Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association

Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

September / October 2023

N F A P A

HOW FOSTER PARENTS CAN SUPPORT REUNIFICATION

by AdoptUSKids

If you're a foster parent, you know that there is one unifying goal for every child in foster care: permanency. The best way to achieve that is typically through reunification. In fact, the majority of children and youth in foster care will be reunified with their families.

You are in a unique position to make a positive impact on a young person's life by supporting reunification efforts. But, even so, you may have questions about this goal and how you can help.

We spoke with an AdoptUSKids foster care and adoption specialist to gain insight into this topic.

- Many of the strategies she suggests center around partnering with the birth families.
- That partnership has the added benefit of making the child feel more comfortable in your care, with two sets of important adults in their life working together.

In the words of a foster and adoptive parent who wrote for our blog back in 2021, "If you support birth parents and treat them with respect, it helps them and it lessens the trauma of the child when they go home."

Assess your ideas about birth families

To authentically support the goal of reunification, it may help to reflect on what you know about birth families, as there are many myths out there. Elizabeth Brescia, a senior foster care and adoption resource specialist, helps frame this.

"A majority of the children enter due to neglect. Maybe the parent has a substance use disorder. Substance use disorders are common across all families in America and can impact anyone."

Consider looking within your family and extended family ties. You'll soon realize that, as Elizabeth puts it, "There's really no such thing as it couldn't happen to your family. So, if it can happen to everyone's family, then the children come from families who are everyone."

In addition to making the child more comfortable, there is research indicating that a strong relationship between foster and birth parents increases the chances of reunification.

Be supportive when it comes to visits

Court-ordered visits with birth families are part of most case plans. Elizabeth explains why these visits are so important, saying, "A child is getting to see their parent who they are missing probably every single day, if not even more often than that."

Some adults who were previously in foster care have described hearing hurtful things about their birth parents, and this can cause additional trauma. Show the child that you know visits are important to go to and that you are in full

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Attention Foster Parents!

Earn Your In-Service Hours While Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a $10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to ***Corinne@nfapa.org***, send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at ***https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SeptOct2023***
We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

1. True or False. In addition to making the child more comfortable there is research indicating that a strong relationship between foster and birth parents increases the chances of reunification.

2. Fill in the blanks. Every time, I ask, "Can we start over?" And every time, my daughter appears to snub my _____ _____.

3. True or False. Having a better relationship with your teenager starts with you.

4. Fill in the blank. Sometimes kids use lying as a way to keep part of their lives separate from their parents. In psychology, we call this _____.

5. Fill in the blanks. What are the five steps to a Lying Intervention?

6. Fill in the blanks. What distinguishes ODD from _____ oppositional behavior is how _____ it is, and how _____ it has been going on for.

7. True or False. Kids who have ODD are likely to be less oppositional with people they know well, partly because the pathways are so well worn.

8. List three causes for kids to disengage academically.

9. True or False. It is clear that chronic trauma can cause serious problems with learning and behavior.

10. Fill in the blanks. Children who have been neglected or abused have problems forming _____ with teachers, a necessary _____ step in a _____classroom experience.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone #: _____

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support of their relationship with their birth parents.

"We all get really busy in our lives. It's important, though, that the child get a sense from you that you view these visits as important and worth it, and that it doesn't accidentally come across as trudging to a dentist appointment," Elizabeth explains.

Involve birth parents in decision-making

In a recent article published by WTVR-TV, foster parents Margie and Pedro Rosas are featured for their relationships with birth parents. They respect birth parents' decisions and preferences. For example, they ask about things like haircuts and whether or not the parents want their child to use a pacifier.

Elizabeth responded to the idea of reaching out to birth parents by saying, "That's absolutely fantastic because that provides continuity for the children—when you go to a new home, there are just so many things that are different. The smells are different, the colors can be different, the food is different."

You might ask a birth parent questions like:

- "What music does your child like?"
- "Do you have any advice about clothes your child prefers?"
- "Is there any type of clothing that is frustrating for your child?"

In addition to making the child more comfortable, there is research indicating that a strong relationship between foster and birth parents increases the chances of reunification.

Create a life book to prepare for the transition

We often hear from adults who were previously in foster care that their memories of childhood are fuzzy. This can be difficult for identity and well-being.

A life book can be used by your foster child to remember moments from before they were in care and document happy times while they're in your care.

A life book is also a way to connect your child with their history and culture, and it can be a great activity to do together. It can even be used during visits with birth families. Your child can bring the book and share exciting moments with their loved ones. And once the child is reunified, the book can provide positive memories of their time in your care.

"A great place to start is to go ahead and have the child tell you about some of their favorite things that happened before they came to your home and then keep recording something as an activity together. Just go back and add to the book if they feel like something fun happened today, or if they're really excited about something they got done today," Elizabeth says.

Finally, reach out for support

While you recognize a child has been reunified for their own well-being, and you may even maintain contact with the family, you will likely grieve once a child leaves your home.

Know that you can take time to grieve, and it is natural to feel this way after the loss of a child. It is also understandable to take time before considering another placement.

You can reach out to your caseworker for support groups in your area. You can also explore support resources on our state information pages and on Child Welfare Information Gateway.

