

# Is it Okay to Lie to Kids?

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Amy Paturel, M.S., M.P.H.

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From the time my three sons were infants, I was convinced I would always be totally honest with them — about everything. This was, of course, a lofty goal. I hadn't considered Santa (much) or the Tooth Fairy. And I didn't anticipate how desperate I'd be to get my kid out the door in the morning or how I would respond to their inquiries about the odd sounds coming from Mommy and Daddy's bedroom during what should be naptime. ("Mommy and daddy were just playing.")

My conviction began to unravel around the holidays. We gave our kids one or two gifts each year from "St. Nicholas," calling them "The Spirit of Christmas" gifts and explaining the true story of St. Nicholas. We never told them Santa isn't real (or that he is). So, in that sense, it was a matter of semantics...right?!

Given these gray areas, was I lying to myself about my "total honesty" policy?

Maryam Abdullah, Ph.D., Parenting Program Director of the Greater Good Science Center in Northern California, reassures me that my struggle isn't unique. "There are many shades of honesty, and sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we might not say the truth to benefit someone else — namely, our children," she says. But now that two of my three boys

are teenagers, the stakes feel higher. Suddenly, I'm more concerned about sex than Santa, and honesty feels critical since my answers (or avoidance) could influence everything from their health and safety to the way they navigate relationships.

According to [a 2024 literature review](#) published in the *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, parental lying is common across cultures. Other studies, including [a 2024 overview](#) of the research published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, report that parents frequently exaggerate their kids' talents, gloss over tough topics (like sex and current events) and spin tales to preserve cultural traditions like [Santa Claus](#) and [the Easter Bunny](#) — lies society reinforces at every opportunity.

But is that really lying? And can we be too honest with our kids about heavier topics like school shootings, misogyny and racial profiling?

## What is Truth, Really?

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The truth is, I set myself up for failure.

I've said things like, "It will heal quickly" after an injury, even though I had zero medical foresight. And when my twins were toddlers, we slipped silicone devices over their hands to curb their thumb-sucking habit, telling them the gloves had special powers and wearing them would make them superheroes.

What about the lies we tell to protect our children from the harshness of reality? Is it wrong to create a mythical haven for a child in a war zone? What about families displaced by wildfires who frame their evacuation as a spontaneous adventure as if their homes hadn't just burned to ash?

"As parents, sometimes shielding our children from harm means being selective about where we focus their attention, and stories can help children feel a sense of familiarity or order amidst uncertainty and chaos," Abdullah says

## Interrogate Your Motives

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When falsehoods paper over uncomfortable topics, Omar Gudiño, Ph.D., deputy clinical director at Child Mind Institute, recommends thinking about why you're sharing the information. Pause to ask yourself: "What am I hoping to achieve from this interaction? Is it reactive? Am I hiding from my own feelings and experiences?"

One of the most common reasons parents lie is to coax their kids into compliance. Called "parenting by lying," this approach is commonplace across cultures with [a 2013 study](#) reporting that **84% of American parents and 98% of parents in China admitted to lying to their children** to get them to stop unwanted behavior or encourage good behavior.

It might sound like, “If you don’t get in the car in 10 minutes, I’m leaving you at the park!” or “We’re all out of cookies,” when there’s a full jar in the pantry. If you’re short on time, or patience, maybe both, these white lies seem like an obvious solution. And based on the research cited above, nearly all of us have done it.

On the plus side, younger children don’t have the cognitive capacity to retain the white lies you tell to preserve your sanity, e.g., “That noisy toy you love so much? Sadly, it broke.” But over time, research shows lies of all types can undermine trust and encourage kids to be dishonest themselves. And studies consistently show that children do better when they’re able to talk about troubling events with their parents.

Your best bet, Gudiño says, is to set kids up for success. Do you need to wake them up earlier? Stock the pantry with healthier snack options? Set clearer expectations before going to the park? Children need caring adults who help them face reality — not avoid it.



