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## EC5573 The Word of a Child

Florence J. Ovens

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### THE WORD OF A CHILD

Florence J. Owens,  
Editor, National Kindergarten Association, New York City

"Never esteem anything of advantage to thee that shall make thee break thy word," advised Marcus Aurelius two thousand years ago. Should we expect a child to reach such a lofty height as this? Yes; but not until he has climbed the intervening distance step by step. How fast will he climb? That will depend largely upon this environment. If you notice that he is not advancing, try to find the cause. There is always the greater likelihood that it is not in the child himself. But an outside cause brings about an inside effect, so the cause for falsifying may seem to be in the child when it is in circumstances or in someone else--perhaps in a very truthful person.

"What shall we do when a child tells a lie?" someone asks. Those who have read "How Big Is a House?" by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, will answer, "What kind of a child? What kind of a lie?" The treatment to be salutary must vary with the answers.

"It is earnestly recommended in view of its importance that very special study be given to this subject. The references offered in the bibliography afford a scientific approach which will be found distinctly worth while. Contrary to popular opinion, scientific writings are not necessarily remote from daily experiences nor difficult to comprehend. The writers of the books referred to give us the benefit of their careful personal study of the truth-telling difficulties of many boys and girls. They will be found to aid very materially in making clear the causes of different forms of prevarication. They also point out ways of prevention and cure.

The articles attached hereto are designed to supplement not to replace such study. Each carries its own lesson. Mrs. Fisher's story, while it says nothing about truth-telling, carries a vital message. Don't forget to ask, "How old a child?" And don't miss the lesson in the last sentence. Though a lying child does not necessarily mean a lying parent it does indicate a parent who at the present is a failure with regard to securing truthful responses from the child. Such a parent should set about very careful self-examination not forgetting a test on the knowledge of child psychology. If you are sure that you measure up to the wisest mothers that these articles portray and that you are never guilty of committing the follies of the others, modify in thought the mistakes of the latter and see if you are still innocent when the fault in the story is less evident. Mr. Coryell has a message or two for the very conscientious and careful parent. How often we deceive ourselves!

#### HOW BIG IS A HOUSE?

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

The lecturer was describing and advocating modern, humane and intelligent methods of dealing with young children. As he paused for an instant, a grim-faced woman rose up. "Will you answer me one plain question?" she challenged him. "This shilly-shallying with children is all right at times, but there are times when nothing but a good spanking will do. What do you do when a child stamps his foot and



says, 'I won't do it'?"

The lecturer waited. The questioner added nothing to her question.

"Do you call that a plain question?" he asked in an incredulous tone, as though he could not believe his ears.

"I certainly do," she said with satisfaction.

"Well, Madam," said the lecturer, "I will answer that plain question if you will answer one of mine. How big is a house?"

The woman stared. "That's not a plain question. What sort of a house?"

"Aha!" said the lecturer, "You can't answer me till I have told you what sort of a house? Well, I can't answer you till you tell me what sort of a child."

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," said the woman, but somewhat taken aback.

"Well, here's a case. A little child of three, very nervous, sensitive, recently over an illness, has been on a long hot railway journey. At the end, exhausted from lack of sleep, excited to the point of distraction by the noise, and a thousand fears he cannot explain, with a beginning of stomach-trouble from their irregular meals, he is told by someone who does not understand little children to carry a satchel much too heavy for him. Perhaps you would expect a three-year old to say, under such circumstances, 'I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling very well and it is really quite beyond my strength.' But I don't blame him a bit for stamping his feet and screaming. And certainly he does not deserve the same treatment as a loutish boy of fourteen who refuses to obey a reasonable request. And yet you expect some answer that will be the same for both those cases."

Every child is different from every other child, and only his mother is in a position to know how to take him. All sets of circumstances are different from all others and only those who know all about the case have any chance of guessing what is the right thing to do. You must do that most difficult of all things, think, and think hard, before you know what is the right thing to do. But before you begin to think, just remember that if a child stamps his foot and says, "I won't," to you it is because you have brought him up wrong. When you see a dog that habitually snarls and shows his teeth, you do not say "What a disagreeable nature that dog has." You say, "Heavens! what a brutal master the poor creature must have had."

#### DEVELOPING INTEGRITY

Lelia Munsell

When I was just a little girl I remember going with my mother to a store to pay a bill. The clerk made a mistake in her favor of almost two dollars. She called his attention to it. He looked at her gratefully. "It is not everyone who would correct a mistake like that," he said.

