



Iceberg Model trauma-informed guide

Understanding and responding to lying

Introduction

Lying can be a survival behavior for children and young people who have experienced trauma. Lying can be an attempt by children and young people to make their circumstances safer or more tolerable, or to gain some control over their lives.

Tip of the iceberg (what we can see)

Many children and young people who have been traumatised tell lies. They may deny things they have done, claim to have done things they did not actually do or tell fantastical stories about events which did not actually happen. If confronted, some children and young people may tell further lies to defuse the situation or escape blame.

What is happening underneath the surface?

Struggle to differentiate between truth and lies

Some children are too young to have a good understanding of the difference between truth and their own thoughts and beliefs. This may also be true for children and young people who experience developmental delays in their cognitive skills which makes it difficult to understand the difference between their truth and their own thoughts and beliefs. Some children and young people may have difficulties with memory but feel pressured to provide some sort of answer when asked a question. Some children and young people may have learned that living in a fantasy world is more pleasant and satisfying than real life or seek connection by trying to upset or cause a reaction in others.

Children and young people lie to keep them safe from harm

Many children and young people who have been harmed have learned that adults are unsafe, unpredictable, frightening and can cause harm. They may have discovered that lying is an effective way to keep themselves safe and give adults what they want to escape anger or inappropriate punishment.

Children and young people believe lying is acceptable

Some children and young people have been exposed to adults who frequently lie and have taught them that it is normal. Sometimes harmful adults may directly instruct children and young people to lie in order to avoid detection and involvement from authorities. They may also have been lied to by adults at times about very important things such as denying the child or young person's experiences of harm or distress.

Strategies to promote healing

It may be tempting to try to press children and young people to tell the truth or 'catch them out' in a lie to encourage honesty but this usually does not work. Instead, it can invite more lies as the child or young person 'doubles down' or it can lead to escalated behavior as their feelings of shame and lack of control increase. The following strategies may be more helpful.

Model honesty

Children and young people who lie may have been told many lies from adults and have learned that lying is normal behaviour. Being honest with the child or young person will help model to them a new way of behaving and slowly correct the misperception that lying is normal. For example, avoid white lies like *"We can't go to the playground today because it's closed"* and take the opportunity to show the child or young person how you admit to making mistakes or doing the wrong thing *"Oh, I forgot to take this book back and now it's overdue. Never mind, I'll go return it and pay my fine"* or *"Sorry I haven't called you back. To be honest I was too tired to talk."*

Keep discussion about truth and lies for calm moments

When children and young people lie, they are often in a state of fear or anxiety. At this time, they are not able to think rationally or learn from what you are saying. If you want to talk to the child or young person about the difference between truth and lies or the importance of telling the truth, wait until the child or young person is in a calm state and keep the conversation light. If it gets too intense, the child or young person will become stressed and the thinking parts of their brain will 'switch off', and they will be unable to learn from the discussion. It might be helpful to have conversations about third parties. For example, commenting on the actions of characters in one of their favourite television shows rather than directly in relation to the child or young person.

Let go of correcting 'tall tales'

Some children and young people who have experienced trauma, protect themselves by making up fantastic stories about people and events that did not happen. This helps them feel calmer or happier and may provide them with enjoyment. While this behaviour should reduce over time as their real life becomes more satisfying, caregivers can help by letting go of trying to prove or disprove which stories are true and which are unlikely to be so. Instead, respond to the nature of the story without getting caught up on the facts. For example, if the child or young person is telling a story which paints them as funny or courageous, respond to the feeling rather than getting caught up with the 'truth'. For example, *"Wow that sounded so exciting!"*

Sometimes children and young people tell stories about past caregivers that do not match their histories. Often this is a form of wish fulfilment and reflects just how much the child or young person wanted their caregiver to give them the care and nurture that they need. Again, caregivers can respond to the nature of the story without getting caught up on whether it is likely to be true. For example, *"I can imagine you would have enjoyed a big birthday party at the zoo – shall we talk about what you would like to do on your next birthday?"*

Avoid setting the child or young person up to lie

If you know that the child or young person tends to lie when questioned, avoid asking what happened and instead focus on what you are going to do next. For example, if the child or young person spills milk on the floor, instead of asking *"Did you spill that milk?"*, focus on what will need to happen next *"Oh I see there has been a spill. Let's wipe it up together."* If the child or young person says something like *"It wasn't me"*, avoid being drawn into a conversation about blame and go back to the task at hand by saying something like *"I'm not worried about who did it - I'm more interested in what we're going to do now."* This response shows the child or young person that it is safe for you to find out about mistakes and that you are there to help them find solutions.

