

How Much of the Truth Should You Tell Your Kids?

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Parents have a big responsibility raising children, but they often find themselves in a quandary over how much of the truth to tell their kids.

Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith, a Washington, D.C. [psychiatrist](#) who counsels individuals, couples and families, offers her thoughts on the topic.

No one-size-fits all.

The issue is complex. As Dr. Gadhia-Smith sees it, there is no one-size-fits-all manual for raising kids. “First-time parents will go through a trial an error process, and each child within a family may be very different,” she says. “In general, children do have very different levels of comprehension, depending on individual personality development and age.”

As for whether there's an age-appropriate version of the truth, Dr. Gadhia-Smith says that children under five cannot comprehend the complexity of life and relational issues that an older child can. "The older the child, the greater the need for fully honest disclosure and guidance that will help the child integrate and set their own value system."

Don't lie but don't tell all either.

A big question is whether it's ever OK for parents to lie to their kids. Here's where it comes down to using good judgment.

"In general, it is not advisable to lie," Dr. Gadhia-Smith says. "However, it is not always advisable to tell all either. Parents need to use their own inner guidance about what feels right to them. Some children are more mature than others, but you also don't want to parentify a child and use them as your support system."

When outside support systems may be best

What about one parent unloading all his or her emotional anguish on the kids, perhaps over a divorce, separation or break-up? This could very well be too much of an emotional burden for the children. Dr. Gadhia-Smith has some clear advice for parents to avoid such an inappropriate emotional dump on their kids.

Indeed, if a parent is going through a separation or divorce, Dr. Gadhia-Smith says it is best for everyone involved if each person has their own [support system](#) outside of the family.

"[Psychotherapy](#) can be very helpful for children who are struggling with divided loyalties and feeling caught in the middle between divorcing parents," she says. "Parents need to be mindful not to use their children as their best friend or therapist. It may be tempting, as they are readily available, but the impact on the child could be detrimental."

Telling the truth about divorce.

Speaking of [divorce](#), what truth should parents tell their kids about the decision to do that? Is saying, "Daddy is going to be traveling for a while" not a good approach? What is better? Again, does it depend on the age of the child how much of the truth the parent(s) tell?

Here Dr. Gadhia-Smith recommends the direct approach. “It is best to be honest and straightforward about it. As difficult as this may be, the sooner the child learns of reality, the better.”

But that doesn’t mean blurting out the facts just to get it over with. A little finesse is required to do this right. “It is important to take the time necessary to help the child understand what divorce means, and that there will still be a family (if at all possible),” she says. “The child needs to understand that he or she is not being divorced; it is the parents who have made this decision in the best interest of everyone.

“It is also important to speak in a positive manner about the person you are divorcing. Remember at the child is half of each of you, and needs to love you both. Modeling compassion, empathy, courtesy, generosity, and decency during the process of divorce is invaluable to children’s development.”

The importance of modeling truth-telling

Parents also play a vital role in showing their children what telling the truth looks like. This another area parents struggle with and one where Dr. Gadhia-Smith offers some practical advice.

“Modeling truth-telling is critical, because children learn from what they see you do more than from what you tell them to do. Children need to develop skills in honest communication, confronting difficult life situations, and setting appropriate values.”

Confront the truth with love

Suppose a child repeatedly tells **lies** and the parents want to help the child change his or her behavior. This might be especially difficult if the parent(s) have been caught in lies and the kids know it.

“If a child repeatedly lies, and parents want to change their behavior, a good approach is to confront the truth with love, and then model truth-telling and talking about reality,” Dr. Gadhia-Smith says. “If a child is **lying**, they may be uncomfortable about some aspect of their reality, and it can be very helpful to look underneath the behavior and examine what is driving it.”

Dealing with truth in the news

The news is often brutal, graphic and distorted. This is another area where parents often need help about what they should say to their children about they see and hear in the media.

In general, parents shouldn't shield their kids from the news, but they shouldn't go too far in the other direction either, according to Dr. Gadhia-Smith, who says that overprotecting children is usually not in the best interest of the child.

“Life is difficult, confusing, and contains many contradictions,” she says. “And life is not always fair. The news should not be over idealized or demonized. It is helpful for children to understand the way the world is. To create a fantasy about the world is not helpful, but at the same, overexposure to anything is not balanced.”