

Another Crazy Whopper!: Understanding and Dealing with Lying – Part One

Why is my nose growing?

There are a few behaviors that routinely present great long-term difficulty for parents to deal with. Lying is among these behaviors. The adoptee with a history of [complex trauma](#) (i.e., abandonment, abuse, institutionalization, neglect) lies—regularly! Parents arrive in therapy exhausted, frustrated and angry with the latest tales put forth by their adopted son or daughter. Lying violates the moral fabric of the family. Living with such deception prevents parents from allotting trust to their son or daughter and from receiving the trust they would like as parents.

This portion of *Understanding and Dealing with Lying* overviews the developmental process of forming honesty. Knowing that honesty is a progression helps parents comprehend the reasons their children lie. It will also become clear that the traumatized son or daughter may lie well-beyond the chronological age that typical children move forward to become truthful family members.

Honesty is a developmental process just as is learning to walk or talk. At some time, between the ages of three and four, children begin to lie. Typically, lying starts with the cookie jar. Mom says, “No, you can’t have a cookie now.” As soon as she isn’t looking, the pre-schooler moves a chair over to the counter, where the cookie jar is located, and shortly absconds off with the Oreo. A bit later, Mom, noticing the crumbs surrounding her child’s mouth, inquires, “Did you eat a cookie?” The young child replies with, “No!” This type of lying is referred to as primary process lying. The young child lacks understanding that Mom can evaluate the situation and actually see the cookie crumbs. The typically-developing child quickly learns that “honesty is the best policy” as truthfulness is a great way to avoid consequences. Unfortunately, the adoptee whose development has been interrupted by abuse, neglect, abandonment, neglect and institutionalization may remain stuck in primary process lying for years! One crazy whopper of a lie after another is put forth!

As the fibs and tall tales continue, the conflict in the home escalates. Mom and Dad, in search of the truth, become embroiled in lengthy arguments with the adoptee. The end result is a myriad of falsehoods, a lengthy list of punishments and another evening spoiled—for each family member—by the adoptee’s negative behaviors. Over time, parents and the untruthful child chronically and habitually engage in battles over the lies. The child tells a falsehood and automatically the parent engages in an angry tirade of “Why did you do that?” “Why are you lying?” “That’s another lie!” “That’s it! You’re grounded until you tell the truth!” “You need to tell the truth right now!”

Or, frequently, Mom and Dad, grill the other children in the home—“Did you eat the Pop-Tarts?” “Where is the change that was on my dresser?” “Who put the empty yogurt containers behind the couch?” The typical kids, often well past the stage of such deceit, tire of this ongoing parental effort to ferret out answers to the bizarre antics of their adopted sibling. These healthy kids wonder why their parents can’t just proceed directly to the source—their adopted brother or sister? They think, “We only have one liar in the house! Why don’t Mom and Dad just go ask him?” “How could Mom and Dad think I could do that?” “Don’t they trust me?” Feelings of anger and sadness follow these thoughts.

Ages three and four are also the time imaginary friends first appear. Along with the positive learning experiences that this invisible playmate brings—enhanced language development, coping skills, comfort in times of stress, someone to boss around, a way to make sense of the world, the ability to see things from another’s perspective—he or she also brings “someone” to blame when the lamp gets broken. However, appropriately developing children will soon grow out of this phase because by the early school years they clearly understand reality from fantasy. Again, the traumatized child, whose development lags behind her chronological age may continue blaming others or objects well-beyond early grade school.

The child with a history of abuse, neglect and abandonment may also continue playing with his or her imaginary friend beyond age seven, the age at which most children leave their invisible playmate behind. For example,

Anna was two-years-old when she was adopted and age eight when she arrived in therapy. Her parents were concerned about the amount of time she and “Beth” played. Beth, an imaginary friend, and Anna could entertain themselves for hours! The theme of the play reflected Anna’s early experiences in an orphanage. She and Beth would care for the babies and rescue the youngsters from unknown “bad things.” Parental efforts to re-direct Anna and Beth’s adventures had proven ineffective.

Actually, Anna had befriended Beth to cope with the stress of living in an orphanage. The ongoing friendship was reflective of unresolved trauma for the experience of being institutionalized. Once Anna was helped to understand her abandonment and how she came to be adopted, Beth was replaced with actual peer relationships.

The rescue themes apparent in Anna and Beth’s play raise another issue. Many children that have experienced complex trauma lie via tall tales in which they “save the day.” For example, Pete age 12, loved to tell stories about how he hit the home run that led his team to victory in the last inning of the ball game. This would have been a great story if it were actually true. In fact, Pete had been so belligerent to the coach that he was kicked off the baseball team. Underlying Pete’s desire to “save” and “rescue” is his pre-adoptive trauma. He wished he had done more to “rescue” his birth mother from the beatings she sustained at the hands of her paramour. Once Pete was helped to comprehend that a young child is helpless in such situations, his tall stories diminished.

In conclusion, chronic untruths may be the result of developmental delays or a way to let adults know the child is struggling internally with his pre-adoptive trauma. Parents and professionals are encouraged to look beyond the lie itself and ferret out the root of the problem.