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https://blog.adoptuskids.org/how-to-support-the-goal-of-reunification-as-a-foster-parent-advice-from-a-specialist/

ONE SIMPLE QUESTION THAT WILL RESET YOUR KID'S BAD MOOD

By Kelly Holmes, Certified Parent Educator

Parenting tweens and teens can give you whiplash if you're not careful. It typically starts out a little like this:

- Your kid tracks mud through the living room, and you snap. She hangs her head, and you're not proud of snapping at her. But you clean it up together, and you both move on.
- Then 30 minutes later when you ask for help folding laundry, you realize the truth about who's moved on. She stomps over to the laundry basket and won't make eye contact. She's still stuck on the mud mishap.
- And so you snip at each other, back and forth, back and forth – getting progressively grumpier with each other in each exchange. Suddenly, you get the feeling you're on the outside looking in, and you wonder: Where did we go so wrong?

Science shows that in happy relationships, you need a ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction. When my oldest daughter and I have been snapping at each other all day, balancing every negative interaction with five positive exchanges feels like an impossible goal to get us back on track.

Here's the good news: After researching how to find happiness in the chaos of parenting and writing a book about it, I can usually catch myself much earlier when we start down that path.

But the truth is, we still have these moments. I find myself wishing life had a reset button so we can start fresh and erase the negativity.

And my attempts to reset my moody child's attitude haven't worked out well.

This Is How It Goes

One morning not too long ago, my oldest daughter and her middle sister came downstairs to breakfast, and I hugged both girls at the same time. It didn't take long for the little one to squirm out of the hug, leaving me still hugging my big kid.

I kissed her on the top of her head. "How'd you sleep?"

"Not good." She gestured at her sister, playing happily. "She keeps kicking me and pushing me off the bed while she's sleeping."

I laughed. "You used to do the same thing when you slept."

Her face darkened, and she pulled away from the hug. "No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did!" I laughed again. "And when we drove late at night on road trips, you'd flail your arms and legs." She loves hearing stories about when she was younger, so I thought this little snippet would pull her back in.

"Well, I couldn't sleep, and I was tired!" Her voice rose the tiniest amount.

My smile dropped. "I know you were tired. I'm just saying that you sleep the same way as your sister."

"No, I don't!" Her voice went up another notch.

I decided to drop it, but the damage was done. As the morning went by, we got more and more snippy with each other.

An Attempt to Reset

I hated the idea of sending my daughter off to school on that note, so while she was brushing her teeth, I walked into the bathroom, stood behind her, and rubbed her shoulders.

"Hey," I said.

She kept her eyes on the bathroom sink as she brushed.

"Hey," I repeated. I put my face down next to hers, looking straight at her face in the mirror.

She glanced up, and our eyes met. Victory! I thought.

I lowered my voice to just above a whisper. "I'm sorry. Can we start over?"

She glared back for a full second, then dropped her eyes back to the bathroom sink while she washed out her toothbrush.

I stood there, waiting. But her body language was clear. I sighed and walked away.

If this is what it's like as a tween, how in the world am I going to connect with her when she's a moody teenager?

A Turning Point

This scene has played out several more times over the last few months. Every time, I ask, "Can we start over?" And every time, my daughter appears to snub my olive branch.

Then something happened last Saturday that gave me hope.

Something I firmly believe every parent should teach their tweens before they become teenagers.

We'd just returned from picking out her first pair of glasses. That's a story for another day, but you should know that she's still making peace with her life sentence of corrective lenses. While we had fun picking out glasses together, a hodgepodge of conflicting emotions flooded her brain.

And so of course, we snapped at each other in the car the whole way home.

In the front seat, I pushed my tongue against my top teeth to catch myself from continuing the tennis match. And I thought, again: "Where did we go wrong?"

When we got home, I walked in the house without another word to her. I didn't know what to say or what to do to get us back on track. And so horrible as it may sound, I opted for silence.

My baby was hungry, so I plopped her in the high chair and sat down next to her at the breakfast table.

In my peripheral vision, I saw my oldest put her shoes away in the hall closet. I saw her head towards the stairs – her go-to move when she's upset. And I was going to let her walk away because in that moment, I felt completely lost as a parent.

But I didn't hear the baby gate open and close. And then I saw my big girl standing to the side of my chair.

I looked up, and she opened her mouth but didn't say anything.

"What is it?" I asked. Not ready for another heated conversation, not ready to navigate the prickly patch of her emotions again.

She took a deep breath.

"Mommy, can we start over?"

The Effect Was Immediate

My eyes filled.

"Oh, hon." I dropped the baby spoon and pulled her into a bear hug. "Yes, yes. Let's start over."

After a few seconds, I held her away from me a bit so I could see her face, and she smiled.

Pulling her back into the hug, I whispered, "Thank you."

How to Get Through to Your Moody Child

When your child is in a bad mood and nothing you say or do seems to help, try asking for a do-over. Not only will you model a healthy relationship habit, you'll teach your child that we all make mistakes, and it's okay to ask for a second chance.

Teach your child this phrase before you hit the teenage years:

"Can we start over?"

Teach this phrase when they're 10 or 8 or even 3. If at first it doesn't work, keep trying.

Because just when you think all is lost, your child may surprise you.

And when your sweet baby turns into a teenager filled with emotions so powerful they shock you both, this phrase may be the reset button that saves you.

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PARENTING TEENS MEANS LEARNING TO LOVE HARD WHEN THEY'RE HARD TO LOVE

by Whitney Fleming

I know a lot of parents of teenagers can relate. We will always love our kids more than anything, but sometimes we don't like the way they are acting at any given time.

I know I felt that way.

When the teen years rolled around, it felt like I was getting hit with a door slam from every angle.

Their behavior changed. Their attitude changed. Their looks and their personalities and pretty much everything about them changed–and I stayed the same.

Sometimes it felt like two rams butting heads, both of us trying to maintain control of our small space of terrain.

