

Lying and Stealing

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Lying and stealing are important indicators of a very specific child development step.

When children are born, they have no idea how the world works. You are always there when you need them. You know what they need. You know where they are. Because of this, they develop magical thinking. They truly believe that you have God-like powers and that you know everything and you see everything. That's normal and should be expected.

At some point, they do something and you don't see it or know about it and a light bulb goes on in their head that maybe you aren't magical after all. It is then that they realize that you can only see what they do when you are right there with them, looking at them. This is both disappointing to a child (because their parents aren't the magical beings they thought they were) and exciting to a child (hey, I wonder what I could do now that I know she can't always see me). It is usually at this stage that you see an incidence of lying or stealing.

How you handle that first instance is extremely important! If you do it right, you can extend that magical thinking time. If you catch the stealing and/or lying and punish it differently than you have punished past bad behaviors, you essentially confuse the kid a little. He was thinking that you could only know about stuff that happened when you were right there with him, but now he isn't really sure what you will find out about and what he can get away with. That's good. That will go a long way to keep him honest over the next 5 years. Further, the unique punishment sends him the message that what he's just done is different than other bad behaviors and that goes a long way in setting stealing and lying apart from other stuff he does on a day-to-day basis.

If you extend your magical time, chances are, a kid doesn't really try it again until he hits the next stage, the one at which he really figures out what you are going to find out about and what he can really get away with.

However, if your kid steals or lies a number of times and gets away with it before you catch it, the extension of that magical time isn't really very strong and you might wrestle with lying and/or stealing for quite a while until he realizes that the bad consequences are going to outweigh the good consequences.

The situation can be complicated by older siblings that are well into one of the next two stages. They might actually 'teach' a younger sibling about stealing. One of them might be getting away with it on a regular basis, keep an eye on the older ones for having any stuff, even small stuff, that you aren't sure where it came from.

Sometimes one of the older siblings is in the 'confused' state and set the little one up to test his theory. Little one might take the fall and prove to the older one that you are, in fact, going to find out about that kind of stuff and that keeps the older one stuck in that 'confused' mode. That's a good thing, too.

Another possibility is that a kid is just struggling to stand out among siblings made a bad choice of what to do to stand out. Trying to focus them on a strength that he has that the older ones don't have is sometimes a good way to go. (That is, is the little one good at something they the older ones aren't good at or that they have no interest in?)

A final thought is that the child is just trying to learn how to get the stuff he wants. He's not going to stop wanting the stuff he wants and putting a ban on something (like Pokemon) is not really going to be all that much help. He'll either keep wanting it and you really didn't teach him how to get it, or he'll just start wanting something else he doesn't know how to get.

When a kid steals, it's a good time to sit down with him and teach him about prices, and work, and earning by having him list out all the stuff he wants and putting "prices" on the stuff. The prices can be in money or in tokens or chores, or whatever you decide. If he's got really outrageous stuff on the list, that's okay, just make sure that you keep pressing him for stuff he wants until the list also includes some things that cost like \$1-\$3. Take one of those "cheap" things and put a "price" on it that he can earn in like 10 minutes, have him do that thing, and run right out and get him the cheap thing to get him interested in the whole plan. He's gotta have immediate gratification on it to keep his interest. Then, when you're sure you have his interest, go ahead and put "prices" on the other stuff, making sure that he can get a few of the things over the next couple of days to keep his interest. Once you have a kid interested in a plan like this, they learn how to get the things they want in the appropriate way.

Sometimes when I suggest a plan like this to parents, they realize that it's going to cost them about \$15-\$30 in a very short amount of time. I don't disagree. If you do this plan correctly, you should end up buying your kid something, maybe even two or three things, on the first day. If it works, you should also end up buying your kid something on like 3 of the next 5 days. If it's still working, you're going to end up tapering to about one thing a week, and so on. By the time you get your kid 'hooked' on a plan like this, it could easily cost \$20-\$50. I realize that is a great deal of money to a family living on a budget.

All I ask is which is going to cost more, teaching your child to work for a living or continuing to support him until he's 25? Which is going to cost more, teaching your child to work for the things he wants or having him steal them? Which is better, buying your child a toy because he has cleaned his room or buying your child a toy for no reason at all? If that's not worth \$50 to you, then this plan isn't for you.

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