

Teens With ADHD and Lying: Why It's Common and How to Respond

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At a Glance

- Many teens lie, and some do it frequently.
- Teens with ADHD may have different patterns of lying than other teens.
- Teens with ADHD generally don't lie to be defiant, but rather to cope with their challenges.

Most parents of teens have dealt with the issue of lying at some point. Telling lies or leaving out the truth is a common teen behavior. Kids at this age have a lot more going on in their lives—sometimes good and sometimes bad—that they may want to keep to themselves.

But when teens with [ADHD](#) (also known as ADD) frequently tell lies, there are sometimes other factors to consider—and to watch out for.

Not all kids with ADHD have issues with frequent lying. In fact, some are compulsively honest, which can create a different kind of problem. For many kids, however, lying is a behavior that [starts when they're young](#) and that can become even more problematic as they travel through their teens years.

Here's what to know about teens with ADHD and the problem of frequent lying, and how to help.

Experimenting and Risk-Taking Among Teens

The teen years can be a time of new experiences for many kids, from dating to [driving](#) to going to parties. It's also a time when kids may experiment with [drugs, alcohol](#) or other risky behaviors.

There can be a lot more to hide, keep private, cover up or lie about. That includes whatever it is they've done *and* the consequences, such as driving a car full of friends with only a learner's permit *and* getting pulled over.

Some kids with ADHD may lie more frequently than their peers, however. That may be partly due to trouble with [executive function](#). It may also be a way to cover up areas of weaknesses related to their [ADHD symptoms](#). These factors sometimes put them at greater risk of engaging in risky behavior to begin with.

Why Teens With ADHD May Lie

It's not just risky behaviors that teens with ADHD may want to cover up. In fact, when they're not telling the truth, it's often about things that happen in their everyday lives. These are usually events or situations that are impacted by their [ADHD symptoms](#), particularly school and schoolwork.

Consider this scenario. Your 16-year-old with ADHD had a math exam two weeks ago. She's said nothing about it since, so you ask how she did. "Fine," she says. "Fine? What grade did you get?" you ask. "Um, a B?" she shrugs and heads out of the house. You hate to doubt her, but you log onto her school's online portal and see that she got a D.

Why would she lie again, you wonder. You've never punished her for bad grades. And she must know how easily you could find out the truth!

One answer might be that she really isn't lying. She may truly not remember the grade, or even that there was a test that day. Issues with [working memory](#) and inattention may cause her to answer the way she did.

At the same time, teens with ADHD may lie to cope with a negative outcome or episode. Experts call this a "maladaptive coping mechanism."

These teens avoid the truth because, in the moment, it helps offset the shame they might feel for doing poorly. It pushes aside the fear they have about what their failings might mean, especially as college looms. If their parent doesn't know, it's one less hurdle to face. The "truth" isn't quite real—at least for now.

The Role of Executive Function and Teenage Lying

As kids get older, their untruths can get more sophisticated. For instance, two friends might say they're sleeping at each other's house, and then head off to a concert they're not allowed to attend.

What about that 16-year-old girl with the bad test grade? She may not think about how quickly and easily her parent can go to the school's portal and knock down her lie. Teens with ADHD may, in part, seem to lie more because they get *caught* in lies more often.

Sometimes, teens with ADHD may be truly unsure of what's the truth and what's not. That, too, ties in with their [executive functioning issues](#).

A high school senior might *think* she asked her teacher for a college recommendation. But she has lots of things swimming in her mind and has trouble keeping track of and prioritizing them.

When her parents ask about that recommendation, she optimistically goes with "Did it!" She may be thinking to herself that she'll do it immediately, but that may or may not occur.

The possible consequences of not doing it may not even cross her mind until it's too late. And her parents may not know if she was lying to cover up, or whether she simply forgot about the whole thing.

The Consequences of Teenage Lying

When they're younger, kids with and without ADHD may lie or hide things. But parents are still very involved in their everyday life. It's easier to catch lies before they do too much damage.

Parents simply don't have that kind of control with teens. High school students have many more teachers and more working parts to their days.

Even when a parent calls attention to a missing homework assignment they see online, a teen might answer back that the teacher's grade portal isn't up to date. It's not probable, but it is possible!

In high school, everything has more consequences. Poor grades. Bad behavior. Lateness and [absenteeism](#). And lying about these issues, of course, only makes things worse.

Teens with ADHD may dig themselves in deeper as they avoid dealing with their problems, telling lies to cover lies. If the cycle isn't broken, lying can almost become a way of life.

Sometimes, the things these teens are lying about are more serious than school issues. Experts largely agree that kids with ADHD are at higher risk for substance abuse. They're also at higher risk of mental health issues, such as [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

A teen who's using drugs or drinking, and lying about it, may be doing it to self-medicate. It's important to look for [signs of anxiety and depression](#).

Responding When Your Teen Lies

Helping your teen understand why she tells frequent lies and the consequences of her lies is crucial for her well-being and success.

- **Don't count it as a betrayal.** Even for teens without ADHD, lying isn't typically an action against you as a parent. It's a bad decision. Focus less on the lie itself and more on what the lie was about.
- **Anticipate what your child will most likely lie about.** Keep an open dialogue about these issues. For matters involving school, you can provide tools—like a graphic organizer or shared online calendar—that can help all of you keep track. You can also talk to the school about [classroom accommodations](#) and [informal supports](#).
- **Confront your teen with evidence.** Teens with ADHD may persist with a lie, unrealistically hoping it will somehow become truth or the problem will just go away. If your child insists she handed something in when she didn't, remind her of what she said. Then show her the missing assignment online and the email the teacher sent confirming that it was missing. Suggest you both go in and sit down with the teacher to “clear things up.” It's tough love, but it's often what teens need to let go of an illusion and deal with reality.
- **Remove the shame of lying.** Don't excuse the lie, but show your teen you understand how she came to do it. You might say, “It sounds like you were struggling. Let's figure out how you got to this place to begin with. Then let's figure out how to get you back on track.”
- **Don't dismiss drinking or drug use as “normal” teen behavior.** Confront your teen. Talk about what's going on in her life and why she might be using alcohol or drugs.

You probably won't be able to stop your teen from lying altogether. But you can help her understand that lying will only make her challenges worse. Learn [why teens with ADHD may take more risks](#). Discover ways to [reduce risky behavior](#).

And keep [showing your support and understanding](#), even when your teen asserts her independence and [seems to push you away](#).

Key Takeaways

- Teens with ADHD tend to lie most about school and homework.
- Sometimes they may truly be unsure of what is the truth and what is not.
- It's important to confront your teen with evidence that they lied, and then focus on what led to the lie rather than the lie itself.