

CHAPTER SIX

Lying



“Lying to ourselves is more deeply ingrained than lying to others.”

– Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky

“What kind of people chronically lie?” The most common answers are: (a) car salesmen, (b) con men, (c) criminals, (d) adulterers, (e) thieves, and, yes, (f) lawyers. When our children lie to us, we fear they will grow-up to be dishonest adults. Within a millisecond of our child lying to us, we panic and envision a lifetime of our child lying to people, creating havoc in relationships, getting fired from jobs, and maybe even doing time in jail.

As parents, lying is a difficult behavior to address in our children for two primary reasons. First, lying is difficult because of the fear we project into the future for our child. We fear our child will not have a strong moral base as an adult, which will ultimately affect his relationships, his employment, and his overall ability to succeed in life. Second, lying is difficult because of our own discomfort from past experiences of people lying to us. When we as parents experience our child lying, it can be like getting swallowed up into a time machine and re-experiencing a painful lie of the past. Yet this time around, we experience the lie on the big screen in full technicolor. We experience the discomfort within ourselves, target our child as the cause of our discomfort, and immediately begin reacting in order to change our child’s behavior, unconsciously thinking: “If I can stop you from lying, I can stop my own discomfort.”

Recently, when a mother began discussing a situation involving her son with me during a small parenting workshop, she expressed pure frustration about her eight year old son’s lying behavior. With stern conviction, she stated, “My son has got to learn that lying is morally wrong. He needs to be taught a lesson now before he grows up. Lying is wrong and will not be tolerated in my home.” Do you hear the fear in those words? After supporting her reaction and validating her, I asked her, “Who lied to you as a child?” Such a deep-seated emotional reaction expressed in her words and her tone of voice was only stemming from a place of darkness within herself. It was stemming from an unprocessed and hurtful experience, or experiences, stored in her deepest level of memory. It was coming from her state level of memory. After the initial shock of my shifting “ the focus off of her son and onto her, she took a deep breath and said, “My father lied to me.” Encouraging her, I sat down on my stool and said, “How bad was it? Tell me more.” She replied, “I was about eight years old and the fighting between my mother and father had escalated into physical violence. My father sat all of us kids down in our formal dining room for dinner and emphatically stated, ‘We’re not getting a divorce.’” As tears welled up in her eyes, she said, “Three weeks later my father left our home, divorced my mother, and never stepped foot in our home again.” Emotional reactivity stems from unfinished business. The associational connection between her son being eight years old presently and her being eight years old previously was a prevalent aspect of her reactivity to her son’s

lying behavior.

Attachment-challenged children commonly exhibit lying behaviors, and not only do they exhibit chronic lying, but they also often exhibit nonsense lying. This lying behavior can occur several times during a single day. Day after day of dealing with this type of lying behavior can drive even the most patient parent into rage-filled behaviors. First, let us look at how traditional therapists view this behavior and what advice they give to parents. Second, let us look at this behavior through the understanding of the Stress Model and what the application of this understanding would be for parents working to create a healing environment within their homes.

Traditional View

Traditionally, attachment therapists view lying as a way for children with trauma histories to take control. Lying develops into a habitual strategy in order to gain power and control, and certainly as a way to avoid punishment.¹ It is viewed as a way for the child to distort the parent's world and as a way to turn the parent's world into utter confusion. Lying is seen as a way for the child to impose the chaos in his own brain onto someone else who he wants to hurt. It is seen as a way for the child to "test" the parent child relationship. By lying, the child is pushing the adoptive parents or the foster parents to their breaking point in order to see if they *really* mean that they are his parents always.

This view explains that attachment-challenged children do not trust and, therefore, react from a place of distrust in order to then gain the ability to trust. Lying is seen as a patterned behavior that needs to be reprogrammed through consequences and that parents need to "beat the child to the punch" in his lying behaviors. Some traditional views go as far as to say that these children are born liars.² Others create fear by describing lying as a "hallmark sign of anti-social children."³

Traditional attachment therapists' recommendations based upon these interpretations of lying focus on the goal of not allowing the child to use the lie to control the parents. Advice is commonly given for parents to say, "I don't believe you" to the child after he tells a lie.⁴ The explanation is that this statement diminishes the controlling effect the child is working to obtain through the lie. Parents are told to tell their child, "I can love you no matter what you have done or have had happen to you. How long do you think you need to keep up your lying behaviors until you figure that out?" Parents are also told to be one step ahead of the child by saying, "I want to talk to you and I know you don't tend to tell the truth when I ask you questions. So, I want you to know I expect you to come up with a really good lie to answer my question. Ready?" The goal of such statements is to put the child in conflict about his lying.⁵

