



## How to Talk When You Think Your Child is Lying

There are many common myths about people who struggle with substance use disorders. One of the oldest and well known is that all substance users have profound character flaws that results in chronic lying. First, it's not true that all people who struggle with substance use are liars and second, it is common for *anyone*, even people who don't use substances to lie about behaviors they are not proud of! And, when you're really struggling with a drug or alcohol problem, behaviors you're not proud of are pretty easy to come by.

When you have a substance use problem, odds are someone in your life has negative feelings about what you are doing. They are at the very least confused, and more likely frightened or angry (most likely both!). When people you care about are upset with your behavior, it can feel like all eyes are on you and that's a lot of pressure, especially when you are engaged in a behavior pattern that you may very well be ambivalent about! Regardless of the reason, if you have friends and family watching your behavior closely, there can be a very normal impulse to lie and try to convince everyone there is nothing to look at!

And when you think about the issue of lying you cannot discount the effect of stigma. When you're really struggling with a behavior problem that is stigmatized, like abusing drugs, there is the added component of shame. The temptation to lie about behaviors you feel ashamed about can be really strong. Because not lying will often put you in direct contact with shaming responses from the outside world.

So, if your child is struggling (and struggling to tell the truth!), how are you supposed to talk to them and get them to tell you what is actually going on so that you can support them? Or help them want to change their behavior? How should you communicate with your child who you suspect is in a cycle of lying described above? How do you have a conversation when you can't trust what your child is saying?

You can begin by thinking through what your goal is for the conversation. What do you want to get out of it?

- Do you want them to just hear your thoughts and concerns?
- Are there specific behavior changes that you'd like to see?
- What are you hoping they will share with you and why?
- How will having that information help you?
- Are you hoping to open up a line of communication that will continue over time?

### Helping with Words:

Each one of those topics may require different ways of communicating. By figuring out where you want to end up, you can focus on managing your part of the communication, regardless of what your child is saying. For

example, if you heard that your child got fired from their job, and they're saying that they were only late once but they just "have it out for them" (and you don't believe that they are being honest with you about the tardiness), it helps to think about what you want to achieve in this conversation. Perhaps your goal is to help them think about what they need to do to get a new job, or to help them think through strategies for being on time regularly. Neither of those topics require them to "fess up" and be more honest, instead they go around the lying and steer the conversation toward topics that can help them do better moving forward. Focusing on the lie can move you away from your end goal of trying to support positive behavior change.

Sometimes, however, the lie must be addressed. In these cases, it can be helpful to step back and try to understand the "function" of the lie. Try to hold the idea that the lie ("*I'm not using*") is probably not meant to be hurtful, rather it is an unsuccessful attempt to maintain the relationship and avoid the discomfort of a fight or confrontation.

See if you can speak to the function of the lie:

*"I imagine it's hard to be honest when you know I am upset and you are ambivalent about stopping."*

It can also be helpful to tell them you will try to manage your response so that an honest conversation can actually happen:

*"I am going to try and stay calm while we talk so that you can maybe tell me what is going on."*

And most important, try to spell out your overall goal for the conversation:

*"I want to understand what you are experiencing and try to be helpful if I can be".*

And if you do happen to get a response that feel like an honest one, don't forget to reinforce them for being honest:

*"Thank you so much for sharing that with me, I really appreciate your honesty."*

### **Helping with Actions:**

Besides communicating with words, you can help influence honesty by the actions you take. To do this, you want to think about ways that you can help reinforce honesty, and how to put some consequences in place for lying.

When it comes to reinforcing the behavior you want to support, in this case honesty, it can be as simple as just noticing, or giving verbal praise for any healthy behavioral choices or honesty/openness in conversations. It might not sound like much, but it goes a long way to encouraging your child to keep up that behavior. When you're struggling it can feel like you are doing everything wrong, so what's the point of changing? When someone notices that you made a change and they actually give you credit for it, it can fuel the desire to make more changes.

Putting some consequence in place for lying is a bit trickier. You want to be clear that you don't appreciate that they are being dishonest, all the while avoiding being too punitive (which will actually increase their desire to lie). Also, the very nature of lying is that you might not know for sure if they are engaging in a lie in

that moment! The solution to this is to be clear about your expectations up front, and how you will handle situations of uncertainty or suspicion of lies.

To do this, it is helpful to start by laying out what they can do to demonstrate that they are being truthful. Is there some way that they can provide evidence to you to back up what they are saying? Or maybe you can establish a regular “check-in” so that you have more data. By establishing what constitutes “truth,” (e.g., a negative drug test, being able to stay within a budget and not need more money) you also establish what will constitute “not-truth” (e.g., a missed drug test, running out of money for suspicious reasons). This also gives you the ability to say how you will handle a “not-truth” situation. Let your child know up-front what will happen if that situation arises.

Dealing with dishonesty is a difficult and trying aspect of behavior change. Taking a pinch of understanding and a dollop of action will help you to feel more in control of how you can help guide your child toward more honest interaction.

Material adapted from: <https://cmcffc.org/article/how-to-talk-when-you-think-theyre-lying>

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