What to say when you catch your six-year-old in a lie

"My six-year-old says she didn't touch the paint. It's all over her hands. Do I make her admit it? What do I say right now?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Don't you dare lie to me. Tell me the truth right now or you're in big trouble."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I can see paint on your hands. You won't be in trouble for telling me. What happened?"

When a child denies the obvious, the instinct is to corner her until she confesses. The studies of children's lying point the other way: a threat makes the truth the riskiest thing she can say.

What is known, and at what age

Lying is an ordinary step in growing up. In a study of children aged three to eight who were told not to peek at a toy, most peeked and most of those later denied it. Their lies went with how well they could read other people's minds and hold back an impulse.

A later study of 372 children aged four to eight changed what an adult said before asking whether they had peeked. Children told that the adult would be happy if they told the truth were more truthful than children told nothing. Children who heard that they would feel good about telling the truth lied less when no punishment was expected than when it was. In a study of three- and four-year-olds at two West African schools, children at the school with harsh punishment lied more often and kept their lies going better. These are studies in a lab and a school, not trials of what parents say at home.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that from about six a child knows a lie is a lie, that lies often come from fear of punishment or of disappointing you, and that harsh punishment is usually not very effective.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the confession the dangerous part. Take 2 says the fact out loud, so there is nothing to win by denying it, takes the punishment off the truth, and asks one open question. When she tells you, say "Thank you for telling me." Then deal with the paint: you clean it up together. The lie and the mess are two conversations, and the second one can be short.

If you live in two homes

A child who moves between two homes may bend the truth to keep both of you happy: about what she ate, what she watched, or whether she missed you. Use the same calm words in your home, and don't ask her to report on the other home to check her story. Pediatricians' guidance on separation says not to make a child the messenger.

In the UK

In the UK the same guidance applies; if lying is constant or comes with other worries, your GP or your child's school is a good place to start. 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

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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.