

Lying

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Ask Philip and he'll tell you it is all the dog's fault. The dog snapped the head off of his sister's Barbie doll. The dog trotted off with his father's watch. And it was the dog that marked the rec room wall with crayon. It's true, the five-year-old swears. "I saw it."

If the lost Seiko wasn't distressing enough, Phil's father fears that his son is turning out to be a little liar and he doesn't know what to do about it.

The situation is not as dire as it may seem.

When preschoolers don't tell the truth, they're not necessarily lying the way adults think of it. Sometimes when young children sound like they're lying, they're really pretending, saying something they wish to be true. Sometimes they're trying to answer a question they don't know the answer to. It is not malicious and it is not unusual.

That's not to say parents shouldn't intervene.

Children sometimes need a parent's help to understand the difference between what really happened and what they wish would happen. If your child tells a friend you have a pony in the backyard, you might say: "No, we don't have a pony. Do you wish we had a pony?"

If a story is fabricated in response to a problem, it will help to give the child some responsibility in fixing the problem. Take the wall Phil marked with crayon. His father might try showing him the wall and insisting he help wash it clean. He might also ask Phil to explain how the dog managed to use the crayon.

Children should learn that it is all right to say, "I don't know." They know that questions require answers. They may not realize that, if true, "I don't know" is an acceptable answer.

You also need to be honest around your children. If you promise to watch your child skateboard, follow through and do it. Also, avoid "little lies" intended to comfort, such as "the shot the doctor will give you won't hurt."

Most importantly, teach, encourage, and reward telling the truth. When your child admits breaking something or doing wrong, even after denying it at first, say how pleased you are that he or she told the truth, and even reduce – but don't necessarily eliminate – the consequence. In the long run, telling the truth will be much more important than the crayon marks.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.