Under this understanding of the attachment challenged child, parents are told that the child must not experience the parent angry or emotionally triggered by the child's lie. The advice is that the child needs to feel and experience emptiness as a result of his behavior. Negative consequences are also encouraged as a way for the lesson of lying to be experienced by the pain of a consequence. Attachment-challenged children are not viewed as children who can simply think through the

pain they have caused others by their lying and, therefore, they need a negative consequence to actually experience the pain of their lying.⁶

A New View

Research in the field of neuro-science has shown that children who have experienced trauma react to stress out of a state of fear, from an unconscious level, as deep as the state memory. The fear receptor in the brain becomes overly triggered and, in this stress state, the traumatized child's perception of the situation at hand becomes distorted and exceptionally fearful.

Children with trauma histories are living out of a primal state of survival. They literally lie from a place of life or death. Their survival is dependent on convincing you that they are telling the truth. In this distortion of their mind, the state level of memory drives them with the conviction that they must persist with this lie at all costs in order to survive.

Simple events throughout the child's day can cause intense fear reactions. It can be as simple as a child picking up a penny off of the floor belonging to someone else and lying about it. It can be as obvious as a child hitting his sister and denying it, even after the parent witnessed the behavior. It can be as absurd as lying about stealing a pencil off of the teacher's desk while standing in front of the teacher, holding the pencil in hand. This type of lying can be absolutely maddening for the parents (caretaker, teacher, etc). Parents soon begin to question their own sanity when living with this type of behavior; the child's lying challenges their own reality.

In order to understand this lying behavior, we must first acknowledge that the child is simply reacting from a state of fear. It is critical that we acknowledge that when children with trauma histories are triggered into their stress and confronted in a lie, they will continue to reinforce the lie. Thus, the awareness that the child's unconscious is saying, "I have to convince you I'm telling the truth because my life depends on it" is necessary in order for the parent to respond from a place of love, instead of a place of fear and punishment.

■
***It is vital for parents
to identify their own
reactions first.***
■

Thus, the ability for the parent to help the child depends on the parent's ability to avoid buying into the lie. This is an extremely difficult task because lying is a threatening behavior. When our children lie to us, it causes a stress reaction in our brain – a stress reaction within our body-mind system. We then go into a hyperaroused state and say to the child, "Now, tell me the truth. You're lying to me. I've told you more than a hundred times not to lie to me." Yet, as soon as we do this, we have only fed into their fear and increased their determination to convince us of the lie. Parent and child then enter into a negative feedback loop, each driving more fear into the other.

So the question is then, "Can you as the parent ignore the lie?" If you

immediately say, “No, I can’t do this,” recognize this as a rigid reaction. And then the question becomes, “Well, who lied to you?” Someone must have lied to you to have such a strong reaction. When your child lies to you, it puts you into an emotionally reactive state. Remember that emotional reactivity stems from our own unfinished business. Ask yourself, “Is this emotionally charged response stemming from something in my own history?”

It is vital for parents to identify their own reactions, first. Otherwise, the parents will not be in a calm place physiologically or emotionally to help their child. Scientific research shows that within an interaction between two people, the person with the calmer amygdala (the fear receptor in the brain) has the ability to soothe the one that is activated. (Refer to Chapters 1 through 4 for a review of this information). This translates to an understanding that the parent must be regulated in order to calm the child.

So it becomes critical with this understanding for the parents not to buy into the lie in order to maintain a calm state, a state that does not allow their own amygdala to get triggered. It is then that the parents are able to create a different physiological environment for their child. They can then work to help calm the child by embracing their child with a hug and calmly saying, “You’re not going anywhere. Everything is going to be okay, sweetheart.”

Doing this can have a dramatic impact on the child’s state level of memory. By doing this, the parent is addressing the child’s unconscious fear, while calming the child through the sensory pathways (sight, sound, and touch).

But you’re saying by this point, “Okay, calm the stress... I get that. But what about the fact that my child is lying? How is he going to know that lying is wrong?” You are absolutely right; lying is wrong and the moral lesson of lying should be taught... it just cannot be taught in the heat of the moment due to the child’s fear reactivity. Once the child is calm, and you’re calm, perhaps in an hour or later in the day, this behavior can be addressed with the child. Yet, in order for the child to absorb and fully understand that lying is wrong, the child has to be out of his fear state. His cognitive thinking pathways have to be clear and open. These pathways are engaged and fully operational only when a child is in a state of love. Remember, stress causes confused and distorted thinking, so the child must be in a calm state in order to be receptive to the rationale of why it is hurtful to lie.