In spite of the old saying that anyone who lies will steal, there are many sons who would not knowingly defraud another yet whose word is not altogether dependable. Mother was as honest in word as in act. She did not even tell "white lies." Such an example in any home would help to make truthfulness the habit.



Why do children ever lie? So far as my observation goes there are in general three contributing factors. You will probably think of others.

First, fear: very often the lie is an instinctive gesture to shield oneself from the consequences of a mistake or of some wrong-doing.

Second, example: sometimes the child's environment includes those who seem to benefit from falsehoods.

Third, ignorance of standards: the very little child knows little of standards; he is not immoral but unmoral. His recognition and choice of standards will be determined by his experiences.

Here are incidents to illustrate the first and second factors.

Fear: I kept a drinking glass in the bathroom. One day my daughter discovered a white powder in this glass. "I didn't notice it till I had taken a drink," she said. "What do you suppose it is?" I had a suspicion that my little son Max was the culprit. I asked him if he had put anything in that glass. He denied having done so. He had always been quite truthful so I said nothing more. An hour later he came to me and asked, "You won't punish me if I tell you about the glass?" I assured him I would not. "Well, I wanted to see how Louise's new tooth powder would taste so I put some in the glass and put some water on it." "What made you think I would punish you if you told the truth?", I asked, in turn. "Well, you looked awful cross about it."

Example: I was visiting with the same lad, and doing some pressing. In some way I awkwardly knocked the iron to the floor. It struck on a corner and made a deep dent in the hardwood floor. I suppose my face must have betrayed me for I remember that my first thought was to say nothing about it. Max said, "We won't tell her who did it, will we?" I could better have afforded to put in a new floor than to have let pass that opportunity to teach my boy to be courageously truthful, so I replied, "Of course, we'll tell her."

A neighbor had a small boy whom we saw take some straps from our garage. The next day he denied it. When urged to tell the truth, he said, "Ma made me promise not to tell if you asked me. She said it would disgrace her. Don't let her know I told, will you?" At fourteen that boy found his way to the reform school.

With regard to standards: This factor played an important part for the child in each of the incidents. The reader, interested in the subject of child development might find it quite worth while to consider the probable effect of each of these experiences on the child's recognition of standards, his comprehension of their meanings and his reaction, also to note the direction of the slight inclination towards either higher or lower ideals which finally remained.

#### TELLING IMPROBABLE TALES

Mrs. W. B. Bailey

As Mrs. Blackford talked with two of her neighbors, Mrs. Elliott and Mrs. Conner, she went on with her preparations for the luncheon which she must soon serve to hungry school boys and girls.

The two friends had just stepped into the bright, sunny kitchen for a few minutes' chat. Somehow, they always felt much more cheerful and happy after a little visit with this busy, happy neighbor. She seemed to them just full of all sorts of helpful ideas.



Bobby, aged five, just home from Miss DuVal's Kindergarten, skipped gleefully into the room. "Mother," he eagerly began, "there's a great big old freight train down there on the track and it runned right over a little freight train. It sure did. Right down there on the crossing." Out he skipped again.

"Now if that isn't just like a child of that age! Maudie Marie is always making up the most awful stories you ever heard, and she sticks to them as the truth," said Mrs. Conner.

"Don't you correct Bobby for telling such falsehoods, Mrs. Blackford?" asked Mrs. Elliott.

"No-o," said Mrs. Blackford slowly and thoughtfully, "I don't scold him, if that is what you mean. Anyway, he hasn't told a falsehood."

"Hasn't told a falsehood? Didn't he just tell you that one train ran over another one?" demanded Mrs. Elliott.

"Yes, he did, but to him that is a truth. It really happened. He just hasn't entirely learned in which place it happened."

"Will you please explain?" asked Mrs. Conner sensing a good idea back of all this.

"Children of his age are often confused when their imaginations begin to develop; they are sometimes really uncertain which events are purely imaginative and which physically true. They have two complete and different worlds, in both of which they live actually and actively. One is just as real and vital to them as the other-- But at this moment she heard Bobby returning and stopped in her explanation.

Her neighbors were anxious to hear what was to come this time. The mother calmly continued her work about the kitchen.

"Mother, there was the nicest little freight train down there on the track a while ago--puffing along like this--chuff-chuff--" Hands and feet assisted him in being a train--feet scuffing, arms working like drivers on the drive wheels. "And directly, along came a great big old freight and runned right over the little one and mashed it flat. It's right down there on the track yet." Out he hurried as though to look at the fearful remains again.