Stay focused and matter of fact

Caregivers may need to address a lie directly especially if it involves others. In this situation, calmly and in a matter-of-fact way state what you believe happened and proceed as if this is accurate. For example, *"There is some money missing from X's purse and I believe you took it. I understand that having money makes you feel safer. I hope next time you will be able to ask me."* If the child or young person denies what happened, acknowledge this but reinforce your perspective by saying *"I hear what you are saying and I understand that I might be wrong. If it turns out I am, I will apologise. For now, this is still what I think."*

Set consequences for the behavior, not the lie

The lie is a survival behavior designed to keep the child or young person safe so it makes no sense to punish them for doing it (and punishment will only increase future lying). Instead, if a consequence is necessary to address something they have done, focus on the behavior instead. For example, say *"I believe that you took money from X's purse. That's not okay and that money needs to be repaid. I am going to take \$2 from your pocket money each week until the money you took is repaid."* It is very important to follow this sort of consequence with some relationship repair and reassure the child or young person that you still care for them despite what has happened.

Increase safety

When the child or young person has difficulty telling the truth but caregivers need to question them about something, the caregiver can help them by increasing safety. For example, these conversations should occur in private and that the conversation is calm and neutral. Caregivers can reassure the child or young person that they can handle hearing the truth and will continue to protect and care for them regardless of what their answer is. For example, say *"I'm going to ask you something that you might find tricky to answer. You might even feel you have to lie about it. But you're safe here and you can tell me what happened. I'm going to stick with you no matter what your answer is."*

(Gently) praise telling the truth

Praise the child or young person when they do tell the truth, even about little things. For example, *"Thanks for telling me honestly about where you put my keys."* Keeping praise brief and matter of fact helps the child or young person to absorb what is being said and to avoid anxiety or false expectations that they must continue to do this in the future.

Additional considerations when providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people need to be understood within the context of historical, political and systematic disadvantages and the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. When caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, caregivers should ensure that they have received appropriate training and support from their caregiver support agency or the relevant departmental staff. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are cared for by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregivers, children are likely to experience culture shock which impacts on their ability to form and maintain relationships. Therefore, caregivers should develop an understanding of the child or young person's cultural background to strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive environment to strengthen their relationship with the child or young person and to continue to offer repair opportunities, including when a rupture occurs.

When caring for and thinking about the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional factors that may contribute to their needs and behaviour need to be considered. These include cultural and intergenerational trauma caused by harmful practices associated with colonisation such as forced dispossession of land and Country, forced suppression of culture, the Stolen Generations, assimilation policies, and systemic racism and oppression. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may also hold broader notions of wellbeing that include spirituality, community, and interconnectedness with land that must be recognised and supported.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, lying may be a way to protect themselves and/or their family from stigma, discrimination, or injustice. In culture ways, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are often taught to prioritise loyalty to family and community over honesty if telling the truth could lead to conflict or harm, as historically reflected. Another thing to keep in mind is that lying can be a response to perceived power imbalances, or to protect personal boundaries and privacy.

Additional considerations when providing care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background may also use lying as a survival behaviour in many instances such as in refugee camps, during interaction with immigration and other support agencies to protect themselves. Therefore, it is important for caregivers to receive additional information, training and support from their caregiver support agency or relevant departmental staff when caring for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caregivers can connect with local CALD organisations to continue to enhance their understanding of the child or young person's cultural background and the impact of it on their worldview.

Iceberg model in action

Harvey in family based care

5-year old Harvey is scared he will not have his needs met and can hit out at other children in the house when they touch his things. When confronted, he completely denies what he has done even if his caregiver saw it happen.

Harvey's caregiver knows that Harvey experienced neglect and physical abuse when he was little. Harvey's caregiver listens to the messages underneath the behavior - *"I need to look after myself because nobody else is going to. It's not safe to tell the truth they will hurt me if I say I did it. If I just stick to my story they'll give up and go away soon."*

Harvey's caregiver responds by not questioning him (as this will just set him up for another lie), focusing on the behavior and staying matter of fact. They tell Harvey *"You hit Tyson on the arm when he tried to play with your truck. We don't hit each other in this house so that everyone can stay safe. I hope next time you can come and ask me for help instead."* His foster caregiver then offers Harvey reassurance and a chance to connect - *"I know that it's hard to learn new ways to do things and I still think you're a great kid. Would you like to play a couple of rounds of Uno with me?"*

Ava in residential care

14-year old Ava was placed in residential care three years ago. She often tells stories about things that she did with her mother and siblings which do not match what her residential care workers understand about her history. These stories are detailed, specific and paint her family in a very positive light.

Ava's residential care workers listens to the messages underneath the behavior - *"I wish I had the sorts of experiences with my family that I see others doing in real life and on tv. I wish my parents had been able to give me the things that I really needed. I would like you to see me as special and important."*

Ava's residential care workers respond by letting go of what is true or not and reacting to the nature of the stories instead. For example, they say *"Wow that sounds like a really fun thing to do. Hmm sounds like you love to go on rides - me too! It's so nice to do special things with people we love, isn't it?"*

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact your case worker for further support.