## The Dark Underbelly of Truth

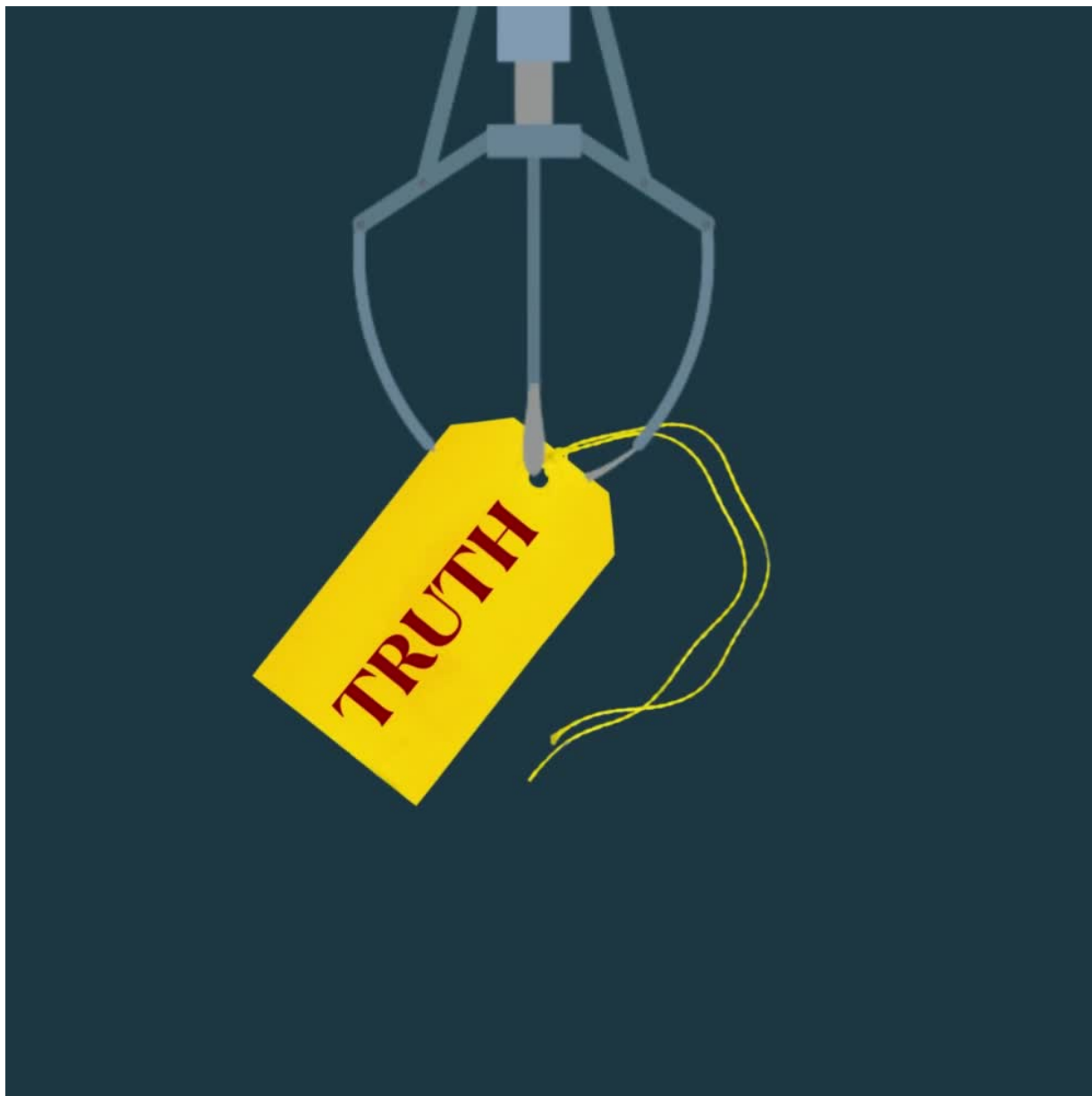
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Some facts about life — a lot of them, actually — aren't easy for kids to process. Maybe they don't need the whole truth until or unless they specifically ask for it. But in the absence of information, children often create their own (inaccurate) narratives — or worse, surf the internet to fill in the gaps where the whole world (and a whole bunch of other things) are at their fingertips.