"I am gradually showing Bobby which world is which, and he will come out of it all right," continued Mrs. Blackford as soon as her son was out of the kitchen. He'll be back and explain that he understands the train episode was imaginary--a story. I have watched and helped too many safely through the same thing to be at all alarmed about it. I was so embarrassed and worried about my oldest son, though, when he had this experience. Sometimes dogs were bears; horses, elephants; and once crows were negro angels."

"Here he comes again," whispered Mrs. Conner.

This time Bobby came more slowly, riding a horse.

"Mother, there's just one train down on the track. It's just the same old freight that's down there every day, but that was a good story wasn't it--the one I told about the big train and the little train?"



"Now the trouble with us," said Mrs. Elliott, "is that we should have told the boy at once that he was saying what was untrue, and that would have made him so stubborn he could never have seen the straight of the thing."

"You have suggested the only danger about the whole situation," responded Mrs. Blackford. "Continually tell an imaginative child that he lies and he will very likely begin to practice real deceit. We need to try to understand the little mind, and to help from the child's viewpoint, not ours."

#### THE GAME OF TRUTH

Florence Bascom-Phillips

"Mother, Virgil hit me!" cried my three-year-old daughter.

"I did not! She hurt her own self," emphatically declared my five-year-old son.

"He did hit me. He did," sobbed Evangeline.

"Why, I didn't either!" replied Virgil with still more emphasis.

Such episodes become problems befitting the wisdom of Solomon, and the persistence of a Philadelphia lawyer, rather than that of an ordinary, busy mother with four tots under school age, all demanding attention. But experience with an older foster-son had demonstrated the evils growing out of a childhood habit of falsehood, so I determined to find a way to get these kindergarten children of mine to tell the truth. Therefore, I invented the "Game of Truth."

Placing a bottle, a pencil, a book, a ring, or similar articles on the table I shut my eyes and said:

"Virgil, put the pencil on the kitchen cabinet."

Both children had formed habits of obedience, so this part was easy. Then I carefully explained how in this game we had to tell things exactly the way they really were, and placed a score card on the wall with each child's name written on it promising a tiny gold star after the name of each one who successfully played the game. Then I questioned as follows:

"Virgil, who put the pencil on the cabinet?"

Upon a satisfactory, truthful, well expressed answer, I said:

"Evangeline, who put the pencil on the cabinet?"

At first, she echoed the words of her brother, which made her claim that she had put the pencil there.

Virgil then got a star after his name for telling the truth, and I played the game with Evangeline doing the acting. Each time I questioned both children as to who did whatever I had told them to do, explaining patiently that each one must tell things just exactly as they really were, until both children could tell the truth about these simple things. It was a game to them, one of the most thrilling games we had played, and their delight knew no bounds when they began to see a row of gold stars after their names, for telling the truth.



Neither one has developed into a George Washington yet, but it has simplified the matter of getting their stories straight when they have a disagreement, for when I find one telling one thing and the other something else a reminder to "tell it just as it really is as we do in the Game of Truth" usually causes the child who is telling a falsehood to speak truthfully about the matter, even to acknowledge having done wrong. It seems that when approached in this way, the child's mind grasps the larger thought of speaking the truth, in place of the more personal idea of possible punishment or reprimand for having done wrong.

The most frequent cause of lying appears to be fear of consequences if the truth is known. The next, seems to be the effort to create a condition which will merit praise. Keeping these two facts in mind helps me with my "little flock".

#### TEACHING CHILDREN TO LIE

Katharine D. Hill

Most intelligent parents distinguish between the child's romancing, or sheer inability to know truth from fancy, and the actual lie, denying guilt or placing the blame for an offense on an innocent playmate in self-defense. There was a time when I was quite proud of the tact I used in dealing with the former, and of my severity in trying to cure the latter, but I have come to feel that in these latter efforts many of us -- though well meaning parents -- have actually encouraged these very faults which we are struggling to correct.

One day when I was chatting with a neighbor our respective children fell into one of those petty quarrels so common to childhood, and my boy interrupted our conversation with some weeping accusation against his little playmate. To my friend's natural chagrin at any unseemly action on the part of her child was added annoyance at the interruption, and her manner was actually terrifying when she turned to the little girl and demanded, "Did you hit Richard?"

