuts or passing off someone else's product as their own *is indeed cheating*, and therefore is not acceptable in your household.

Also, focus on *process* or *effort* praise rather than *product* praise. Show admiration for a tenacious attempt, not just for success. When kids feel that they are under too much pressure to succeed, cheating often occurs—not only to win the game or to receive a good grade, but to also "please" parents or teachers. Let your children know that you're not just looking at the grade or the batting average, but more so at their persistence or sportsmanship. Children can't always control the *outcome* of their efforts, but they can determine the *amount* of effort exerted, and that's what really counts.

You can also lessen the impulse to cheat by teaching your kids that there are consequences (both behavioral as well as social) for this type of inappropriate action. Teachers may look askance at an excellent paper if plagiarizing has been an issue in the past, and others won't want to play games with your child if they can't trust the integrity of the play. You can encourage honest play behavior by commenting upon cheating if it occurs during a game of checkers or Chutes and Ladders, and ending the game immediately, noting that "It's not fun playing a game when the rules are not followed. We'll try again tomorrow."

Finally, if you don't want your child to cheat, don't do it yourself. Those "rolling stops" at the traffic sign suggest to your kids that it's okay to cut corners, especially if no one is looking. If a cashier forgets to charge you for an item and haphazardly places it in your bag make a point of bringing this to the cashier's attention and paying for it. Your child will soon get the message that you respect laws, rules and regulations and you expect the same from your children.

## **Lying:**

Children develop through progressive stages of moral development. Two-year-olds may not understand the concept of truth versus deception, but children three years and older certainly can. They may not like to own up to it, but preschoolers know right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and certainly don't like to be lied to. However, many don't seem to mind stretching the truth at times, especially if it gains them attention or a coveted treat, privilege or reward.

Of course, especially with little ones, imaginary friends often engage in pretend (and false) actions. This is necessary for play and is an indication of creativity and imagination. However, when you ask your preschooler if she made her bed and she tells you that she did but her “friend” must have messed it up, it’s time to teach her the difference between playful teasing and lying in order to avoid responsibility for completing a task or for misbehavior.

### **What to do:**

*If you catch your child in a whopper, try not to over react and to give unwarranted attention to the misdeed.* Understand the child’s motivations and reasons for the lie—was it to get out of doing a chore, to avoid punishment for breaking an object, or a call for extra attention? Let him know that you care about his behavior as well as his needs and that not only do you want to understand them but that you want him to understand his behavior as well. The goal is to help your child to develop a sense of *conscience*—so that he can be his own guide in the future when you are not always present to supervise his actions.

Also, recognize that not only are your children watching you when you are altruistic, honest and caring, but they have very annoying radar when it comes to noticing *your* indiscretions. They are watching your behavior and how honest you are. So, the next time that you consider trying to talk your way out of receiving a traffic ticket, telling a telephone solicitor that you’re just the baby-sitter and the occupant of the house is not at home or lying about your kid’s age to get the reduced rate ticket at Disney World—reconsider! It’s confusing to kids to see their folks fudging, fibbing and telling even “white lies.” It’s hypocritical at best and can be downright harmful. The lesson of “do what I say but not what I do” just doesn’t cut it when trying to teach kids honesty and truthfulness. You must live it in order to get the message across clearly to your children.

### **Stealing:**

Try this one on for size—your three-year-old is getting the reputation at pre-school of not just “borrowing” classroom materials, but of pilfering blocks, toy cars and supplies and stuffing them in her lunchbox to sneak home at the end of the day. You wonder if your kid is a budding kleptomaniac and what in the world you could have done to promote such behavior. Well, probably nothing, as being a bit sticky-fingered is not unusual for little kids.

For many pre-schoolers the operating rule seems to be “what’s mine is mine *and* what’s yours is mine also.” Although your five-year-old can give a short lecture on knowing what’s right and what’s wrong, the true internalization of ethical behavior is still somewhat shaky at this age. These kids are still in the process of developing a true conscience. Combine that with little kid impulsivity and it can be difficult for some children to leave the school toys in the classroom, to not take a friend’s action figure when visiting nor refrain from stuffing that enticing pack of gum in his pocket as you check out at the grocery store.

Another motivation for stealing, especially for older children, is to keep up with the Jones' kid. It's tough believing that you're the only child in the universe who doesn't have the latest Play Station 2 game and many children will steal to fit in with their peers and their possessions. Stealing may seem to be the only way to keep up with them, especially when the birthday seems so far away. Also, many preteens and teens will begin shoplifting to not only secure items for themselves, but to give them to buddies in an effort to buy friendships.

**What to do:**

*View your child's stealing as a teachable moment—an opportunity to instruct right from wrong.* Of course, have the child return the taken object and offer an apology. In addition use this incident to confirm your family's code of ethics. Say, "In our family we do not steal from others. It does not matter whether the coveted object is expensive or cheap, or whether you are taking it from a store or an individual. We are proud of our honesty, we wouldn't want anyone to steal from us, and we expect you to behave accordingly."

Recognize your child's impulsive tendencies and need to fit in with the crowd—but offer reasonable, effective alternatives to stealing. Consider starting an allowance system or chore chart so that he can earn money to buy what he wants. Help him to learn how to save so that he can purchase what's really important by budgeting his money, as well as learning to delay gratification.

And, as always, watch your own behavior. If you are undercharged for an item at a store, not only bring it to the cashier's attention, but also make your child aware of the situation. If you find a wallet or a purse, return it and let your child be a part of the process. Let her see how good it feels to do the right thing, even if it was tempting to keep the money for yourself. This is a great teachable moment—when your child can see that you chose to be honest when you could have paid less for an item goes a long way toward instilling your family's code of ethics in a solid manner.

Morality is often a work in progress—especially for children. Many adults, even, have not themselves accepted the concept that honesty is the best policy. So, try not to over-react when your child does slip up and behave in a less-than-honest manner. Try to understand the behavior, offer a consequence or a way of fixing the problem, keep your lecture to 25 words or less, and most of all—use the moment to teach your child where you and your family stand in terms of honesty and trustworthiness.

