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

"My ten-year-old swore he was at a friend's house after school. The friend's mum just texted that he wasn't. What do I say when he walks in?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You lied to me! Do you know how worried I was? You're grounded. No phone, no friends, nothing."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I know you weren't at Sam's. I'm not going to yell. I need to know where you were, because keeping you safe is my job."

A lie about where he was is a safety question first and an honesty question second. The instinct is to lead with the fear, as anger. The research on children's lying suggests that a frightening reaction is the thing that teaches a child to hide better.

What is known, and at what age

In a study of 372 children aged four to eight, older children were more likely to lie and to keep the lie going under questioning. Children told that the adult would be happy if they told the truth were more truthful than children told nothing, and children who expected punishment lied more. In a study of three- and four-year-olds at two schools, children at the school with harsh punishment lied more often and kept their lies going better. Both studies are of children younger than ten; for an eight- to twelve-year-old they are a reading of the pattern, not a finding about his age.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says school-age children often lie after doing something wrong, out of fear of punishment or of disappointing you. Its advice is to tell the child straight away that you know, to avoid harsh punishment, which it calls usually not very effective, and to avoid overreacting.

What the words do

Take 1 is a verdict and a sentence before he has said a word. Take 2 tells him what you know, so there is nothing to defend, lowers the volume, and names the reason you need the truth: you keep him safe. When he tells you, say "Thank you for telling me," and then make the plan for next time together. A consequence, if there is one, comes after the truth, and fits the problem.

If you live in two homes

If the plan was made with the other home ("he's at Sam's, then you pick him up"), tell the other parent what happened yourself, adult to adult, rather than sending it through your child. Pediatricians' guidance on separation says not to make a child the messenger. Agree on one rule both homes use for where he is after school, so the next plan has one version.

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.