

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

I need to stop lying!

Part One, of this two segment blog, helped parents and professionals understand that progressing to honesty is a developmental process similar to that of learning to read or ride a bike. Children must pass through lying in order to learn and internalize the value of truthfulness. Trauma interrupts “normal” developmental processes. As such, the adoptee with a history of complex trauma, may lie—frequently—for years! Truth distortions also manifest via imaginary friends. These invisible playmates have many positive benefits. However, the child who maintains his make-believe friend beyond the age of seven or eight may continue to place responsibility on this playmate for his own negative behaviors— “I think ‘Henry’ ate the cake.” Eventually, this habitual displacing of responsibility is transferred to others or things! Or, the imaginary friend becomes a springboard for tall tales that actually are the traumatized child’s way of attempting to resolve his abuse or abandonment.

Now, attention is turned toward a menu of suggestions for coping with this negative behavior exhibited by many adoptees who enter the family with a history of abuse, abandonment, institutionalization and neglect:

Stop Asking “Why?:” “Why?” only leads to more lies. The parent, infuriated, continues to pursue a rational answer. A lengthy argument results. During the conflict, the “why” was never answered, and again, the child most likely lied numerous additional times. A negative emotional climate was generated. Instead, state, “Would you please clean up the crumbs from the counter?” The child may reply, “I didn’t eat the cookies.” At which point, the parents says, “I didn’t say you ate the cookies. I simply asked you to clean the counter.” Conflict was avoided. Cleaning up the mess was the [natural and logical consequence](#). Natural and logical consequences help to alleviate the types of developmental delays left in the aftermath of trauma.

Understand How Adoptees Communicate: The adoptee arrives with expectations. She expects to return to her birth family. She expects that her adoptive family cannot love her. After all, she was too “bad” for her birth family to keep. How can her adoptive parents and siblings love her? Or, he believes that this will be another home in which he could be abused. The traumatized child [communicates the feelings](#) for all of his experiences and thoughts via negative behavior. He hopes that adults will demonstrate ways to express these emotions. Unfortunately, the end result of the behavior is usually an altered emotional climate within the adoptive home. Anger, conflict, frustration and exasperation prevail. Consider changing the way you react to lying—utilize the method described above. The more calmly parents can manage their interactions with their troubled child, the sooner an unwanted behavior disappears.

Recognize that Emotional Distance is Safe: In conjunction with the above, parental and sibling anger feel safe to the child who has had one failed relationship after another. Really, does anyone like to be “dumped” by a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife? The child with a history of complex trauma has been dumped time and time again. Anger, to this son or daughter, creates distance in familial relationships. Anger inhibits attachment. Thus, the traumatized child thinks, “If I don’t get too close, it won’t hurt so much when you dump me.” Lying almost guarantees an argument. So, lying is a sure fire way to protect an already broken heart. Again, a change in the emotional response of the parent to the untruthful child is essential. A calm response increases the level of parent-child attachment. And, attachment, in turn, is the context

in which all development occurs. Enhanced attachment facilitates the developmental growth necessary for the child to pass from the lying phase to the honesty stage!

Expect the Behavior. Many parents put a note next to their bed. “I live with a liar.” “I live with someone who rejects my hugs.” “I live with someone who won’t do his homework.” Each day the note serves as a reminder to deal with the particular behavior more calmly or to let the behavior go totally. The note could also read, “I am teaching Billy to be honest.” “I am teaching Sally to be more careful with her things.” Notes with this type of message *re-frame* the behavior as a developmental task to be accomplished. The behavior isn’t intentional—it is a skill the child is learning.

Parenting Doesn’t Have to be Fair. It does seem that today’s parents want to be fair. Parents move from child to child striving to find the answer to the latest misdeed. The detective parent seeks to uncover the culprit—beyond a shadow of a doubt. If there is only one deceitful child in the family, parents can bypass these time-consuming and frustrating interactions and go directly to that child. The usually truthful children resent such inquisitions. This process is slowly eroding the quality of the attachment that existed, with these typical children, prior to the adoption. If at some point, a child was wrongfully accused, the parent can right the wrong. What a valuable lesson for all of the children in the family!

Seek Professional Help. Post-placement lying that continues month after month is a sign of a developmental delay or a trauma-related issue. Ongoing crazy whoppers can swallow the happy, peaceful atmosphere of the family! Don’t wait! Instead, lessen your intake of these tall tales by seeking professional help. A list of adoption-competent, trauma-informed professionals is available at the [Association for the Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children](#).