

Teaching kids to be honest can take Solomon's wisdom

Q My 6-year old daughter tells so many lies that I'm becoming very concerned. I can watch her do something wrong, yet when I ask her about it, she denies it and won't back down. Could she have some kind of emotional problem? What's the best way to teach her to be honest?

A. Many years ago my father was coaching my two youngest brothers — identical twins — a Little League baseball.

One of the twins, Michael, was sliding into second and the umpire called him safe. Mike immediately stood up and implored to the umpire: "I was out, Ump — honest."

As I recall, it was a rather close game, so my father went running out to save the situation before Mike convinced the umpire to reverse his decision. Dad was in a real dilemma. He certainly didn't want to tell his son to lie, but then again, it was a close game.

With the wisdom of Solomon, he firmly instructed my brother "Michael, never argue with the umpire."

HONESTY is one of those characteristics that most all of us highly value at least in theory, and wish to impart onto our children. When our children are dishonest with us, it can be infuriating. The hardest yet most important thing we can do to remind ourselves that our values are not automatically our children's values: children need time to learn and incorporate our values.

During early stages of development, the avoidance of discomfort is a natural and fundamental motivation for the child. It will take a great deal of learning before any newly earned value can be expected to supersede such basic inclination.

Therefore, a 6-year-old boy who is not devious or misadjusted. On the contrary, lying and stealing are quite common in children until they are eight or nine years old. If an older child continues to persistently lie, then other explanations should be sought.

HOW DO WE help children to develop a respect for honesty and to incorporate this value into their own ethics? For starters of course, is parental example. Here are some additional suggestions.

- Be reasonable in our expectations. Don't expect your 4, 5, or 6-year-old to have the ethics and strength of conviction only found in mature adults.

psychology



Dennis Sugrue

Be prepared for tall tales. During early developmental stages, a child has not yet developed a strong capacity to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Subsequently, the child becomes the teller of tall tales, often believing his own stories. Don't dismay, a healthy imagination and creativity are in the making.

- Avoid tempting the child to lie. Often, when we know the child did something wrong, there is still the inclination to ask him, "Did you do this?" But why ask? We already know the answer. We already know a youngster, if he thinks that he can avoid punishment, will tend to lie. If you child has a smart lawyer, he'll scream entrapment!

- Avoid overreacting to dishonesty. When a child is dishonest, we can best teach him by describing in a calm and matter-of-fact manner what the appropriate behavior would be. Shaming the child is largely ineffective.

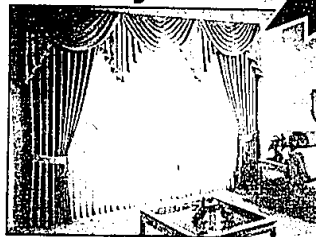
- Reward honesty. A child will not be inclined to tell the truth very often if every time he does so the outcome is some form of punishment. If the child admits doing something wrong, perhaps a good response would be "I feel bad that you did that, but I'm glad that you told me the truth."

Be prepared to hear the truth. We tend to reward dishonesty. If the child lies and tells us something we want to hear such as "I love my baby brother," we lavish him with praise.

But if the child tells the truth, "I wish my baby brother was dead," we may be inclined to react with horror. If we want our children to tell the truth, we have to be willing to accept it.

Dennis Sugrue, Ph.D., is a Farmington Hills resident and a clinical psychologist at Henry Ford Hospital. He welcomes questions and topics for future articles, but is unable to answer questions on an individual basis. Questions and topics may be sent to this newspaper.

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Edward Hines Drive in the Middle Rouge Parkway will be closed to motor traffic 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. this Sunday for the county park system's "Fall Color Bike Tour."

The event is intended to encourage bicyclists, runners and walkers to use the park free of street traffic, according to Vic Chalson, recreation manager for the Wayne County Parks and Recreation Department.

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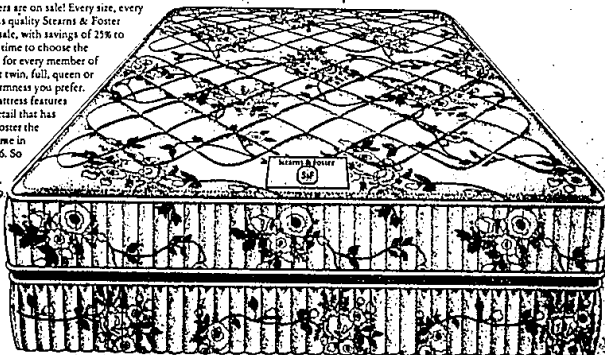
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