Question: What is the best way to intervene when young children repeatedly lie to their parents? I work with several families for whom this has become a major point of contention in their homes.

A: When we learn to talk as young children, we go through a process of discovering what can be accomplished through manipulating language. At around age 15 months, most children will have developed the ability to say “no” either through a headshake or by saying the word aloud. By age 2 years, a child may have acquired use of the pronoun “me.” So, by age 2 years the essential linguistic building blocks to be able to tell a lie are in place—if their parent asks “Did you take the cookie?” the child could reply “Me, no.”

However, lying behaviors are not commonly seen until after children learn their parents are not omniscient. Children start their lives believing that their parents know about everything they do, even when their parents are not around. Later they learn that their parents may not know about something that they have done if their parent did not observe it happening. This realization generally happens sometime after age 3 years, in the process of realizing that other people have different thoughts and perspectives than their own; this is sometimes referred to as developing a “theory of mind.” At that point, the possibility of intentionally telling lies to avoid a negative consequence comes into fruition. The ability to lie strategically to thoroughly cover up a misdeed in response to more critical questioning generally does not develop until the child is in elementary school. Therefore, early attempts at lying can be quite humorous, such as the child who denies eating pudding but has pudding all over his/her face.

So why would children lie? They lie for the same reasons that adults lie—to manipulate a situation, to avoid consequences, or to obtain goods or benefits that they may not otherwise receive. Telling lies is a normal behavior in the developing child, and it will create varying degrees of anxiety and concern for different kinds of parents. Lying appears in children long before they could be expected to adopt an adult-like moral code that values truthfulness and honesty over telling lies. And let’s face it, even the most moral adults will tell small lies in some social situations to avoid causing others to experience hurt feelings.

I find that parents who are most disturbed by a very young child’s lying behaviors are at greater risk to engage in dysfunctional reactions to their lies. For example, a parent who already knows that their child has done something that is not allowed, such as taking a sibling’s toy, may initiate engagement by asking a question such as “Did you take her toy?” This approach essentially asks the child to practice lying. The child knows a negative consequence will result if they say “yes” and a negative consequence will result if they say “no” but are still found out. The only desirable option left is to try to tell a lie convincingly enough to succeed in avoiding a negative consequence. In other words, working to catch a child lying and then punishing them for telling a lie is likely to have the opposite effect, ultimately training the child to get better and better at telling lies over time by rewarding the most successful lies. Behavior therapists would find “intermittent reinforcement” within this sequence, in that a behavior that is only occasionally rewarded is often repeated or increased in frequency.

Instead, the preferred approach would be to coach caregivers to provide discipline or consequences for their children strictly based on what the parent already knows transpired. In the case of sibling conflict where each child pleads his/her case as to...
the other sibling being at fault, the parental discipline choice should ideally impact both individuals involved in the transgression, rather than applying discipline based on the most convincing story. This might mean that neither child can use the toy for a certain period of time. If the conflict had escalated significantly, then both children might need an additional consequence such as a “time out.” Parents should avoid situations in which a child’s explanation becomes the sole basis for discipline of a sibling—that kind of power just encourages increasingly skillful lies.

Parents can be coached to recognize that if they feel like they have become a judge weighing the validity of their child’s oral arguments, then that is a good moment to switch into a different overall approach. The old adage that actions speak louder than words is pertinent here. This is not to say that lying behavior should never become a discipline focus on its own, but when lying has become a recurrent problem the approach described here is generally more helpful. Parents can further support their message of valuing nonmanipulative communication by specifically praising their children for a spontaneous admission of their own culpability around minor transgressions.

Mental health counseling for the child is neither recommended nor effective for resolving isolated lying behaviors. However, if there are areas of parenting difficulties that cause significant dysfunction in the household (which may include parent responses to child lying), referral to a mental health professional who can provide parenting support and advice may be appropriate.

REFERENCE