

ORANGE SELLER

BACKGROUND

I have noticed that children get to a stage where they are, basically, learning to lie. This seems to happen around 8 or 9 years old. Of course, much younger children will tell lies when confronted with evidence of their misdeeds, but they can't usually maintain the lie when asked more questions, whereas when they approach adolescence they start to develop the skill (if it can be called that) of true deception. They learn to make their lies plausible, and can anticipate what they will be asked and what they need to do to prevent the lie being exposed. One of the things they learn is that when there is a case of one person's word against another, all they need to do is stick doggedly to their story and it will be hard for the person in authority to call them a liar.

This session came from a faith-based school where I was talking to the children about the Ten Commandments. They didn't know all of the Commandments but one that they did know was 'Thou shalt not lie' or 'No lying'. The headteacher of the school described to me how after a playground incident, several of the children had consistently lied about what had happened. 'But they know the difference between right and wrong' she said, frustrated by the fact that this very important part of the school's ethos was not being lived out by the pupils.

This led me to think along two different lines.

First, when children 'know what is right' but do what is wrong, it may be useful to distinguish between intellectual and operational beliefs. So they know that lying is not allowed, that it is not a good thing to do, and so on. And they are sincere when they tell us it is wrong to lie. But from their actions we can see that they believe that lying is OK, or necessary, or inevitable in certain situations. If they didn't believe it was OK in some way, they simply wouldn't do it. What we don't want is for a big gap to open up between these two types of belief. If we are teaching children that a certain kind of behaviour is wrong, we don't want them to set that aside when they are in two minds about what to do.

Following on from that, the second point is that it may not be enough to learn absolute rules and hope to stick to them. So to say that lying is always wrong may not help me much in my daily life. Because I lie every day, probably. Here are some of the lies I have recently told:

Child: What do you think of my picture? Me: It's very interesting.

Mother: What colour would you say Beth's hair is? Me: Strawberry blonde.

Client: People say I come across as arrogant - what do you think? Me: I wouldn't say 'arrogant', exactly.

Colleague: How are you?

Me: I'm fine.

These could be described as white lies. Some people tell them more often than me, others less. But this kind of lying is common and even those people who are more rigorously honest (they would say the picture is not interesting; Beth's hair is ginger; you do come across as arrogant; I am not fine because I've just split up with my girlfriend) can see that white lies are a special type. They differ in intent (because I'm trying to protect the other person, not get an advantage over them) and consequence (the person being deceived will often be happier than if we'd been honest). I am also less likely to stick to these lies if I sense the other person wants to hear my genuine opinion.

Now some people would maintain that white lies, while being better than selfish lies, are still not OK. They would say that it is better to be honest on all occasions about everything. And they have a strong argument. But what children need, at some point, is a growing awareness of the intentions and consequences of different types of lying so that they can start to make the more subtle moral decisions that adults make.

This session gets the children to ponder two questions: Is it possible to go through your life without lying? Is it desirable to do so? And it leads to a discussion where children try to agree about when it is OK, or actually better, to lie.

STIMULUS

Once upon a time, there was an orange-seller. She had a cart with two wheels that she could push along, and she sold her oranges by the side of the road. At night she slept under the cart with her young daughter. During the day, the lady sold oranges in the hot sun while her daughter sheltered in the shade beneath the cart. From time to time, she would buy old books or comics and give them to her daughter to read. She could hear the girl reading the words out loud from under the cart.

One day, the woman heard two voices. At first, she thought it was her daughter doing different voices for the characters in the story she was reading, but she quickly realised that there was someone else under there with her. So she peered into the dark under the cart. And there was a little genie sitting with the girl and smiling up at the mother.

The genie said: 'I have been very impressed by you and this daughter of yours. You work hard all day in the sun for very little money and this girl has taught herself to read with nothing but second-hand books. I want to do your favour. But I am only a small genie and my power is not so great. So I will make you this offer. By magic I can give you all the things you need in life: a house, some furniture and food and water every day.'

'That would be wonderful' said the orange-seller, eagerly.

'But there is one condition,' cautioned the genie, 'You must never tell a lie again and neither must your daughter. If you tell even one lie, all the things you had will be gone and you will have to go back to sleeping under your cart. So choose carefully.'

So the orange-seller thought hard about whether to take the genie's offer.

TASK QUESTIONS

- ✓ Should the orange-seller take the offer?
- ✓ Is it possible to live without lying? Is it good to live without lying?

LESSON COMMENTS

Some children will feel that they themselves just can't be good 100% time so they wouldn't take the offer, knowing that they would lose everything and end up back where they started. Some will agree that it's hard to stay truthful, but the worst that could happen is you go back to where you are now, so you actually don't lose anything. These are not really moral questions as they are not about what kind of behaviour is morally right. So don't allow the discussion to circle these issues for too long. Whether it is humanly possible to be 100% honest is relevant, but it's not the main question. The main question is not *Could we never lie?*; it's *Should we never lie?*

Eventually, children will probably get onto the whole idea of white lies. Many will decide that not hurting other people's feelings is important, but may struggle to accept that to protect other people's feelings involves lying - just a bit.

Another necessary lie is to deceive those who want to harm us: if a stranger in the street asks a child for their address, they should give a false address to protect themselves. But is that the same, morally, as giving a false address if you are stopped by the police? If not, but what exactly is the difference?

One way to extend this is to bring in the story of *The Gruffalo*. Most children seem to know it. If they are too old for it now, that will actually help as you can quickly remind them of it and then get to the questions. In that story the mouse protects himself by claiming to predators that he is waiting to meet a fearsome beast called a Gruffalo. He has completely made up this beast but it works to scare off the other animals. But then he runs into a real Gruffalo, which fits his description entirely. The questions are: Was the mouse lying when he told the animals about the Gruffalo (what he said was true even though he thought it wasn't) and was he wrong to do so?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Write a story with a good lie and a bad lie in it.