



# The Little Con Artist

## Why your child lies, cheats, and steals

By Alice Kaltman on March 15th, 2012

Let's face it: Most toddlers lie, cheat, or steal. Heck, most do all three. But don't freak out and assume this "bad" behavior predicts your sticky-fingered little fibber will grow up to become a remorseless criminal.

Lying, cheating, and stealing are common components of toddler development. Little kids are constantly trying to figure out the difference between right and wrong, real from imagined, too much from too little. By lying, cheating, and stealing, they test boundaries to find what is right and just. And with thoughtful guidance from parents, they begin to understand family morals and values.

So why do they do what they do?

### Why they lie:

**They don't know better.** Toddlers live in a world of action, impulse, and immediate gratification. Furthermore, they don't always have a firm grasp on reality. So while they may seem like they know the difference between what's real and what's imagined, a lot of times they don't have a clue. Therefore, they don't get the consequences of lying.

**They live in the present.** Toddlers are developmentally incapable of shifting gears easily, especially to attend to less pleasurable tasks. Ask any kid who's fully engaged in playing a game if they've gone potty yet, and you will most likely get a yes, even if you know it's an obvious lie from the way they're holding their crotch or jiggling around.

**They want what they want.** Little kids are pleasure seekers who act out of *desire*. They'll lie to **join in**, to feel part of things, to get attention. If they see a friend or older sibling getting goodies, they'll fabricate a lie to get in on the action – to nab their own piece of the pie.

**They will do anything to avoid feeling bad.** No one – especially a 3-year-old – likes to be punished. If a toddler is scolded, their first response is usually denial of misdoing. Denial lies are primal, defensive, intuitive responses to perceived threats, which is why we hear them so often. Also, toddlers *feel shamed* when others react to their spontaneous silliness with ridicule. They'll lie when embarrassed and deny they did the silly thing to begin with. They're usual tactic is to blame someone else, maybe the kid sitting next to them or an imaginary friend.

### Why they cheat:

**They want to win.** I know, doesn't everybody? But for toddlers, the goal is definitely more important than the journey. Getting to Gum Drop Mountain is the goal, and a toddler just might take any shortcut available to get there first. Even little kids are aware of the **competitive world** around them: Winners are cool and losers are, well ... losers. They hear how parents talk about success and failure, and though they might not fully understand grown-up feelings, they can sense them viscerally.

Something good to remember: Game cheating usually bothers parents more than it bothers other little kids, who view cheating as a detour rather than a crime – though non-cheaters usually lose interest in playing with cheaters and will eventually walk or toddle away.

### Why they steal:

**They don't understand the concept of personal property.** If they want something, they'll nab it. The world is one big playground, and everything in it belongs to them.

**They are guilelessly greedy.** They like to consume, and they'll get stuff however they can. Unfortunately, that includes intentional and unintentional stealing.

**They are powerless captives.** They depend on parents and caregivers to provide and set the rules. Grabbing something without asking, sneaky as it may be, feels **powerful**. The pilfered item may not even be all that desirable, but taking it feels like freedom.

**They want to be cool.** If they see other kids getting attention for having the best toy truck/doll/shovel or pail, they might grab those items – and ultimately steal the spotlight from them.

## What parents can and should do:

**1. Set a good example.** If your toddler hears you tell a lie, sees you bending the rules, or watches you pocket stuff that doesn't belong to you, what do you expect? Kids are impressionable little beings who depend on parents to set their moral compasses. So do right by them. Corny as it sounds: Be the best *you* you can be.

**2. Locate the positive impulse behind their criminal behavior, and begin there.** For example, Dahlia takes a bag of cookies out of Coraline's cubby. Take Dahlia aside and say, "Gee, you really love cookies, don't you?" Talk about how yummy cookies are, how you wish the world was made out of cookies, how cool it would be if cookies grew on trees, etc. Once you've got a thread going, address the stealing: "Did you know that bag of cookies belongs to Coraline? Coraline loves cookies, too. You need to give the cookies back to Coraline, and tell her you're sorry for taking them." Once Dahlia rights her wrong, praise her and help her figure out a better way to get her own cookies.

**3. Narrate rather than interrogate.** Sam swears he brushed his teeth, but you know he didn't. Tell Sam, "It's a really good thing you brushed your teeth, 'cause you know what happens to teeth that aren't brushed?" Provide the graphic details. Tooth decay, dentist's office, drills, etc. It's likely Sam will want to brush his teeth a faux-second time, just for extra protection.

**4. Active imaginations are good to encourage, but don't allow them to run rampant.** Appreciate stories – even join in and add outlandish details. But when the stories are continual cover-ups for misbehavior, provide gentle reality checks and truthful alternatives.

**5. Join them in simple games that promote taking turns and playing by the rules.** Guide them through the ups and downs of winning and losing. After a straight forward round, if all players are willing, call rules off for some good wholesome mayhem. Afterwards, compare the different ways of playing, and talk about what was fun or not fun in both situations.

**6. Read books.** Observing the foibles of fictional characters is a great way to deal with criminality indirectly. Discuss the moral of the story later on, or not at all. Here are some suggestions:

*Sam Tells Stories* by Thierry Robberecht

*Ruthie and the (Not So) Teeny Tiny Lie* by Laura Rankin

*The Boy Who Cried Ninja* by Alex Latimer (better for kids over 5)

**7. Share your own stories of childhood misdemeanors so as not to constantly come across as holier than thou.** If you were a perfect angel as a child (*yeah, right*), borrow a meaty story from a friend. On the flip side, also share stories of how good it felt to work hard and earnestly towards something when you were a kid.

**8. Avoid the blaming/shaming equation and public humiliation.** It's often only after the consequences of their actions have been explained that toddlers realize they've misbehaved. Try to figure out a remedy, do-over, or apology that's age-appropriate, and if possible, do it privately. Get their input, but retain ultimate authority.

Toddlers will test over and over again so don't expect overnight rehabilitation. Between ages 5 to 7, the lines can still be a bit blurry, but most innocently amoral behavior should be in check. By 8 years old, they should solidly know the difference between right and wrong. If your kid continues to lie, cheat, or steal chronically during the early grade school years, there may be more serious underlying issues afoot, such as:

Tension/conflict at home or school

Bullying or teasing by siblings or friends

Lack of attention or shift of attention from parents

Too much praise of, or comparison with, other kids, siblings, schoolmates, or friends

Possible learning/developmental delays or disorders

Highly competitive school, home, or sports environments

If you continue to have doubts about your child, regardless of age, get more support. There may be more serious issues at play when their deviousness seems too demented, their sneakiness inordinately sinister. Consult your pediatrician, friends, therapist, parenting professional, and family. Don't parent in a vacuum. It's in isolation that we miss cues, intervene too late, or begin to believe our own lies.