But it's not just the tough times that make it an emotional roller coaster; it's also all the overwhelmingly beautiful things occurring. It's watching your teenager find their passions, take charge of their newfound independence, and move on to a new chapter.

And while you are struggling with your teens in this new paradigm, you are also carving out a new, more mature relationship. It's like getting ready to let go of a beautiful kite and watching it soar off into the sky.

It's an impossible paradox to understand until you are sitting on the crossroads–clinging to 'what was' while launching them into the 'what's next' and always wondering if you did enough.

What does it mean to love hard?

One day, after what seemed like the millionth argument I had with one of my nearly-teen daughters, I broke down and cried.

I did not have the relationship I wanted with her. In fact, I barely had a relationship at all.

I felt guilty for not giving her a better parent, one who would know how to handle these adolescent years better.

But mostly, it seemed like I was the only one who was struggling to get along with their kids.

So, I realized I had a choice. I could muddle through these years hoping that we would come out on the other side, or, I could do something about it.

I could love harder when she was hard to love.

I decided if I wanted a better relationship with my kids, I had to work on myself first.

I had to understand my own triggers, that caused me to be angry and irrational at her behaviors.

I needed to deal with my own past issues and relationships, so I didn't let them creep into my relationship with my kids.

I focused on developing coping mechanisms for stress, anxiety, and fear of the unknown.

I separated out their behavior and choices from the ones I expected of them, and placed my hopes and dreams for them to the side.

And instead of feeling exasperated at every juncture, I leaned into their behavior.

Instead of getting upset that they were snippy, I started noticing that it was often during a stressful time at school or with one of their activities.

Instead of taking their comments personally and constantly criticizing them, I tried to be compassionate about their wants and needs.

Instead of thinking they were irrational about an issue they were facing, I reminded myself that they were behaving exactly as they should in this complex, chaotic time when their hormones were flaring and looks were changing and social relationships were evolving. Their reactions were big and felt out of control for them, but their perspective on life was small.

Instead of thinking they needed to grow up and act more mature, I reminded myself that I was the one who actually was the grown-up.

Having a better relationship with your teenager starts with you

I found that when I felt in charge of my emotions and confident in my choices, I could be the parent my kids needed instead of feeling like their behavior was a reflection on me.

I yelled less. I connected more. I gave space. I gave grace.

I tried to understand the why behind their behavior instead of focusing on how it impacted me.

I focused on being grateful for the small things my kids did and formed an unconditional belief in their goodness. When they acted out or made poor choices, I recognized it was not against me, but something they needed to own and learn from.

I continued to address my own issues, like my anxious nature, my personal insecurities, and how to turn my overpowering empathy into compassion.

I learned to lean into the qualities I did not like about my kids at the time and love them harder. When we got through these tough times, it felt like our relationship was stronger.

We all grew up, together, a little more every day.

Getting through the teen years is hard for almost everyone.

It wasn't easy. It wasn't pretty.

But it started with me. My kids were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing growing up. I just didn't realize I needed to do it right there with them.

Our relationship isn't perfect, but it's a beautiful work in progress.

It's a preamble to what I hope to be a long love story of connection to my kids throughout their life.

And with that, I hope they love me when I'm hard to love, too.

This is an excerpt out of the book Loving Hard When They're Hard to Love.

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https://parentingteensandtweens.com/loving-hard-when-theyre-hard-to-love/

HOW TO DEAL WITH LYING IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

by Janet Lehman, MSW

When you catch your child in a lie, it's natural to feel betrayed, hurt, angry, and frustrated. But here's the truth: lying is a normal child behavior problem. It needs to be addressed, but for most kids, it's not a character flaw, and it's not an issue of morality.

Instead, lying is the immature and ineffective way they choose to solve a problem. Rather than fix an underlying problem, your child lies about it.

If your child doesn't complete his homework, he solves that problem by lying and telling you he did. If your child doesn't get home before her curfew, she lies about why. Or about where she was or who she was with. Lying is used to avoid consequences rather than face them.

I believe that with kids, lying is used as a faulty problem–solving skill. And it's our job as parents to teach our children how to solve those problems in more constructive ways. Sometimes that means addressing the lying directly, but other times it means addressing the underlying behavior that made the lie seem necessary.

In this article, I explain the various reasons why kids lie and how to handle specific lying situations.

Kids Lie To Avoid Trouble

Most often, kids lie to avoid trouble. Let's say they've gotten themselves into a jam because they did something they shouldn't have done. Maybe they broke a rule, or they didn't do something they were supposed to do, like their chores. If they don't have another way out, rather than suffer the consequences, they lie to avoid getting into trouble.

Again, in my opinion, the primary reason kids lie is that they don't have another way of dealing with a problem or conflict. Sometimes it's the only way they know how to solve a problem. It's a survival skill, albeit a faulty one.

Kids Lie to Individuate From Their Parents

Sometimes kids use lying as a way to keep part of their lives separate from their parents. In psychology, we call this individuation, and it's quite normal.

At times it may even seem that they make up needless lies about things that seem trivial. It can be baffling to parents.

And, of course, children lie when they think the house rules are too strict and they decide to disobey them.

Let's say you have a 16–year–old who isn't allowed to wear makeup, but all her friends are wearing it. So she wears it outside the house, then lies to you about it. Lying may become a way for her to have you believe she's following your rules and still do typical teen activities.

Kids Lie To Establish Identity

Kids will use lying to establish an identity, even if that identity is false. This can be used to impress their peers, perhaps in response to peer pressure. Your child might lie to his peers about things he says he's done (that he hasn't) to make himself sound more impressive. This is not unusual, and we all know adults who still do this in one way or another.

