

# Lying, Stealing, and Cheating: Helping Handout for Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Lying, stealing, and cheating, referred to in this handout as dishonest behavior, are not new childhood problems. Most children at some point in their development will engage in behavior that may be considered dishonest. Many dishonest acts occur as children test the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable (Hughes & Hill, 2006). By some reports, dishonest behaviors have increased in recent years. For example, in an anonymous survey, over 70% of high school students admitted to cheating on tests or copying another person's work (Power & Power, 2006). These students also reported that cheating was easy to do and that they were not offended by this behavior.

Although engaging in dishonest behaviors may seem to hurt no one but the person involved, these behaviors should be taken more seriously if they occur over a period of 6 months; coexist with aggression; are evident at home, at school, and in the community; or are committed purposefully to retaliate, get back at, or harm another person (Miller & Zimprich, 2006). In such cases, harmful social and learning consequences can occur and may lead to later involvement in other antisocial behavior. To stop such negative outcomes, it is important that all major adults in a child's life come together to examine potential reasons a child might engage in dishonest acts and to work together to prevent dishonest behaviors as well as respond to any suspicion of dishonest behaviors. There are multiple reasons why children behave dishonestly. Common reasons are discussed in the next section, followed by recommendations supported by research to prevent and help address lying, stealing, and cheating behaviors.

## REASONS CHILDREN ENGAGE IN DISHONEST BEHAVIORS

One reason children may engage in dishonest behavior is confusion about rules and ideas of what is and is not considered dishonesty. For example, in some classes it may be okay to copy from an encyclopedia for a homework assignment, but in later grades this may be viewed as plagiarism or cheating. In some classes it may be fine to discuss answers or to bring notes into an exam, but in other classes this would not be acceptable. Also people often freely share food or personal belongings at home; however, at school such sharing without permission may not be as commonplace. Thus, it is important to determine if unfamiliar or confusing property, personal, and social guidelines across settings are leading to dishonest behavior.

Children are strongly affected by things happening around them at home, at school, and in the community. Participation in dishonest acts is more likely when a child frequently observes others getting away with such behaviors and not receiving any negative consequences. Dishonest acts also can be performed for good reasons, such as concerns about others. For example, in response to a friend's or a family member's emergency, children may take an item to help another, or give exam answers to a peer unable to study after an unfortunate event. Dishonesty also may be influenced by perceived injustices, as when a child steals to help someone in need or to give someone a gift, or tells a lie to protect someone the child thinks is being unfairly treated.

Personal circumstances such as loneliness, anxiety, or poor academic skills also can contribute to a decision to engage in or to resist the impulse to

act dishonestly. For example, a dishonest act may be viewed or required as an initiation to belong to a certain group. Dishonesty also can occur when more weight and recognition are given to getting the highest grade or being the smartest, prettiest, or strongest. A fear of failure can be heightened by an emphasis on competition versus on cooperation and by a lack of recognition of individual effort and persistence. A child who does not feel accepted, listened to, or supported also is more likely to engage in dishonest behavior, especially if it leads to positive social recognition from peers or others.

A child's developmental maturity must be considered as a reason for dishonest behavior. Children as young as age 3 can distinguish between the naughtiness of a lie told as a result of an incorrect idea and a lie that is a deliberate attempt to hide a misdeed (Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). However, it is only with increasing age that children develop the capacity to empathize and think about right and wrong (Eisenberg, 2004). With increasing maturity, youth are less reliant on external factors to help them resist temptation and more reliant on an internalized understanding of justice and honesty (Kohlberg, 1984). For example, young children are likely to explain a wrongdoing in terms of breaking an authority figure's rule, or as a way to avoid a specific punishment for breaking a rule, or to gain a concrete reward for obeying the rule. Older children have a greater capacity to think about fairness and another person's point of view, so their explanations of violations typically include a consideration of the impact on others as well as themselves. For example, a less mature explanation for why it is bad to steal might simply be that you can be sent to jail, whereas a more mature explanation for stealing would consider the circumstances surrounding the event and personal and societal consequences and might also mention a concern for a wider global community. Such advanced understanding indicates a person is guided by an internal compass that helps regulate behavior, which has been found to deter dishonesty more than adherence to a rigid set of rules dictated by others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are divided into two general sections: (a) preventing lying, stealing, and cheating, and (b) responding to lying, stealing, and cheating. Many of the recommendations for preventing the behaviors also apply when responding to them.

### Preventing Lying, Stealing, and Cheating

When viewing the following preventive strategies, keep in mind that the strategies are likely to be most successful when they are jointly developed, with input from your child and with others who regularly interact with your child, including immediate family members, relatives, friends, caregivers, teachers, and other people from the community.

