

It Doesn't Pay To Lie To Children

by Honorable Anne Kass. Ann Kass is a District Judge in the Second Judicial District State of New Mexico.

Parents shouldn't lie to their children.

I doubt anyone would disagree with this principle. Still, I hear many divorcing parents do just that! I suspect that many parents who are not divorced may often lie to their offspring as well.

One of the most common lies parents tell is in response to their children noticing that the parent is upset, angry, sad, or frightened. When the child asks, "What's wrong?" the parent misleadingly replies, "Nothing."

The parent would be wiser to say, "Thank you for noticing that I am upset. I will be O.K." The response should not, however, include a detailed description of why the parent is upset. There are some parents who tell their children far more of the truth than the children have the capacity to understand, which is just as bad as telling a lie.

Parents who fib probably believe they are being kind by saving their child from worrying about grown-up problems.

But rather than feeling comforted or safe, the child feels confused. These children wonder whether they are capable of accurately interpreting reality. Can they believe what they think they see? They are also likely to develop misgivings about the parent's truthfulness.

It's a matter of trust. Does the child trust his or her own perceptions or what the parent says? The child intuitively realizes one of them, the child or the parent, is out of sync!

In one case, I heard divorced parents who conspired to lie to their children. They agreed not to tell their teenage children that the father had been diagnosed with cancer. They reasoned it might be cured, in which case the children would have been unnecessarily concerned. A seemingly benign mission with possible disastrous results. They had given no thought to the possibility that the children would sense a tension, and that without any explanation being provided, they could well worry more over the silence than they would about the truth.

Parents often conceal that they have decided to divorce. One of the most shocking examples of this in my years of experience, involved parents who

colluded to keep the divorce a secret for a "couple of weeks," until after their child had taken a school exam. The father went home after work for dinner as always. He stayed at the family home until after the child had gone to bed. He would then leave for his own apartment, but he would return to the family home at 5:30 the next morning to be there before the child awoke for breakfast. It was an elaborate deception.

When deceitful parents ultimately admit the truth, their children are often far more injured than they would be if the truth were told straight-away! When the truth is finally told, the child has to cope with whatever unpleasantness is part of that truth, but the child will also have to sort out self-doubt from mistrust. Moreover, the child will always wonder what else the parents might have lied about and when the parents might lie again. Finally, the child will have been taught to be deceitful, by his own parents no less.

Surely, the overwhelmingly large number of falsehoods which parents tell their children are motivated by a desire to ease the children's anxiety and fear and to protect them from sadness. But to protect a child from the truth, unless there are serious and extenuating circumstances, is only to delay reality and cause confusion. Responsible honesty is always the best policy.