

Honesty

**Truthfulness, sincerity, honor,
fairness, trustworthiness, being genuine**

"The naked truth is always better than
the best-dressed lie."

Ann Landers

Martin was sprawled in front of the TV, sort of doing his math, when the phone rang. "Answer it!" his sister hollered from upstairs. "And if it's Robert, tell him I'm not home."

"Why should I?" Martin asked, looking up as his sister rushed into the family room.

"You idiot! Just answer the phone! I don't want to hurt his feelings. He's going to ask me to go to the junior dance with him, and I want to go with Alex. So tell him I'm not here . . . if it's Robert."

Martin still hesitated as the phone rang for the fifth time.

"Look, if you're feeling guilty, I'll go stand on the front porch," his sister said. "Then I'm really *not* home." Martin's sister ran out the front door just as he answered the phone.

Would Martin be lying if it were Robert calling and Martin said his sister wasn't home? Have you ever manipulated the truth in this way? What might Martin have done to handle the problem with his sister better?

Suppose you have a brother who has had a really rotten day. A bad-hair, drop-your-lunch-tray, step-in-dog-doo-day. He comes home, throws his books on the kitchen table, and stomps off toward his bed-

room as your mother follows him, asking "What's wrong, dear?" He barks "Nothing!" and slams his door in her face. Is he being honest with your mom? With himself?

Dishonest thoughts can lead to dishonest actions. The truth is, your brother doesn't want to tell your mother what's wrong, because to do that he'd have to face what's wrong. Did he make a poor choice? A foolish mistake? Did he fight with a friend? Talk back to a teacher? Whatever it is, he'd rather not think about it. And he certainly doesn't want to tell your mom about it . . . too embarrassing. So he covers up the truth, lies to your mom, then tops it off by being rude. Now he has *three* problems instead of just one. And until he admits *to himself* what's wrong, he can't make any of them better.

It's okay to look stupid, make mistakes, and have bad days. Everyone does. If your brother had stopped to think about that, he might have told your mom "I had a rotten day, and now I want to be alone for a while." That would have left him with the *one* problem he had to begin with, plus quiet time to consider what to do about it.

In most cases, honesty isn't just the best policy. It's also a lot simpler than the alternative.

"Truth is the only safe ground
to stand upon."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Eight Great Reasons to Tell the Truth

“Half the truth is often a great lie.”
Benjamin Franklin

1. Telling the truth lets everyone know what really happened. There's less chance of misunderstanding, confusion, or conflict.
2. Telling the truth protects innocent people from being blamed or punished.
3. Telling the truth allows everyone to learn from what happened.
4. You usually get into less trouble for telling the truth than for lying (and getting caught).
5. Other people trust you more when you tell the truth.
6. You don't have to tell (and remember) more lies to keep your story straight.
7. You gain a reputation for being truthful—a trait most people value.
8. Telling the truth helps you to feel secure and peaceful inside.



You could probably come up your own list of great reasons for telling the truth. And you might want to do just that, if it helps you to stay on the truth track. Meanwhile, here are ten tips to keep in mind for times when you're tempted to go the other way.

Ten Tips for Being More Truthful

1. **Make a commitment to tell the truth.** Say to yourself “Starting today, I’m someone who tells the truth.” Then honor your commitment.
2. **Tell someone about your commitment**—a close friend, a parent, a teacher, someone else you trust. Keep that person informed of your progress.
3. **Think before you give a dishonest answer, explanation, or reason.** Consider the consequences. You’ll probably decide that it’s easier to tell the truth.
4. **Be careful of when and how you use exaggeration, sarcasm, or irony.** Maybe you’re trying to be funny, or maybe you want to discourage further questions or conversation. Either way, you don’t want to give people the wrong information. *Example:* You missed three problems on your math test, and you’re upset because that dropped you down a grade. You dad asks “How was your math test?” and you answer back “I blew it!” He ends up thinking you did a lot worse than you really did—and worrying as a result.
5. **Be careful not to twist the truth or leave out part of it.** *Example:* Gloria says to Marcus “Tell Hosea I don’t know if my folks will let me go to the party with him.” What Gloria means is that her parents might not let her go to the party, period. But Marcus says to Hosea “Gloria’s dad probably won’t let her go to the party with *you*.” Now Hosea thinks that Gloria’s dad doesn’t like him, doesn’t think he’s good enough for his daughter, doesn’t trust him—or maybe Gloria doesn’t want to go with him. Marcus’s little twist could greatly change how Gloria and Hosea relate to each other in the future.

6. **Don't indulge in little white lies;** don't get caught up in cover-ups. *Example:* "My sister's not home" means she's not home. Standing outside on the porch doesn't count.

7. **Watch out for silent lies.** When you know about a lie and choose to keep quiet about it, you're allowing the lie to live on. Silence equals complicity.

8. **When you catch yourself lying, throw your mouth into reverse.** Do it then and there. *Example:* "What I meant to say is I missed three problems on my math test, which means I'm getting a B instead of an A."

9. **Talk to yourself.** (Not out loud, or people might think you're a little strange.) Ask yourself "How do I really feel about this? What's the best thing to do? How can I keep my commitment to myself?"

10. **Treat yourself when you tell the truth even when it's hard to do.** Pat yourself on the back. Indulge yourself. Take an evening off. Do whatever works for you.

