

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Convincing Children That They're Honest

AT LUNCH TIME I found a chocolate chip cookie on the floor and asked a five-year-old if it belonged to her. “Yes!” she said eagerly. Then, after a moment of reflection, she added, “Just kidding,” admitting that it wasn’t her treat after all. I exclaimed at her honesty.

How many preschool children could resist claiming such a sumptuous dessert, especially if an adult was offering it to them? The girl beamed at my intense praise for being truthful and asked if I could tell her mother.

To trick children into believing they’re honest, create a chance to recognize them for that virtue. When we see a child eating his sandwich, we can feign ignorance. “Have you eaten your sandwich?” we inquire. If he says yes, we say, “Thank you for being so honest.”

A wise woman once told me that we encourage honesty in children by not “reacting” intensely when they share something wrong they have done. We need to show children that they don’t have to be afraid to tell us the truth.

If a child admits doing something wrong, and we still feel the need to give a consequence, we can applaud the bravery of telling the truth.

We can also maintain our supposition that they are honest by avoiding questions designed to make them incriminate themselves—the basis of the Fifth Amendment. If a child comes to us crying that his brother Joey just hit him, it doesn’t make sense to ask Joey if he just hurt his brother. We know the answer. The goal isn’t to catch Joey telling a lie. What about saying “I see you’re upset with your brother. Can you tell me about what happened?”

Think about the people you felt safe being honest with as a child, and reflect on how you can demonstrate those qualities in your own life.

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