Kids Lie To Get Attention

When your child is young, and the lies are inconsequential, this behavior may just be his way of getting a little attention. This is normal.

Younger children also make up stories during imaginative play. Understand that this is not lying but rather a way for them to engage their imaginations and start to make sense of the world around them.

So, when a small child says, "Mommy, I just saw Santa fly by the window," I think it is very different from an older child who says, "I finished my homework," when he hasn't.

Kids Lie To Avoid Hurting Other's Feelings

At some point, most people learn how to bend the truth in order not to hurt other people's feelings. If someone asks you if you like their new shoes, and you don't, you might still say, "Hey, those look great on you" instead of being completely honest.

But kids don't have the same sophistication that adults do, so it's often more comfortable for them to lie instead. This type of lying is a first step toward learning how to say something more carefully.

Indeed, we teach our kids to lie when we say, "Tell Grandma you like the present even if you don't because it will hurt her feelings otherwise."

We have a justifiable reason—we don't want to hurt someone's feelings who's gone out of their way for us. Nevertheless, we are still teaching our kids how to bend the truth. And again, this is normal.

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Lying in Children is Not Usually a Moral Issue

I don't believe lying in children is a moral issue. Therefore, I think it's imperative not to take it personally if your child lies.

Indeed, most kids don't lie to hurt their parents. They lie because there's something else going on. The important part for you as a parent is to address the behavior behind the lie. If you're taking it personally, you're probably angry and upset—and not dealing with the behavior that led to the lie.

Here's an example. Let's say your child didn't do his homework, but he told you he did. When you find out that he's lying and confront him, he confesses and explains that he was playing sports with friends after school, and that's why he didn't do his homework.

At this point, you have a choice to make as a parent. Either you can focus on the fact that your child lied to you, or you can focus on the fact that he did not complete his homework.

I strongly recommend that you focus on the underlying behavior—the homework not being completed. As your child improves the underlying behavior, the reason for lying will go away. He won't need to lie.

In contrast, if you yell at your child about the lying, about being betrayed, or about being disrespected, then that's all you're going to be able to address. Your child will shut down. And you're not going to be able to deal with the real issue of your child ensuring that his homework is completed.

The bottom line is that your anger and frustration about the lie is not going to help your child change the behavior (not doing his homework) that made the lie necessary for him.

So lying is not strictly a moral issue; it's a problem–solving issue. Lying is a lack of skills issue and an avoiding consequences issue. Your child isn't lying because he is immoral; he's lying because he can't figure out how to get his homework done on time.

Most kids know right from wrong—that's why they're lying in the first place. They don't want to get in trouble for what they've done, and they're using lying to solve their problems.

That means our kids need better problem-solving skills, and you can respond as a parent by helping them work on their ability to problem-solve, which can be accomplished with effective consequences that teach your child how to problem-solve.

Pick Your Battles: Focus on the Serious Lies

I believe it's the parent's job to determine which lies are serious and which are not. And the most serious lies pertain to unsafe, illegal, or risky behavior. Therefore, I recommend that you pick your battles and focus on the serious lies.

For example, you may hear your child say to another child, "Oh, I like that dress," and then later on in the car, they tell you, "I didn't like that dress." You might decide to confront your child about this contradiction. But you might also let it go, especially if this happens only occasionally.

But if they're lying about something risky or illegal or unsafe, you must address it. And if it's about risky sexual behavior, drugs, or other harmful activities—you may need to seek some help from a professional.

So pick your battles. Focus on what's important.

What to Do If You Catch Your Child in a Lie

If you catch your child in a serious lie, I recommend that you do not react immediately. Instead, send him to his room so you can calm down. Talk with your spouse or a trusted friend or family member and come up with a game plan. Allow yourself time to think about how to handle the situation.

Remember, when you respond without thinking, you're not going to be effective. So give yourself a little time to plan this out.

When you do talk, don't argue with your child about the lie. Just state what you saw, and what is obvious. You may not know the reason for the lie, but eventually, your child might fill you in on it. Again, simply state the behaviors that you saw.

The conversation might go something like this:

"I got a call from our neighbor. She saw you sneaking out of your window. And I noticed that you were falling asleep at the kitchen table this morning at breakfast. But you told us that you were home all night."

And then say to your teen:

"There's going to be a consequence for that. You're not going to be able to stay over at your friend's house next weekend. And we're concerned about where you went."

Leave the door open for him to tell you what happened.

Remember, state what you believe based on the facts you have. Do it without arguing; just say it matter–of–factly.

"We have this information, we believe it to be true, and these are the consequences."

Keep it very simple and listen to what your child has to say, but be firm.

How to Address Chronic Lying: Stage a Lying Intervention

If your child lies chronically or lies about unsafe, risky, or unhealthy behavior, I think it makes sense to address the actual lying in addition to the underlying behavior. You can do this by staging a lying intervention.

A lying intervention is a planned and structured conversation about lying behavior. This conversation lets your child know what you've been seeing, and it gives you a chance to tell them that you are concerned.

Here are some things to keep in mind when staging an intervention.

Plan the Intervention in Advance

Think about how you're going to intervene in advance. Plan it with your spouse or co-parent. If you're single, ask another close adult family member to be there with you.

When this issue came up with our son, my husband James and I planned out what we were going to say, how we were going to react, and even where we were going to sit.

We decided we were going to be as neutral and unemotional as possible. We identified the problem behaviors we wanted to address. We also decided what would be the consequences for our son's behavior.

We did all of this ahead of time.

