What to say when you catch your teenager in a lie

"My sixteen-year-old said she was studying at a friend's. She was at a party. She's home now and I'm furious. What do I say tonight?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You lied to my face. How can I ever trust you again? You're grounded for a month."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I know you were at the party. I'm glad you're home safe. I'm upset about the lie, and we'll talk tomorrow when we're both calm."

Catching a teenager in a lie lands as a betrayal, and the instinct is to say so at full volume, with a sentence attached. The research on teenagers and secrets suggests the reaction is part of what she learns from tonight.

What is known, and at what age

In a study of 276 ninth and twelfth graders, around fourteen and seventeen, and their parents, teens who felt more trust in their parents disclosed more to them and kept fewer secrets. Teens also felt less obliged to tell their parents about personal matters than parents thought they should be.

A study that followed 982 young people over three waves looked at what happened after they told their parents things. When parents reacted negatively, young people went on to feel more controlled and less connected; feeling that way predicted more secrecy and less telling later. Positive reactions went with feeling more connected, and with telling more. These are links over time, not proof of cause, and neither study tested a parent's words on the night of a party.

What the words do

Take 1 puts the whole relationship on trial at midnight and hands down a sentence before anyone has slept. Take 2 says three true things: you know, you are glad she is safe, and you are upset about the lie. Then it names a time to talk when you are both calm.

Tomorrow's talk can be firm. Say what happened, why you need to know where she is, and what changes for a while. A teen who sees that the truth was met with a fair consequence, not an explosion, has a reason to tell you the truth next time.

If you live in two homes

If your teen moves between two homes, one home's rules can become the cover story for the other ("Dad said I could"). Check that with the other parent directly, not through your teen; pediatricians' guidance on separation says not to make a child the messenger, and suggests agreeing a set of consistent rules for both households.

In the UK

If you are worried about drinking, drugs or her safety, your GP is a good place to start; if anyone is in danger, call 999. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Smetana, J. G., Metzger, A., Gettman, D. C., & Campione-Barr, N. (2006). Disclosure and secrecy in adolescent–parent relationships. Child Development, 77(1), 201–217.
2. Tilton-Weaver, L., Kerr, M., Pakalniskeine, V., Tokic, A., Salihovic, S., & Stattin, H. (2010). Open up or close down: How do parental reactions affect youth information management? Journal of Adolescence, 33(2), 333–346.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org (2026). Divorce and separation: How to help your child adjust.
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.