

Another Crazy Whopper: Understanding and Dealing with Lying in Adoptive Families

By Arleta James, PCC

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 article 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

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

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.

Overall, 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. In the meantime, below is a menu of suggestions to help devour this behavior on a day-to-day basis:

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

2 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

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 to 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: Again, 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 – www.attach.org