Be Specific About the Lying Behavior

When you're talking with your child, be specific about what

you saw and what the problems are. State your intentions calmly and matter-of-factly:

"If the lying about homework continues, this will be the consequence."

"It's obvious you snuck out last night. There will be a consequence for that behavior."

Remember, it has to be a consequence that you can and will follow through with.

Keep the Intervention's Message Simple

Keep it very focused and simple for your child. Concentrate on the behavior. And then tell him that you want to hear what was happening that made him feel he needed to lie.

Understand that you are not looking for an excuse for the lie, but rather to identify the problem your child was having that they used lying to solve.

Be direct and specific. The intervention itself should be quick and to–the–point. Don't lecture your child for a long time. Remember that lecturing is not going to be helpful. Kids just tune that out. They've heard it over and over. They stop listening, and nothing changes. Lecturing is ineffective.

Take Time to Listen to Your Child

Because lying is most likely the way your child is trying to problem-solve, make sure you indicate that you want to hear what's going on with her. Allow your child to explain herself and be prepared just to listen.

She may not be ready to talk with you about it initially. Therefore, just be open to hearing what your child's problem is. You want to create a safe environment for her to open up to you.

But if your child is not ready, don't push her. Instead, simply reiterate that you are willing to listen whenever she wants to talk. Try to be patient.

A Word about Magical Thinking

Be aware that kids and adolescents are prone to engage in what psychologists call magical thinking. Your child engages in magical thinking when he convinces himself that his lies are true. Understand that your child doesn't want to believe he's a liar. No one wants to be known as a liar.

So you'll see kids who've gotten caught smoking at school say, "No, I wasn't smoking"—even though the smoke is still in the air. That's magical thinking.

And when you're a kid, you think that if you keep repeating the same thing over and over again, it will magically be true.

Moreover, if your child gets away with a few lies, he will start thinking he should be able to get away with them the next time. The lies become more and more abundant—and absurd.

But it's your job as a parent to say in a matter–of–fact way what you feel is the truth. Acknowledge the lie, but give the consequence for the behavior, not for the lie.

Conclusion

Realize that most kids are not going to lie forever. In all my years in working with adolescents, there were very, very few kids that I met who lied chronically for no reason. Usually, kids don't lie arbitrarily; they have a reason for doing so, no matter how wrong that reason might be. Your child does know right from wrong, but sometimes he chooses to lie.

I understand that it's hard not to take lying personally or to be disappointed when your child lies. But just remember, your child is trying to solve a problem ineffectively. Our job is to teach them appropriate and effective ways to solve problems and to coach them through these confusing years. Over time, they can learn to do that without lying.

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https://www.empoweringparents.com/article/how-to-deal-with-lying-in-children-and-teens/

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD GET MOTIVATED IN SCHOOL

Writer: Danielle Cohen; Clinical Experts: Laura Phillips, PsyD, ABPdN , Ken Schuster, PsyD , Kristin Carothers, PhD

If you have a child who is struggling in school and doesn't seem to be motivated to make an effort, the first thing you want to do is explore whether there is some obstacle getting in his way. Learning issues, social challenges, attention or emotional problems can all cause kids to disengage academically.

But not all kids who are under performing in school—clearly not living up to their potential—have a diagnosable problem. And there are a number of things parents can do to help motivate kids to try harder.

Get involved

As a parent, your presence in the academic life of your child is crucial to their commitment to work. Do homework with them, and let them know that you're available to answer questions. Get in the habit of asking them about what they learned in school, and generally engage them academically. By demonstrating your interest in your child's school life, you're showing them school can be exciting and interesting. This is especially effective with young kids who tend to be excited about whatever you're excited about. Teenagers can bristle if they feel you are asking too many questions, so make sure

you are sharing the details of your day, too. A conversation is always better than an interrogation.

Likewise, it's important to stay involved but give older kids a little more space. If you're on top of your kid all the time about homework, they may develop resistance and be less motivated to work—not to mention the strain it will put on your relationship.

Use reinforcement

Many parents are nervous about rewarding kids for good work, and it's true that tangible rewards can turn into a slippery slope. But there are ways to use extrinsic motivation that will eventually be internalized by your kid. "Kids respond really well to social reinforcers like praises, hugs, high fives, and those kinds of things," says Laura Phillips, PsyD, a neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Then they start to achieve because it feels good for them."

Ken Schuster, PsyD, a neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute, encourages parents to use rewarding activities that would have probably occurred either way but placing them after a set amount of time doing homework. He suggests treats that are easy to provide but that your child will enjoy, such as going for ice cream or sharing a candy bar. He also recommends breaking work up into chunks and using small breaks as rewards for getting through each chunk.

Reward effort rather than outcome

The message you want to send is that your respect hard work. Praising kids for following through when things get difficult, for making a sustained effort, and for trying things they're not sure they can do successfully can all help teach them the pleasure of pushing themselves. Praise for good grades that come easily can make kids feel they shouldn't have to exert themselves.

Help them see the big picture

For older kids who have developed an understanding of delayed gratification, sometimes simple reminders of their long-term goals can help push them. It can help many high school seniors who slack off after getting into college to remind them that they could lose their acceptance if their grades drop too much, or they might not be prepared for college courses. "Linking school up with their long-term goals can make the work feel more personally fulfilling," explains Dr. Phillips.

Let them make mistakes

No one can get A's on every test or perfect score on every assignment. While kids need encouragement, and it's healthy to push them to try their best, know that setbacks are natural. Sometimes the only way kids learn how to properly prepare for school is by finding out what happens when they're unprepared.