1. **Strengthen interpersonal bonds.** Communicating sincere interest in what your child says and does can enhance the parent-child relationship. A sense of comfort, safety, and support is best instilled when you regularly give clear expectations about desired behaviors (e.g., "Please say, 'no more milk, please' if you do not want milk.") versus simply imposing restrictions or prohibitions (e.g., "Stop your screaming!").
2. **Strategically instill prosocial skills.** Your child's understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior will be strengthened when you provide explicit versus vague reinforcement of desired behavior (e.g., "Thank you for waiting patiently for your turn while I helped your brother find his shoes" versus "Good job"). Prosocial skills and reasoning also are learned by highlighting instances of tolerance, gratitude, and empathy. This can be done during daily routines or by reading books and viewing movies that inspire conversation about honesty and dishonesty. Help your child identify emotions, evaluate a situation, and problem-solve through role playing to act out specific situations and different prosocial behaviors and solutions.
3. **Notice effort and growth.** Concentrate on noticing your child's effort and improvement and avoid placing undue weight on grades or other outcomes, performance, or end products. It often helps to allow children to set short- and long-term goals and then monitor and notice their persistence on tasks and their progress over time on meeting goals. If your child expresses negative thoughts and frustration, such as "I can't do this," restate this perception as "I am not there yet." This encourages the development of a "growth mind-set" so your child learns that there are different ways to demonstrate success and that many things are accomplished by trial and error.
4. **Clarify expectations and definitions of dishonesty.** Differences between home, school, and community guidelines relating to property, personal, and social norms can be confusing for children. To help your

child adjust to dissimilar expectations and rules guiding behaviors across settings, openly discuss and explain differences so your child understands what constitutes a lie, stealing, or cheating. For example, sharing personal items like food or a hair brush may be expected and accepted at home but may be restricted and not condoned at school. Examples of what is and is not considered a dishonest act in different settings also can be taught through games and role playing.

5. **Highlight the impact of dishonesty.** Help your child understand that dishonest behaviors have real impacts by talking about how these acts harm people and relationships. Children better understand the consequences of dishonest actions when they are given an opportunity to talk to and listen to victims affected by a dishonest act. Discuss your child's role as a member of a community in promoting honesty at home and at school. Also discuss instances of misbehavior that your child exhibits or may be a victim of to teach fairness, empathy, and personal responsibility.
6. **Set rules so they are understood, respectful, and allow for choices.** High standards of behavior are nurtured when your child understands reasons for setting rules and making decisions. Take your child's developmental level into consideration when providing explanations and be as clear and concise as possible. For example, instead of yelling "Do not run in the parking lot!" as you get out of the car, you can prepare your child in advance and provide a reason for this rule: "Today we are going shopping, and you must hold my hand and not run in the parking lot. This is to help keep you safe because drivers cannot see you." Children are also more likely to perceive rules as respectful when their opinions are considered and if they are given choices about potential courses of action. For example, instead of arguing with children about finishing dinner before watching TV, parents can ask which order they prefer to eat what is on their plate. Or before serving, parents can ask children how much to put on their plate to ensure all the food is eaten. Children who have had the opportunity to make many choices about little things will make better decisions when facing bigger choices later in life.

### **Responding to Lying, Stealing, and Cheating**

Besides the prevention ideas outlined above, if your child is engaging in or suspected of engaging

in dishonest behavior at home, at school, or in the community, other procedures and methods are needed to lessen the likelihood of such behavior recurring.

7. **Consider the nature and extent of the problem.** When responding to instances of dishonest behavior, consider the type and degree of the problem and your child's developmental and cognitive level. Does your child have the ability to control impulses, understand cause and effect, or consider consequences? Also identify what your child was trying to gain from the dishonest act. Such acts are more concerning when a child repeatedly performs dishonest acts, when the dishonest act occurs with other antisocial behavior, when the dishonest act occurs in multiple settings (e.g., home and school), and when there is a clear intent to deceive or harm a person or property. For instance, a 3-year-old lying about finishing dinner in order to get a cookie is less concerning than a 10-year-old lying about having your permission and then stealing \$20 from your wallet to attend an event.
8. **If the dishonest behavior occurs at school, collaborate with the teacher and others, as needed.** If the behavior is seen both at home and at school (or other places), it should be taken more seriously than when it is seen only at home. To help stop the behavior, talk to your child's teacher and decide if the behavior requires additional support from a school psychologist, school counselor, or social worker. Working together with a team of professionals, you can assess if your child's behavior is atypical and if engagement in or accusations of these dishonest actions are affecting relationships with others, academic progress, or other day-to-day functioning.
9. **Agree on definitions and consistent detection.** To maximize the success of any intervention, everyone involved must agree on definitions of the behaviors of concern, whether they are considered acts of stealing, lying, or cheating. They also must agree to consistently detect all actual and suspected occurrences of these behaviors. This is because such behaviors are often hard to observe. If dishonest behaviors are identified only some of the time, these acts receive intermittent (i.e., occasional) reinforcement, which can actually increase a behavior. For example, when a child's stealing is spotted only occasionally, the stealing receives intermittent reinforcement if the child

gets to keep the desired item, while thinking, “This might work again; I won’t get caught.” Thus, before an intervention is put into place, everyone must agree to not ignore misbehavior and instead must agree to try to spot and report all actual and suspected instances of agreed-upon dishonest acts.

