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Not Lies: Wishes and Dreams

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

4 Comments

It takes time for children to differentiate between fact and wish. It takes time for them to realize that they cannot make something become so simply because they say it is so. After all, children hear adults say all manner of outlandish things, things that stun and amaze them. It must seem to children that those nearly unimaginable things are true simply because the adult has said so. It is natural for a child to attempt to work some magic himself. Perhaps if the child practices saying amazing things for a long enough time and insists hard enough that they are true, he can develop that marvelous and useful skill himself. Wouldn't it be wonderful!

Dad says, "Bob's coming over tonight," and sure enough Bob appears. Dad seems to have magical powers. The child has often worked hard to practice Dad's other magical powers. Dad can whistle; dad can snap his fingers; Dad can throw a ball through the hoop. The child practices and learns to do it too. Dad can say someone is coming over and that person appears. Dad seems to be able to make whatever he says come true. Perhaps if the child practices for long enough saying something is so, he can make it come true also. It takes a long time for some children to understand that Dad only says what is so; that why whatever he says is true.



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Mom asks how the vase fell and broke and Dad says the cat jumped up on the table and knocked it over. The child didn't see it happen. Mom didn't see it happen. Dad made it true by saying it happened. That skill seems one worth practicing. To the child it seems Dad was very fortunate he had the skill to create his preferred choice among facts of reality, no matter it really did happen that way. To the child it seems that it is true not because of a fact of reality but that Dad made it so by saying it was so. Everything Dad says is true simply because he says it. Why can't everything the child says be just as true simply because he says it? It takes a long time for all the confusion to get sorted out. Dad doesn't create facts of reality by saying something. Dad only says something because it is a fact of reality. Some children do not give up easily. They are determined to practice the skill of creating facts by saying them. It takes a long time for children to become convinced that they cannot acquire this skill of spontaneous creation through determination and practice.

Dad asks what happened to the headlight and mom says she doesn't know. She thinks it happened in the parking lot while she was at the grocery store. Dad asks what happened to the coffee table and the child says he doesn't know. It happened when he was in the other room. A child doesn't give up easily on a skill that, were it possible to develop, would be so pleasant and convenient. We can help our children understand wishes and truth more clearly if we make those moments when we must tell unpleasant facts serve as opportunities. We can't help our children much by the truths that are easy for us to tell, but we can help them immensely by the truths that are unpleasant for us to tell.

During the developmental period when our children are still reaching for attachment to the truth we can say, "I wish I could say the cat opened the door herself and got away, but what really happened was I was careless and let her get out." "I wish I could say that I put your book on the table but what really happened was, I forgot to bring it home." "I wish I could say I turned the water off but what really happened was, I forgot to turn it off."

Instead of dealing with our children's development directly and unpleasantly, we can make our own behavior transparent by clarifying our own process. We can say that we wish it were different, wish we could say it was something more pleasant or more expedient, but choose instead to tell the truth.

Connection

"I have a new book about dinosaurs," says one child. "I have a new book about dinosaurs, too," says his friend. "My dog was hit by a car and his leg is broken." "My dog was hit by a car, too, and his tail is broken." "My uncle is staying at our house and he brought me a pogo stick." "My uncle is staying at our house and he brought me a stilts." "I went to my uncle's ranch and he let me drive the truck." "I drove my father's car to San Antonio. He let me." "My father was born in Kenya." "My father was born in Antarctica." "We went camping over the weekend and saw a meteor shower." "We went camping over the weekend and saw a flying saucer."

A desire for camaraderie and companionship, for solidarity of human experience, or a certain competitiveness, at times, can stimulate a child to try to match another child's announcements. We can bring perspective for a child by saying, "I saw it too. In my mind it was made of shiny blue metal and I think we should write a story about it. Let's see, I think we should have it land in the middle of Mopac and cause a big traffic jam on the way home from school. You could help Adam write about meteor showers, Sam, and he could help you write about spaceships.

Children, who else can make the beginning of the story? Janey, what can you say you did over the weekend. Lucia, tell us what you can think up.

When children complain of others making up things that aren't true, we can say how important it is to be able to make things up right out of our head, to use our imagination to create. "Look at this story. C. S. Lewis just made it up. How do you think he could imagine that lion and that ice queen? When we read that book, the story becomes real in our minds. It is all really true in C. S. Lewis' imagination. All those characters are really alive in his mind and they become alive in our minds. A good story lives in our mind for a long time."

When a child comes to report that another child has taken liberties with the truth we can refuse to indelibly stamp the libertarian with, "liar." By refusing to participate in labeling a child's words "lies" when she plays fast and loose with the facts, we can model a developmental approach of faith and hope for our children. We can say, "I see the facts are important to you. When you hear something you don't believe, you feel confused and upset. Every day Danny is growing braver and stronger. Soon he will be able to say what really happened. Right now he can't quite do that. He is not ready yet. Danny, we want to help you get the courage to say what really happened instead of what you wish had happened. We know you will be able to do that soon."