Get outside help

One way to take a little tension away from your relationship with your child is to find an older student (either at their school or a nearby college) to help them out with work. Most will charge pretty low rates, and the fact that they're closer to your kid's age may make it more likely they'll listen to what they say.

"Homework was a source of conflict for us," says Elizabeth, whose son Alex has ADHD. Elizabeth hired a few Barnard students to help Alex do his homework on certain nights, she recalls. "He behaved a lot better with them, and it was money well spent for me because I wasn't fighting, and I wasn't stressed out."

Make the teacher your ally

Another one of the most important things you can do for your child is to work with their teacher. The teacher might have additional insight about how to motivate your child or what they might be struggling with. Likewise, you can share any strategies or information that you have.

When her son was in lower school and only had one teacher, Elizabeth would call his teacher before the first day, introducing herself and alerting the teacher that her son had ADHD and that he found it hard to focus. She would give the teacher little tips that she had found were useful with Alex: Writing multi-step directions on the board, tapping him on the shoulder while walking past to make sure he was paying attention and other small tweaks that would be useful to any young child but are especially essential to one with ADHD.

"Make sure that both school and home are of one accord," stresses Kristin Carothers, PhD, a clinical psychologist. Dr. Carothers often sets up a system she calls the daily report card. With this system, the child gets points from their teacher for things like completing work and following directions the first time they get them. Then they bring those points home, where their parents give them small rewards, such as extra time on the iPad or playing a game together.

Get support for yourself

It can be just as frustrating to watch your child withdraw from school as it can be difficult for the kid themself to focus.

Elizabeth says that she often feels judged as a parent for having a son who struggles so much in school.

Some schools have support groups for parents of kids who are less motivated, and if your child's school doesn't, Elizabeth encourages setting one up. "It's very comforting to hear that you're not alone," she says. "It's also helpful to hear people who have gone ahead of you talk about how to navigate the school's system, find a therapist, and talk to teachers."

"If you're feeling yourself getting really angry or frustrated with your kids, take a step back," Dr. Carothers recommends. "Put things into context."

It's also important to keep your goals in perspective: Your child may not become a star student. Make sure to focus on the effort they put in and the commitment they show instead of the outcome. If you expect perfect achievement from a child who struggles in school, you'll drive yourself crazy.

"I'm not trying to get my child to be someone he's not," Elizabeth says about her efforts to help her son. "I just want him to reach his potential."

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HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS KIDS IN SCHOOL

Signs of trauma and tips for helping kids who've been traumatized

by Caroline Miller

We tend to think of trauma as the result of a frightening and upsetting event. But many children experience trauma through ongoing exposure, throughout their early development, to abuse, neglect, homelessness, domestic violence, or violence in their communities. And it's clear that chronic trauma can cause serious problems with learning and behavior.

Trauma is particularly challenging for educators to address because kids often don't express the distress they're feeling in a way that's easily recognizable — and they may mask their pain with behavior that's aggressive or off-putting. As Nancy Rappaport, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who focuses on mental health issues in schools, puts it, "They are masters at making sure you do not see them bleed."

Identifying the symptoms of trauma in the children can help educators understand these confusing behaviors. And it can help avoid misdiagnosis, as these symptoms can mimic other problems, including ADHD and other behavior disorders.

In brief, the obstacles to learning experienced by these children include:

- Trouble forming relationships with teachers
- Poor self-regulation
- Negative thinking
- Hypervigilance
- Executive function challenges

Trauma and trouble forming bonds

Children who have been neglected or abused have problems forming relationships with teachers, a necessary first step in a successful classroom experience. They've learned to be wary of adults, even those who appear to be reliable, since they've been ignored or betrayed by those they have depended on.

"These kids don't have the context to ask for help," notes Dr. Rappaport, a school consultant and associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "They don't have a model for an adult recognizing their needs and giving them what they need."

Many of these children haven't been able to develop secure attachments to the adults in their lives, adds Jamie Howard, PhD, a clinical psychologist and head of the Trauma and Resilience Service at the Child Mind Institute. They need help to let other adults into their lives. "Kids who've never developed that early template that you can trust people, that you are lovable and that people will take care of you," Dr. Howard explains, "need support to form that kind of relationship."

One of the challenges in giving that support is that when kids misbehave, our schools often use disciplinary systems that involve withdrawing attention and support, rather than addressing their problems. Schools have very little patience for kids who provoke and push away adults who try to help them.

Instead of suspending children, Dr. Rappaport argues, schools need to work with them on changing their behavior. When a student is acting up in class, she explains, teachers need to recognize the powerful feelings they are expressing, if inappropriately.

Rather than jumping right into the behavior plan — deducting points or withdrawing privileges or suspending — Dr. Rappaport stresses the importance of acknowledging the emotion and trying to identify it. "I can see that you are

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REALLY angry that Andrew took the marker you wanted!" she suggests. "If you're wrong about what the student is upset about, he's likely to correct you."

Acknowledging and naming an emotion helps children move towards expressing it in a more appropriate way. Communicating that you "get" them is the necessary first step, she explains, to helping kids learn to express themselves in ways that don't alienate and drive away people who can help them.

Poor self-regulation

Traumatized children often have trouble managing strong emotions. As babies and toddlers, children learn to calm and soothe themselves by being calmed and soothed by the adults in their lives, Dr. Howard notes. If they haven't had that experience, because of neglect, "that lack of a soothing, secure attachment system contributes to their chronic dysregulation."

