



## BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

# WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE LIE OR STEAL?

Young people can demonstrate challenging behaviour, like lying or stealing, and this can be difficult for carers to deal with. This is because such behaviours can challenge our own values and beliefs about honesty and trust. Lying and stealing can bring out strong responses in us, like feeling we have been taken advantage of, let down or hurt. Carers also tend to have concerns about such behaviours getting worse and what that might mean for the young person's future, such as getting into trouble with the law or ending up in the youth justice system. So why do young people lie or steal and what can carers do to help change such behaviours?

### Behaviour is a form of communication

Young people, like all children, use behaviour to communicate, and lying and stealing is no different. It is important carers try to **make meaning** of a young person's behaviour and work to **understand** its function – for example, what is the behaviour telling you about the young person's needs? Labelling or criticising the young person and delivering long lectures can make a young person feel **ashamed** and **jeopardise** your relationship with them – this can be counterproductive when trying to work to reduce their negative behaviours. Instead, young people need carers who can talk about their lying or stealing in a **non-judgemental** and **open** manner.

### Why young people lie or steal

Young people might lie and steal for different reasons, including to:

- > hide or escape difficult feelings, such as abandonment, loneliness and sadness
- > find a sense of control in their unpredictable and chaotic lives
- > belong to their peer group (succumbing to peer pressure)
- > feel an instant sense of gratification or fill a void inside themselves
- > externally express their unease or feelings about something they are unable to verbalise
- > express their need for connection with their carers
- > avoid punishment for something they have done and so lie instead
- > protect their self-esteem and relationship with their carers.



### How carers can help

It is important carers focus on maintaining **connection**, building **trust** and fostering a **positive** relationship with the young person in their care. How carers respond to the lying or stealing will impact whether the behaviour continues, increases or decreases. So, what can you do?

- ✗ Don't take the behaviour personally.
- ✓ Spend time with the young person.
- ✓ Listen and validate their feelings.
- ✓ Give opportunities for the young person to earn back your trust.
- ✓ Reduce opportunities for stealing.
- ✓ Reassure the young person they will not get in trouble for telling the truth.
- ✓ Focus on family-based values around honesty and trust, and demonstrate to the young person how these can be achieved and their importance.
- ✓ Focus on the behaviour and its impact, and reassure the young person your feelings for them remain unchanged, that you care for them deeply.
- ✓ Be kind and firm.
- ✓ Set clear, consistent boundaries.
- ✓ Focus on solutions with the young person.
- ✓ Help the young person accept responsibility.
- ✓ Provide affection, for examples hugs or high fives.
- ✓ Increase the young person's sense of belonging in their environment and foster honesty.



Note: The terms 'young person' and 'young people' also refer to 'child' and 'children'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > <https://raisingchildren.net.au>
- > Schofield, G. & Beek, M. (2018). *Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption*. London, UK: CoramBAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy
- > Source images: Freepik.com (Freepik, pch.vector)



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