"Truth, like surgery, may hurt,
but it cures."

Han Suyin

Being honest means more than telling the truth. When you're honest, you're *sincere*. You have a *sense of honor and fairness*. You're *trustworthy* and *genuine*. And you're not just honest on the outside; you're honest on the inside, too. You don't lie to anyone, including yourself.

This sounds hard, and sometimes it is. But you probably know someone who has these qualities. And if you're fortunate, that person is your friend.

CHECK IT OUT



The First Honest Book About Lies by Jonni Kincher (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1992). This book explores the truth about lies and encourages you to develop honesty as a personal value. Experiments, examples, and games explore the nature of lies and promote active questioning and truth-seeking. Ages 13 & up.

Sincerity

When you're sincere, you don't flatter people to try to make them like you or think well of you. *Example:* A friend comes to school wearing a new blue shirt. The first thing he asks you is "How do I look?" Actually, he doesn't look that good. You don't say "You look great" to his face, then laugh about him later behind his back. That's not being sincere. On the other hand, you don't say "You look awful" because there's no need to hurt his feelings.

Admittedly, this is a tricky situation. You might say "You look nice in blue." Or you might say "You look nice in blue, but I like your old blue shirt better." It depends on what kind of relationship you have. You'll have to be the judge of what's best.

When you're sincere, you're free from hypocrisy and pretense. You express your feelings openly and honestly. Your speech is natural, without double messages or hidden agendas. People know they can count on you to say what you mean and mean what you say.

"The most exhausting thing in life, I have discovered, is being insincere."

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Honor and Fairness

You overhear a teacher blame a student for taking the lunch money from her desk. In fact, you saw another student take it. Would you be lying if you said nothing? Technically, no. Would this be the honorable thing to do? No again.

When you have a sense of honor, you do the right thing.¹ You might have to spend some time figuring out *how* to do the right thing, and you might have to play out a few scenarios in your mind before taking action, but you know that staying silent isn't an option. In this case, you might tell the teacher what you saw and let her handle it. Or you might go to the student who took the money and suggest that he give it back. Explain that if he doesn't, you'll have to tell the teacher. You're not going to sit by

¹ See also "Integrity," pages 135–141.

and let the other student be blamed for something he didn't do.

"Lying is done with words and also with silence."

Adrienne Rich

Having a sense of honor isn't easy. It means that you're true in all you say and do. Your life exemplifies truth, and people can trust you to do and be what you say. You stand up for the truth even when silence is more comfortable. If you hear one person telling a lie about another, you stick up for the person being lied about.

Having a sense of honor can also mean that you're patient and understanding with someone who might have lied. You don't tolerate the lie, but you can forgive the liar,² because you know that it's only human to make poor choices and mistakes.

When you have a sense of fairness, you don't take things you don't deserve.³ These "things" might include awards, praise, money, or credit for good ideas or a job well done. If you win first prize in an essay contest because a teacher spent hours listening to you and making suggestions, you don't just take the prize and smile. You take the prize, smile, *and* thank your teacher.

Having a sense of fairness means that you don't tell your employer that you worked a half-hour more than you did. You don't tell your trombone teacher that you practiced every day when you didn't. You don't let your dad pay you to mow the lawn and then do a shabby job. If the cashier at the grocery store gives you change for a \$20 bill when you paid with a \$10 bill, you don't keep the extra change. You give it back. And if you don't discover it until after you get home, you *take* it back.

Being Trustworthy and Genuine

When you're trustworthy, your parents know that you'll be home by curfew. They don't have to worry

(although they *will* worry, of course, until you walk through the door). They don't have to remind you or hound you. Similarly, if your parents go out for the evening or away for the weekend and leave you in charge of the house, they know that you'll take good care of it. You won't let your friends in for a wild party, even if your friends show up uninvited and make fun of you for not letting them in.

Being trustworthy means that if you promise to meet your math teacher at 7:00 A.M. for a makeup test, you arrive on time. And if you forget to do your homework, that's what you tell your teacher—not some phony story.

"But wait!" you might say. "If I tell my teacher I forgot to do my homework, he'll yell at me." So what? If your teacher yells, that's *his* problem. What you do is *your* problem. When you're trustworthy, you accept the consequences of your actions.⁴

Being trustworthy doesn't mean that you're perfect. It means that when you make a mistake, other people can count on you to tell the truth and take responsibility. *Example:* Your club leader asks you to call 10 people on a phone list she gives you. If you're trustworthy, you call them. And if you forget to call them, you're *still* trustworthy if you admit it and promise to call them right away. Basically, being trustworthy means that you're a No-Excuses Kid.

When you're genuine, the "real you" is the one people see. You're the legal tender dollar bill, not the counterfeit. You're authentic.

Some people have a hard time being genuine. Maybe they're insecure, or they're afraid that other people wouldn't like their "real" selves. So a boy whose father was a so-so boxer brags that his dad was a middleweight champion. Or a girl pretends that her family is rich because that makes her feel more important around her friends. Or politicians develop public selves that are very different from their private selves, hoping to win more votes that way.

Being genuine means that you don't bother with games, ruses, and masquerades. You are what you are, and other people know that. They can relax around you and be genuine, too.

² See "Forgiveness," pages 94–102.

³ For more on fairness, see "Justice," pages 142–153.

⁴ See "Choice and Accountability," pages 28–34.