

Teaching Honesty to Toddlers

The Truth About This Important Life Lesson

by Jenn Director Knudsen

Two seemingly opposing days bookend April. April 1 is April Fool's Day – and April 30 is National Honesty Day. Does the latter apply to everyone, even those new to walking who still might be in diapers? Yes, even your toddler can be tasked to tell the truth. Seem like a tall tale? Or at least a tall order?

It is. But teaching honesty to the daycare and preschool sets is important. It's so important, in fact, experts and parents agree it's never too early to teach and model – over and over again – playing it straight, all life long.

Modeling Honesty

"The best advice I can give to parents is to make sure they are great role models," says Dr. Gabriela Cora, president and founder of the Executive Health & Wealth Institute, Inc., author, speaker and mother of two grown children in Miami Beach, Fla.

She offers an obvious example: If you tell your child smoking is bad, you'd better not light up, ever. And here's another: Those sugar packets on the diner's table stay there, Mom and Dad.

"No other strategy works as well as this one [because toddlers] smell lies in an intuitive way and, whether or not they can verbalize this, they do learn from their parents and adult caregivers," Dr. Cora says.

It may seem your toddler is unaware of a complex concept like honesty. But, simply put, he gets it in his own, concrete way. And you want him to get it right. Starting now.

Dr. Laura A. Jana, a pediatrician, owner of the Primrose School of Legacy in Omaha, Neb., and mother of two, reminds parents that children under 8 years of age struggle to understand and apply abstract concepts, honesty among them. In her practice, she often gets this question from parents about teaching honesty to their little ones: "Can't it wait?" Like instructing healthy eating habits, the answer is no, it cannot.

Hold off on this (and, later, topics like sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll) "and you'll realize what a disservice we do to our children," Dr. Jana says. She adds that conversations and interactions with your children on any tough topic – honesty now and sex in a decade from now – need to be age-appropriate.

"It is ... entirely possible (and a good idea) to introduce children to this concept long before they can master it," Dr. Jana says.

We teach children how to eat with a spoon and their ABCs without hesitation; honesty, too, automatically should be taught – and modeled – Dr. Jana says.





Modeling means we consistently do what we say we're going to do, even in the toughest circumstances, Dr. Jana says. For example, if you say you'll take away your daughter's toy for pulling the dog's fur, and she, of course, gives Rover's fur a healthy tug, modeling honesty is confiscating that toy. As is promising ice cream and then taking your child for her favorite chocolate scoop with rainbow sprinkles.

Loving Lessons

Barbara Bakken, a Portland, Ore., entrepreneur and mother of two adult sons, a 6-year-old daughter and grandmother of a toddler, says modeling truth-telling always has worked in her parenting career – especially when coupled with empathy, love and adult emotions kept in check.

Bakken recalls a conversation with her now 27-year-old son, Jed, when he was the age her grandchild is now: He insisted his imaginary friend, Rifty, was responsible for getting the juice out of the fridge and spilling more on the floor than made it into his cup. "I used to tell Jed that when Rifty made a mess it would be nice if he or Jed would come and tell Mommy so it could be cleaned up right away," she says. "When bad stuff happens, I try really hard to park my emotions, listen and not blame. ... Remember they are only 2 or 3; keep a sense of humor and hand out lots of loves and hugs."

Dr. Jana praises Bakken's way of handling the situation. It is, after all, counterproductive to get angry at a very young child barely on the cusp of "getting" what it means to be honest. Rather, a quick correction of the child's behavior, offered with affection and understanding, will more effectively communicate your point. Instilling fear out of anger, by contrast, will belittle your child and redirect her focus in an unintended direction.

Testing Limits

Dr. Jana encourages parents, especially in a moment of frustration, to remember that young children require myriad reminders before truly understanding a virtue like honesty. As hard as it is, parents need to remember a normal part of growing up is testing limits, including the free exercise of fibbing.

Testing, Dr. Jana says, "is to be expected [at this age] and should be considered part of the learning process."

Lois Hays, a Portland, Ore., parent of two sons, ages 7 and 3, counsels parents not to punish their toddler when he's caught lying. "After all, they were being honest when they told you the truth about the fib," she says. "Praise and celebrate what they did right and briefly explain the severity of what they did and why it should not be repeated."

"It is typically at around 4 years [of age] that a child can appreciate the difference between a 'lie' and the 'truth,'" says Jennifer Walker, a registered nurse, mother of three sons and co-founder of Moms on Call from Atlanta, Ga. Hays adds that perhaps this is the right time to introduce "clear consequences for repeated offenses." Until then (as well as beyond), the use of



repetition is key in teaching any and all lessons to toddlers.

"Any mom who has played 'drop the paci,' or 'drop the sippy cup off the stroller' about 100 times knows how much toddlers love repetition," Walker says. "Like most everything else, seldom do they get it the first time. However, eventually they do get it."

She should know from personal experience. "Because honesty is such an important character trait in our home, my kids feel the value," Hays says. "They have no interest in playing with other kids who cheat or lie."