Self-defense being one of the strongest instincts of the human race, the child cringed and said, "No!"

Evidences were against her, but still, and even more emphatically, she protested her innocence. In vain I tried to persuade the mother to let the matter drop for a moment, and soon a hysterical mother was dragging a hysterical child away saying, "I won't have my child a liar. I'll make her tell the truth!"

She was exhausted when she came back a little while later to say she was convinced her little girl had been telling the truth from the beginning, for she had clung to her story even under threat of the whip if she dared to lie.

Poor child! Almost forced to lie in the first place by the demand, "Did you do it?" and by the realization that confession would mean sharp and quick punishment, and then tormented into a hysteria in which she actually came to believe in the innocence she was claiming!

And so it goes. We threaten with hand and voice while we demand, "Did you do it?" or ask a group of children standing in trembling realization of the punishment awaiting the culprit, "Which one of you did it?" We know there is no instinct stronger than that of self-defense, and yet we ignore that fact, practically forcing the little child to lie and tempting his older brother.

So with little children I have come to avoid these questions under most circumstances. They are having a hard enough time of it to learn to draw the line



between fact and fancy without my tempting them in the face of one of the strongest instincts born in them. When it is absolutely necessary to learn whether or not the little one is guilty, I try to pry out the truth by some other method. And if the direct question seems advisable I ask it gently, trying to make it clear that my purpose is to learn the truth rather than to punish. There are very few occasions when it is either wise or profitable to ask which of a group of little children has transgressed. If we do so, they will very likely all claim ignorance or pass the blame from one to another. And if by chance we discover the culprit we are apt either to utter an inane warning not to let it happen again, or, worse yet, to punish the offender before his comrades tempting many of them to determine whenever they are guilty to lie cleverly enough to escape.

When they are older, with standards more fixed, and true, I shall be glad to put them to the test, but in the meanwhile, the guilt is mine if I tempt the little ones beyond their strength.

#### THE LIAR

Russell M. Coryell

When I was a little boy, my family considered me an awful liar, and my three older brothers stated the fact both frequently and warmly to me and to others in my presence. But you know, I think they misjudged me. I wasn't an awful liar. I was an exceptionally good one. Any way wouldn't I be with three older brothers to learn the technique from? I also learned some of the subtle forms of deception from my mother and father and their grown up friends.

For example, I remember one day when I had "swiped" a cake of sweet chocolate and shared it with my brothers. Mother inquired about it casually -- oh, very casually, if you know what I mean -- so that I knew at once that I had been discovered. The inquiry was made in some such roundabout way as this: "Boys, I had a cake of sweet chocolate, which I think I put on the upper shelf of the pantry, but now it isn't there I wonder if any of you have seen it."

We had not only seen it, we had eaten it, and Mother knew that, and we knew that she knew it. If she really hadn't known, her manner would have been quite different. We could read her as readily as a book. Most children can read their parents. What she wanted was to give us a chance to "come out courageously and tell the truth". She didn't want to accuse us for fear of frightening us into a lie, and she didn't want to ask a direct question that could be answered by "yes" or "no" because "no", being the shorter word, was likely to be chosen in preference to "yes". So she employed a perfectly transparent ruse, and a ruse to the keen, elemental mind of a child is just the same as a lie.

And what did my older brothers do in this crisis? They didn't try to lie out of it. Oh, no! They knew it wouldn't do any good. So they looked first naively surprised and then indignantly accusing -- at me. "Why, Mother," said they, "we ate it. Russell brought it out to us and said you had given it to him."

The worst of it was, I had said just that. I had said it but they hadn't believed it and I knew they hadn't believed it and they knew that I knew it. In fact the whole proceeding had been fabricated in duplicity. It was a system we had worked before and went like this: My oldest brother would lead us all to some distance from the house and would then say to me, "Russ, there's a cake of sweet chocolate on the top shelf of the pantry. Go ask Mother if we can have it." They knew perfectly well, by experience, that I should take it without asking, thus insuring myself and them against the possibility of refusal, while they were provided with a perfect alibi. And as for me, I knew Mother and Father didn't believe in whipping. The worst that



would happen would be that they would talk to me sorrowfully about the pain it gave them to have a son who would lie to them. I knew I was expected to cry after a while and then it would be all over.