In the classroom, teachers need to support and coach these children in ways to calm themselves and manage their emotions. "We need to be partners in managing their behavior," Dr. Rappaport explains. "Co-regulation comes before self-regulation. We need to help them get the control they need to change the channel when they're upset." They need coaching and practice at de-escalating when they feel overwhelmed, she adds.

Negative thinking

Another challenge to traumatized kids is that they develop the belief that they're bad, and what's happened to them is their fault. This leads to the expectation that people are not going to like them or treat them well. As Dr. Howard puts it, "I'm a bad kid. Why would I do well in school? Bad kids don't do well in school."

Traumatized kids also tend to develop what Dr. Howard calls a "hostile attribution bias" — the idea that everyone is out to get them. "So if a teacher says, 'Sit down in your seat," they hear it as, 'SIT DOWN IN YOUR SEAT!'" she explains. "They hear it as exaggerated and angry and unfair. So they'll act out really quickly with irritability."

As Dr. Rappaport puts it: "They see negative where we see neutral." To counter this negative thinking, these students a narrative about themselves that helps them understand that they're not "bad kids." And learning to recognize their negative patterns of thought, like black and white thinking, is a step towards being able to change those patterns.

Dr. Rappaport notes that children from abusive homes are sometimes unable to participate in classroom activities because they are paralyzed by fear of making a mistake, and that can make them appear to beoppositional. "A mistake that might seem trivial to us becomes magnified," she explains, "if their experience has been that minor mistakes incurred adult anger or punishment."

They need not only support to have incremental successes they can build on in the classroom, but help to see that in this setting, making a mistake is considered a necessary part of learning.

Hypervigilance

One of the classic symptoms of trauma is hyper-vigilance, which means being overly alert to danger. "It's physiological hyper-arousal," explains Dr. Howard. "These kids are jumpy, they have an exaggerated startle response. They can have some big, out-of-control seeming behaviors, because their fight or flight response has gone off."

This can look like hyperactivity, she adds, leading kids who have been traumatized to be misdiagnosed with ADHD. Being chronically agitated can lead to difficulty with sleeping and chronic irritability.

In workshops, Dr. Rappaport coaches teachers on how to help kids to settle down when something in the classroom triggers an emotional outburst. When a child is escalating, the key, she says, is to "match their affect, but in a controlled way."

The goal is to connect to their big feeling. "If you can connect with what they're trying to tell you, they may settle. It can work even if you just make a guess — you don't have to be right, they can correct you."

Executive function challenges

Chronic trauma affects children's memory, their ability to pay attention, plan, think things through, and other executive functions. Kids who have ADHD as well as trauma may be especially impaired in these skills.

Difficulty planning impacts not only completing tasks in school, but a child's ability to plan his behavior, rather than acting impulsively, and deciding on the best way to communicate his needs and feelings.

One of the things that tends to upset kids who've been traumatized is difficulty predicting the future — not knowing what is coming is unsettling for children and creates anxiety. These kids can benefit, Dr. Rappaport notes, from repeated dry runs of what's coming up and what they should expect.

Another executive function that may be weak is the ability to self-narrate — to mentally talk themselves through what they need to do as they are carrying out a task. It's a skill young children learn from listening to their parents talk to them when they are babies, and, she notes, if they haven't had

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the experience they may need help developing the skill.

Focus on positive attention

In addition to connecting with kids who've been traumatized, and helping them build missing skills, Dr. Rappaport emphasizes the importance of giving them as much positive attention as possible.

Kids who have experienced chronic neglect tend to be better at getting attention by provoking the adults they depend on than by complying with expectations. "Negative attention is fast, predictable and efficient," she notes. "We need to make positive attention as fast, predictable and efficient."

But she adds that positive attention includes not only praising them for desired behavior but expressing warmth and kindness that aren't necessarily earned.

Surprising kids with "random acts of kindness" can help wean them from habits of acting out to get attention. "When a kid is acting out and sucking the oxygen out of a classroom," she notes, "some teachers have found it works to set their phones to buzz every 5 minutes to give the kid positive attention."

Dr. Rappaport offers tools for understanding ahd managing disruptive behavior in the classroom in her book, The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students, written with behavioral analyst Jessica Minahan.

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WHAT IS OPPOSITIONAL DEFIANT DISORDER?

When disruptive behavior drives a wedge between parents and children

by Rachel Ehmke

When parents start googling behavior issues, one phrase tends to jump out: oppositional defiant disorder. It's easy to see why. "The words 'oppositional' and 'defiant' show up in parents' vocabulary fairly frequently," says David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "It's one of the more aptly named diagnoses that exists."

Whether your child has oppositional defiant disorder (or ODD) or not, learning about the disorder can be helpful. That's because the behavior management strategies used in treatment are evidence-based techniques that all parents will benefit from knowing.

What is oppositional defiant disorder?

It is normal for children to be oppositional and defiant at least some of the time. In fact, it's a sign of healthy development. So when does a child have oppositional defiant disorder? The diagnosis should not be given, for example, to a toddler who has just discovered that her new favorite word is "no."

ODD is typically diagnosed around early elementary school ages and stops being diagnosed around adolescence. Kids who have ODD have a well-established pattern of behavior problems. Symptoms include:

- Being unusually angry and irritable
- Frequently losing their temper
- Being easily annoyed
- Arguing with authority figures
- Refusing to follow rules
- Deliberately annoying people
- Blaming others for mistakes
- Being vindictive

All children can have these symptoms from time to time. What distinguishes ODD from normal oppositional behavior is how severe it is, and how long it has been going on for. A child with ODD will have had extreme behavior issues for at least six months.