It is also important to recognize that stress suppresses short-term memory. Lecturing a child about lying during the stress of the moment will have little impact on the child’s ability to remember not to lie in the future. Consequencing the child during the act of lying with statements such as, “Your TV privileges will be removed if you continue to lie to me” or “You’re not getting dessert tonight if you don’t fess up to lying to me,” will only heighten the child’s stress level, creating more confusion and distortion. These fear-based demands prolong and heighten the child’s fear, preventing the child from being able to remember the life lesson the next time he is confronted with a stressful situation. He will not be able to remember that he received consequences for lying in the past. His short-term memory will not allow him to remember.



*It takes positive
interactions and a
positive environment
to calm a child's
reactive stress state.*

■

So the formula for lying behavior states: "Ignore the lie, but don't ignore the child." The goal is to establish a dynamic that creates true regulation through the parent-child relationship. As the child experiences more and more positive responses from the parent, this regulating relationship between parent and child will permeate the state memory, lessening the reactivity of the child's stress response system. This will, in time, decrease the child's need to lie to the parent. It takes positive interactions and a positive environment to calm a child's reactive stress state. And it takes repetition of both the positive relationship and repetition of the positive environment to create long-term healing for the child.

Parenting Example: Lying

Scenario: As the family is getting ready in the morning, Mom asks, "Suzie, did you feed the cat and give him fresh water?" Abruptly, Suzie says, "Yes." Mom looks over at the cat's bowl and sees that there is no food and sees that there is only a small amount of stale water in the bowl.

Traditional View

Suzie is trying to control her mother at this point in the morning because earlier Suzie had asked her mother to make pancakes and her mother said no. Additionally, since her mother wouldn't make her pancakes, Suzie is fearful that her mother does not really love her and Suzie is using the situation to test her mother. In order for Suzie's lie to lose its effectiveness and ability to control the situation, Suzie's mother needs to calmly say, "I know you're lying because the food dish is empty. I love you always; it is up to you to decide when you are going to believe me and believe that I am your mother and that I will never leave you." This absurd lie was a conscious choice on Suzie's part and the parent must not emotionally react to the lie; otherwise, a reaction from Mom would empower Suzie, only reinforcing this type of controlling behavior. [7](#)

A New View

Suzie is upset and stressed about the earlier interaction with her mother regarding the pancakes. Suzie's state memory became activated and fear-based unconscious thoughts begin to surface: "If she won't make me pancakes, how do I know that the next time I'm hungry, I'll get fed? And if I don't get fed, I'll die. I've got to make sure I'm a good girl – that I'm perfect in order for my mom to take care of me." Suzie's immediate response of "yes" when asked about her morning chore did not have time to be processed in the cognitive mind. It was an automatic reaction from her state memory in order to ensure her survival. If she does exactly what her mother has

asked her to do, if she is the perfect child, she'll survive; she'll be okay. Mom needs to respond to Suzie's fear by holding her hand, placing Suzie in her lap, and saying, "Suzie, I love you. You're going to be okay and nothing can stop me from taking care of you." Later that day, when Suzie is calm, Mom can sit and talk to Suzie, touching or holding her gently. Mom can then say, "Suzie, it hurts me when you lie to me. Sometimes when we get scared, we lie to one another. I want you to know that I love you and you're not going anywhere. I'm here to always take care of you. You can always tell me the truth, honey."

Quick Reference **LYING**

Remember that lying:

- Comes from a state of survival – the child must persist with the lie at all costs in order to survive.
- Easily creates a fear reaction in the parent.
- Is a fear-based behavior; a threatening reaction from the parent only feeds into the child's fear.

When finding your child in a lie, recognize that:

- Lying stems from a state of stress.
 - The lying behavior is not directed at you personally.
 - Your child is reacting from past trauma experiences.
 - Your child already feels threatened, so confronting the lie will only heighten and create more threat.
 - Your best response is to "ignore the lie, but not to ignore the child."
 - Your child cannot be taught the moral lesson of lying while in the act of lying.
 - Your child's foundation is insecure and your child needs your help in building the parent/child relationship through a nonblaming, non-punitive environment.
-

