

LYING ABOUT SCHOOLWORK

by Jeffrey Bernstein, PhD

“THAT TEACHER IS A JERK!” THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD ALEX YELLED AT HIS MOTHER. He continued, “Mom, you always blame me for everything. Lots of people in my class did not turn those assignments in. And, anyway, that teacher hates me and is out to get me!” Sadly for Alex, after I spoke with the school counselor and some of his teachers, it became clear that Alex, like many other students with schoolwork avoidance problems, was quite distorted in his way of looking at things.

Sara, age ten, sitting across from me in my office, blankly stared away when her mother pleadingly stated, “I thought you told me you were keeping up with your schoolwork okay. Then today I get that upsetting note from your teacher. I thought things were going to be better this year, Sara, but it is already starting not to look that way.”

Jason, age fifteen, yelled at his father, “You always expect me to be perfect.” His father replied, “No, that’s not true, but I do expect you to be honest with me. I just wish mom and I could trust you to tell us when you are having problems at school.” Jason answered, “Why should I trust you when all you and mom do is yell at me!”

Like many children or adolescents with AD/HD, the examples above illustrate those who may otherwise desire to be responsible yet fall into a pattern of avoiding schoolwork and not being truthful about it. Being overly stressed out and desperate, such kids often feel

that lying is the easiest way to deal with the demands of parents and teachers. These children and teens are usually not trying to be bad or malicious, but the repetitive pattern of lying becomes a bad habit. For many children and adolescents, lying to avoid schoolwork demands is self-serving in the short term (e.g., lets them avoid doing something or deny responsibility for their actions) but creates long-term pain and chaos.

What to do if a child or adolescent lies about schoolwork

- Probe for and validate the child/teen’s underlying fears without condoning the lying behavior.
- Acknowledge and praise when your child/teen is up front and open with you by expressing appreciation for it.
- Remember to be vigilant for CANNOT versus CHOOSE NOT. There may be an underlying learning disability or AD/HD problem lurking below the surface.
- Be mindful of the stresses that your child/teen is facing in or outside of school. Remember that students often act out social, substance abuse, emotional, and home adjustment issues by shutting down on their academics.
- Realize that as gamey and manipulative as your child or teen appears, deep down he or she is not feeling good about things.
- Watch how you speak. Avoid being critical and shaming.
- When necessary, seek support from school resources, including guidance staff, and teachers. **A**

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