Another hallmark of ODD is the toll it takes on family relationships. Regular daily frustrations — ignored commands, arguments, explosive outbursts — build up over time, and these negative interactions damage the parent-child bond and reinforce hostile patterns of behavior.

Parenting under fire

"Kids who have behavioral issues push parents towards the extremes," says Dr. Anderson. "They push parents to become permissive and they push parents to become hyper-coercive in the hope that a larger amount of control will get the kid to listen."

Neither of these extremes make for ideal parenting. It is never a parent's intention to reinforce bad behavior, and we often don't realize when we're doing it. Here are two common scenarios:

- You tell your child to stop playing a game and get ready for bed. He ignores your first two requests. By the third time you ask, you're so mad that you yell.
- You tell your child to stop playing a game and get ready for bed. He throws a tantrum because he wants to keep playing. You don't want him to be so worked up before bedtime, so you back down and say he can play for another ten minutes — but then he has to go to bed.

In the first scenario, your child learns that yelling is an acceptable way to get a message across. More subtly, he might also be learning that he can continue ignoring those first few requests — when you escalate the situation is when he knows you're serious.

In the second scenario, your child has learned that throwing a tantrum might give him something that he wants, so he'll be more likely to do it again in the future.

Both of these scenarios can set families up for future conflicts, and the more they are repeated the more they become familiar patterns of behavior that are harder to break out of. Your child doesn't have to have ODD for these scenarios to happen, but repeated negative interactions like these make diagnosing a behavior disorder much more likely.

And just like parents aren't necessarily to blame, neither are the kids, says Dr. Anderson. "Through no conscious effort of the child, he learns through hundreds of trials that this is a

way to continue getting what he wants."

This also explains why kids who have ODD might act out more at home. Dr. Anderson notes, "Kids who have ODD are likely to be more oppositional with people they know well, partly because the pathways are so well worn. Whereas in a place like school, where a kid has less control in general over their environment, the types of behaviors that are common to ODD may not pay off as much."

ADHD and other risk factors

There is a very high overlap in kids who have ADHD who are also diagnosed with ODD. Depending on the study, the overlap could be 30 to 50 percent of kids with ADHD also have ODD.

Dr. Anderson explains the connection like this: "Kids with ADHD are biologically loaded to be distractable, to be impulsive, to have difficulty staying in one place for a little while. So kids with ADHD start off doing things that parents perceive as off limits. And then when those kids get negative feedback they start to become even more negatively oriented towards adults." These repeated patterns of negative interactions can lead to developing ODD.

But another pathway into developing ODD has more to do with a child's temperament and might be apparent early on. Children who had a lot of difficulty soothing themselves as toddlers and continue to struggle with an age-appropriate ability to control their emotions in the face of disappointment or frustration can sometimes develop ODD. The adults in their environment might be more inclined to accommodate their demands in order to keep the family functioning as harmoniously as possible.

Kids who have experienced a lot of life stress and trauma are also more likely to develop ODD.

Why treatment is important

It's important to get treatment to improve the parent-child relationship, which is crucial to the health and happiness of the entire household. It is also important for your child's future. Some children will grow out of oppositional defiant disorder, but others will continue to have behavior issues, which could lead to peer rejection and difficulty forming healthy relationships, not to mention continued family discord.

They'll also be less likely to achieve their potential. If something doesn't go their way, they might think it's anyone's fault but theirs. Dr. Anderson says they might also "retreat to the places where they know they can get what they want. That might mean that they try even less, push even more on the people who are closest to them, who they actually care about the most, causing even more frayed relationships."

A small percentage of kids with ODD go on to develop something called conduct disorder, which is a more severe behavior disorder that includes criminal acts like stealing, setting fires and hurting people. Getting treatment sooner rather than later improves a child's trajectory.

What treatment for ODD looks like

Parents play a key role in treatment for oppositional defiant disorder. This might be surprising, since children are the ones given the diagnosis, but in ODD the parent-child relationship needs to be repaired, which means both parties need to make changes to get back on track.

All programs have certain goals in common, like helping parents find the middle ground between being too authoritative and too permissive. A behavioral therapist helps parents learn how to train their child's behavior through setting clear expectations, praising kids when they follow through and using effective consequences when they don't. Parents also learn to use these strategies consistently — one reason why behavior management strategies sometimes don't work is because parents try different, conflicting techniques, or don't stick to one program long enough to see gains. Parents and children will also learn problem solving skills they can rely on when they run into issues.

Parent training programs might include sessions with parents and children working together, or just parents alone. Some different programs include:

- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
- Parent Management Training (PMT)
- Defiant Teens
- Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)
- The Incredible Years

Clinicians might also recommend social skills training to help improve your child's peer relationships or cognitive behavioral therapy if she is struggling with anxiety or depression.

There is no FDA-approved medication for ODD, but medications are sometimes used as an adjunct to behavioral therapy. Anti-psychotic medications like Abilify (aripiprazole) and Risperdal (risperidone), which have been shown to reduce aggression and irritability, are frequently used in cases where a child is at risk of being removed from the school or home. Stimulant medication may be used if a child has excessive impulsivity, including those who have an ADHD diagnosis. Antidepressants (SSRIs) may be helpful if a child has underlying depression or anxiety.

Regardless of the treatment plan your therapist recommends, parents will need to provide a lot of encouragement. "Make no mistake, kids do not often just suddenly wake up with the insight that they wish their behavior was better and then ask all the adults in their life how they can change," warns Dr. Anderson. "They'll stick with whatever behavior is working for them, even if it's not working that well."

But once the family dynamic begins to change, and kids (and parents) begin to feel more confident in their ability to get along, everyone will be a lot happier.

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