In other situations we can say, "I think David is going to be a very good writer. He can make up things so well that it's hard to tell if they are true or not. Right now he isn't ready to tell us when it's a true story and when it's a story he invented. David, why don't you make up stories and let us try to guess which parts of them are real and which parts you invented. Children, it will be very difficult to tell because David is so good at inventing and creating."

When a child is ready and we are sure, we can say, "Sheila, don't say anything right now because I don't want to be confused. I need to hear what really happened this time instead of what you wish. If you are not strong enough to say you ate Connie's kiwi fruit, just don't say anything at all. Children, change the subject and give Sheila privacy. She has a big struggle with the facts and we don't want to embarrass her."

Instead of correcting our children when they show indifference toward the truth we can be creative in demonstrating ways to handle unpleasant facts or undesirable realities. It is important to avoid direct confrontations with children who are not strongly attached to the truth. Often the force of our righteous indignation corners a child into saying anything that comes to mind to avoid our ire. When we are angry and confrontational we can even teach children to lie. We can take the heat out of the situation by saying, "I'm thinking up a story. A dog came in the house and made these muddy footprints. Come help me clean up after that big white dog." "Let's pretend a wild monkey came in the house and took out all your toys and left them all over the floor. Come on; I'll help you pick up after the wild monkey." "Let's pretend you already brushed your teeth and I'm the dentist. I'll show you where to brush better."

We can help our children distinguish between what we wish were so and what is in fact so by increasing our transparency and by making ourselves more emotionally available to our children. "I wish Mary were coming over, but she's not." "I wish Mother had been born in Dublin, but she wasn't." "I wish I could say that I was going to Alaska but I'm not." "I wish my father had brought me a bagpipe from Scotland but she didn't." "I wish I could say that I knew how to speak Chinese but I don't."

Connection and Security

Children will take extreme liberty with the truth if they see they are in danger of being punished, if they are afraid of losing our affection, or if our anxiety level makes them feel unsafe. It is always best to avoid direct accusations or confrontational questioning or angry cornering of a child. Tone of voice and choice of words are crucial. Reviewing our own emotional state is important. When we are in a state of primal fear and high anxiety we are likely to provoke our children to lie. If we place ourselves on the side of our child and approach her from where she is and how she is feeling and thinking, where she was and what she was feeling and thinking, we can most often and most likely explore the truth. Our goal is to work with our child and avoid cornering her into lying.



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The more frightened or anxious we feel about something our child has done the more carefully we should prepare ourselves to approach him. First go to where the child is both in space and in emotion. Get eye-level and say in a quiet soothing voice, "Jacob, you were so angry. How did you get yourself so angry?" Keep the focus on how he felt and his responsibility for his feelings. "Becky, I know it is frightening to lose your temper and break something that belongs to your friend. I know you have a very caring heart. I have noticed that you are getting better and better about

handling your temper. What can we do to make it better?" When a child feels secure in her parents love and faith, she is less likely to deny her acts.

Be sure to demonstrate clearly and transparently that we are all responsible for our actions. When a child hears from a parent, "You are really making me angry." Or "Do you want me to yell at you," Or "Are you trying to make me mad at you?" Or "He made me so mad that I told him off," she gets the message that someone else is responsible for our actions. This way of thinking tells the child we are not responsible for ourselves, that we can excuse ourselves by blaming what we do on others, and that our emotions are out of our control.

When a child feels the permission to deny responsibility for his own emotions it is only a short step to denying responsibility for the truth. It is better to show a child creative ways of handling emotions while still retaining full responsibility for them.

"I'm so angry about finding a wet towel on the bed that I'd better not talk about it right now. I'll hang it up and you get the hair dryer to blow dry the comforter."

"Come quickly; a water elf has been in the bathroom splashing water everywhere. Help me clean it up."

"You must have been really angry at Paula. She sometimes does things that are so annoying. You must have felt furious."

"A person as reasonable and as responsible as you are would have to be at the end of his rope to shove someone like that. What was happening when you lost your self-control?"

"Let's think of another way to handle a situation like this. What do you think would help?"

"Let's make a plan. What do you think would help you in the future?"

"You wish you hadn't taken Sarah's barrette."

"You feel bad about hitting Sam and don't want to talk about it yet."

"You are still too upset to say what really happened."



Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of [Austin Montessori School](#) in Austin, Texas, acts as a resource to schools around the world. Donna's book, *[Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom](#)* draws on her thirty years of experience guiding a community of thirty-five six-to-nine year-olds. She received her Montessori elementary diploma from the [Fondazione Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani](#) in Bergamo, Italy, and her assistants to infancy diploma from [The Montessori Institute of Denver, Colorado](#).