There were other times when Mother would pretend to believe me. She would say with great candor and sincerity: "If you say it is true, Russell dear, I know it must be. Remember that I trust you absolutely." But of course I knew she didn't believe me and didn't trust me but was just trying to make me confess by shaming me. It struck me as an agreeable though rather silly method and I swore with equal candor and sincerity that I was telling the absolute truth.

On the whole I think I deceived my parents more successfully than they deceived me, and my advice to parents is: Don't lie to your children any more than is absolutely necessary, because you can't deceive them anyway, and there is always the chance that if you are truthful with them they may be truthful with you. It isn't likely that they will, but they may. Children will do almost anything to imitate their parents.

As for the way I treat my own son: Well, I try to be honest. It is very difficult, I admit, but I'm always upheld by the thought that if I try to lie to him he'll surely see through it--and then where has my prestige gone to?

#### PROMISES AND PIE-CRUST

Nina Brown Baker

Martha and Kathie have reached that familiar stage of sixth-grade chumship where really delightful things must be shared. And they've planned--oh, for ages! --that when "Ben Hur" comes to their neighborhood movie, they'll see it together. They've read the book together, you see, staged the most exciting parts in Martha's attic and made the whole thrilling story an intimate part of their mutual life.

And it happens--of all fortunate things!--that the picture house down the street has booked the film for Lincoln's Birthday, a school holiday. Of course, they're going to that matinee. The week preceding is crammed with exciting plans requiring innumerable conferences and countless cipher notes. Pennies are anxiously counted; the little girls suffer equally when Katherine's cold threatens to develop into a sick-in-bed catastrophe, and know identical surges of relief when the cold "passes over." Everybody -- everybody -- knows that Martha and Kathie are going to the "Ben Hur" matinee on Monday afternoon.

Quite an hour before the doors could possibly open, Martha "comes by" for Kathie, gayly arrayed and swinging her birthday pocketbook. Little Kathie meets her at the door, evasive-eyed, clearly ill-at-ease, and wearing her morning middy.

With an uneasy premonition of disaster Martha enters. Mrs. Miller, Kathie's mother, looks up from her sewing to greet the visitor kindly.

"How sweet you look, dear. Is Mother well?"

"Yes, thank you."



Martha tries to smile, but that miserable, falling sensation at the pit of the stomach grows worse. Something is wrong, but oh, surely, it can't be anything as dreadful as --

Mrs. Miller proceeds to make conversation. "Did you tell Martha about the lovely treat Daddy is planning for us, Kathie? He is going to take us to see 'Ben Hur' tonight," she explains brightly. "Won't that be lovely? And perhaps, if Kathie is a very good girl, there'll be ice cream afterward."

Martha turns stricken eyes upon her chum, who squirms into the corner of the davenport and looks hard at the toes of her shoes.

"I only knew it this morning--it's a surprise," she murmurs feebly.

"And such a delightful one!" Mrs. Miller smiles. "It will be so splendid for Kathie to have Daddy there to explain the historical parts."

A wave of contempt that is not in the least childish curls Martha's lip. She happens to have heard Mr. Miller remark that he read the book when he was ten. She and Kathie know all about the historical parts. At school they're right in the midst of Roman history and they've worked the story out in every detail on the ancient maps. Martha feels, and rightly, that their fresh knowledge is infinitely more full and accurate than Papa Miller's dusty rememberings.

Silence follows Mrs. Miller's last gracious words, during which she sews serenely on. Then Martha, clenching her hands into desperate little fists and trying very hard to speak politely, brings out, "But Kathie was going with me this afternoon, Mrs. Miller."

"Well, that's too bad," the lady answers. "I remember now, you girls were planning that, weren't you? But it's early, and I expect you can get one of the other girls to go with you, can't you?"

Plain, sturdy little Martha lifts her head, and her honest eyes meet the mother's squarely. "Kathie promised to go with me," she says clearly, "and a promise is a promise."

A faint frown puckers Mrs. Miller's forehead. "You mustn't be rude, Martha. I have decided what Kathie will do; that is sufficient. And anyway," she ends laughingly, for Mrs. Miller is a sweet woman who cannot bear to be severe for long, "you must remember the old saying, my dear; 'Promises are like pie-crust -- made to be broken!'"

This gracious, charming woman has done two dreadful things today, and the least of them is cheating her child of a very precious intimacy. The friendship will go on, but something fine and lovely has gone out of it, for Martha will never feel the old confidence in Kathie again. But the big thing of course, the sickening thing, is that this mother has cheerfully flouted the sacredness of the given word.