10. **Increase monitoring of dishonest behaviors.** The difficulty of actually observing these behaviors and the need for consistent detection also means it will be important for all team members to increase monitoring of the child’s behavior across settings. Examples of such heightened monitoring might include routinely checking your child’s backpack at home and at school to be sure that it contains only labeled personal items; examining all cell phone and Internet usage; or communicating more often with your child’s teachers, friends, and friends’ parents about any suspected acts of dishonesty. Dishonesty decreases when one does not expect to get away with it. Increasing your monitoring to ensure that all actual and suspected occurrences are repeatedly detected also will help reduce the reputation your child might have developed regarding such behavior.
11. **Focus on perspective taking and restitution.** It is imperative that engagement in dishonest behavior be followed up with a clear negative consequence, such as losing privileges or access to preferred activities. Do this as promptly as feasible. Also help your child understand the impact of the dishonest action on the victims by taking their perspective. In addition to requiring your child to compensate for the dishonest act through simple restitution—replacement of or reimbursement for the item—require an additional appropriate behavior. For example, if your child lies about taking money from your purse, require an apology and repayment of the money by docking the child’s allowance, but also require help of another sort, such as completing additional chores.
12. **Increase recognition of prosocial behavior.** Although implementing greater detection strategies and clear negative consequences for dishonest behaviors is important, it also is imperative that your child receives increased recognition for appropriate behavior. Simply focusing on punishment can cause a child to conceal dishonest behavior more, making it more difficult to detect. Work with others to develop a variety of ways to build on your child’s strengths, abilities, and talents and to recognize positive

characteristics and instances of alternative, unselfish prosocial behaviors (i.e., “Your decision to stay and help your sister today was highly appreciated and generous.”).

13. **Promote social connections and acceptance.** Students build positive social support and connections with others when they participate in extracurricular activities and constructive school or community service. If necessary, ask if your child might be paired with a positive peer or adult role model. Involving your child in alternative prosocial activities and with prosocial mentors can strengthen relationships with other people who share similar interests and who display noble and productive strategies and coping skills. Remember also to positively recognize your child’s participation in new or alternative prosocial activities, and remind other adults to do the same.
14. **Address learning or social difficulties.** If your child engages in dishonest behaviors that may be associated with learning challenges, arrange for additional coaching or tutoring and ask your child’s teachers for study and organizational tips and strategies. Also, schedule regular check-ins with teachers, tutors, or mentors. Finally, consider requesting a formal assessment to determine if there are underlying cognitive processing delays or deficits that warrant more intense support and accommodations either at school or at home.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning website provides reviews of evidence-based universal and targeted programs and strategies designed to promote prosocial behaviors and skills.

<http://www.iirp.edu/education-programs/continuing-education/projects/safer-saner-schools>

This website is part of the International Institute for Restorative Practices and provides information on whole-school restorative justice approaches and findings from schools implementing such practices.

### Books

Binkow, H. (2010). *Howard B. Wigglebottom and the monkey on his back*. Singapore: Thunderbolt.

This story follows a bunny character as he faces common situations where it is easier to lie than tell the truth. A discussion guide is included for parents and teachers to prompt further discussions about these issues.

Bowen, F. (2009). *Winner takes all*. Atlanta, Georgia: Peachtree.

In this story, Kyle, a teenager on a baseball team, is dishonest about catching a ball in an important game. This dishonest act leads his team to have an unfair advantage in a championship series. Readers learn important lessons about the impact of cheating.

Cook, J. (2012). *Ricky sticky fingers*. Chattanooga, TN: National Center for Youth Issues.

This story is about a young boy who learns the power of empathy after stealing. Important lessons are learned about ownership and the value of respecting belongings.

Cook, J. (2015). *Lying up a storm*. Chattanooga, TN: National Center for Youth Issues.

This story is about a young boy who learns how one lie leads to more lies and the impact these lies have on people. Parents and teachers will also be happy to learn how lying can be a normal response for children and how to guide them into being truthful.

### Related Helping Handouts

- Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home
- Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home
- Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home
- Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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