

MORAL MATTERS

The best insurance against children acting in immoral ways is building a strong bond. But, even in the best parent-child relationships, young people can be led astray. This handout offers parents guides on what they can and cannot do to help children develop moral principles.

Alcohol and Drug Problems. Consult alcohol and drug treatment services when you first become concerned that this may be a problem. They have information on the warning signs of substance abuse and how and when to implement drug screens.

Dishonesty. Children lie to avoid punishments, rules, disappointing parents, admitting mistakes, or to look good and get attention. Understanding the pressures that make dishonesty a common problem can help parents take it less personally and help children understand why they lie. If you find that you continue to be upset by lying, examine yourself—What does it mean about me if my child lies or “betrays” me? If you have thoughts such as, “I’m stupid or a fool,” you may have unresolved issues. It is important to realize that you are still perceptive even when children are deceptive. Then you can calmly execute several courses of action:

- Focus on misbehavior rather than the issue of lying. Confront children with the facts of what they did. Asking questions to which you know the answers may encourage lying.
- Concentrate on the rule that was broken when it is not possible to uncover what happened. Find out if children understand the reason for the rule and feedback their feelings about it—“It looks like someone was in my closet. I know you get bored and like to explore forbidden territory. Do you know how I feel when people go through my things?”
- Help children understand why they lie—“I wonder if it’s hard to admit . . . because. . . .”
- Assign essays or discuss the good and bad points of admitting mistakes.
- Use rewards when children are truthful even if consequences are needed for wrongdoing.
- Express the belief that your child will eventually grow out of lying.

Sexual Misconduct. When young children are involved in sex play, they should be told it is natural to have such interests but that it is not allowed because private parts are special. Restrict unsupervised play. Return privileges gradually and monitor play intermittently until it appears that the preoccupation is broken. If you suspect abuse, consult authorities on how to approach the child. Encourage casual discussions of older children’s beliefs about sexual behavior and birth control. Refrain from stating your own views until you understand your children’s or you will never hear theirs. Have consequences for broken curfews and dishonesty regarding whereabouts rather than attempt to control what teens are actually doing. If children are blatantly promiscuous, they may have a sexual compulsion and need therapy.

Smoking. Require children to write an essay and do research on the costs and hazards of smoking. This report can be rewritten as needed. If you are engaged in many power struggles with children, trying to prevent smoking can actually increase it. Parents who can accept smoking can use cigarettes as reinforcement for desired behavior. However, do not buy children cigarettes.

Stealing. Place children on “probation” in which “found” or “borrowed” items cannot be kept. They must go for one to two months with no evidence of stealing to get off probation. Require them to interview police officers or inmates. Never allow a child to avoid legal consequences.