**“The idea is to get comfortable having uncomfortable conversations,”** says Sanam Hafeez, Psy.D., a New York City-based psychologist. “You can even tell your child, ‘I’m not comfortable talking about this because I was raised in a home where we didn’t discuss these issues ... but I want you to feel safe coming to me with anything.’”

To head off awkward icebreakers, our boys write their questions on slips of paper and drop them in a jar. Every week, during our family meeting, we pull them out, hold our breaths, and address their questions the best we can, using age-appropriate language. And while we have assured them no question is off limits, sometimes I’ve found myself saying, “I don’t have the words to explain that in a way that’s appropriate for your ears, but here’s the ‘Mickey Mouse version.’” Other times, we’ve watered down definitions of terms like “69” and “bastard.”

“What’s great about the question jar,” says Gudiño, “is that you’re starting with what they’re wondering about and what they already know. That’s very different from launching into a huge lecture about something that isn’t even on their radar.”



## The Truth About Truth

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Being open and honest with your children encourages them to be open and honest, too. It shows them they can safely share their thoughts and feelings with you, even when they're ashamed or embarrassed — and that they can trust your responses.

"It's important to remember that you're not parenting for the moment — you're parenting for ten to twenty years from now," Abdullah says. "The series of lies or truths we tell during their formative years can shape our expectations of one another, building a foundation of trust and reliability."

Where I've landed after 13 years of parenting: withholding unnecessary information isn't the same as lying. It's meeting kids where they are instead of where they're going.

So maybe it's OK not to be 100% honest 100% of the time. Maybe the best we can do is help our children feel safe in the world — answering their questions, providing developmentally appropriate information, and showing up as our authentic selves, even when we don't have all the answers. Maybe we let them see our tears, our heartache, our confusion even when it comes to issues as nuanced and confounding as honesty.

## Honesty with Intention: 4 Strategies for Honest Parenting

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With honesty, there are no hard and fast rules. How honest you are with your kids depends on myriad factors from their age and stage of development to cultural beliefs and norms to how much telling the truth may cost you. Before you overshare, consider these five strategies for truth telling:

1. **Let them lead.** Don't feel like you have to answer questions your child isn't asking. Instead, start with what they already know and fill in the blanks. You can even start with a question. Something like, "What do you think it means?" That way you get a sense of what your child already knows and tread cautiously.
2. **Keep it simple.** Provide information that's developmentally appropriate for your child's age and level of understanding. Remember, this is only one small conversation among many.
3. **Take your time.** You don't have to address every question or conversation on the spot. Whether you're not in the right physical space (in the school parking lot) or not in the right mental space (stressed about an imminent work presentation), give yourself grace and schedule the conversation over the next 48 hours.
4. **Establish boundaries.** Honesty doesn't mean sharing everything. Modeling healthy boundaries teaches kids it's OK to keep some things private.

Amy Paturel, M.S., M.P.H., is an award-winning writer who has chronicled her triumphs, heartbreaks, and parenting escapades for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Parents*, *Real Simple*, and "O," *The Oprah Magazine*, among other publications. When she's not trying to master the fine art of raising a family without losing her mind, she teaches essay writing and pens articles about health, fitness, food, and wellness for consumer and custom magazines. As the wife of a toy collector and mom to three school-aged boys, Amy regularly hurdles LEGO towers, dodges remote control cars, and mentally catalogues Superhero origin stories. Writing is how she maintains her sanity amidst the chaos of her all-boy brood (dog included). She lives in the Temecula wine country outside of San Diego where there's plenty of creative inspiration ... and opportunities to indulge responsibly. You can find her at [amypaturel.com](http://amypaturel.com).



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