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Is My Child Lying to Me?

My child complains every day when she comes home from school that a child in her class hits her. When I mentioned this to the teacher she looked genuinely surprised. She said the two children hardly ever play together and have never had any conflicts.

Is my child lying to me?

Children learn about their world and their place within it in many different ways. Nursery school is an excellent source of social and emotional learning (as well, of course, as many other kinds of learning). Children explore relationships at school. They also observe relationships. They experiment with behavior and they watch other children behaving and ... misbehaving. They tune into their teachers' responses to them and to their classmates'. And, finally, they very often take what they learn at school and bring it home, sometimes in surprising ways.

It is important to take seriously the stories your child brings home from school but just as important to remember that the stories may not *literally* be true. Children are far less likely to be concerned with nuance or even with facts than they are with their own emotional realities. While children may not always eagerly tell you what they did at school, they may at times struggle to communicate to you their sometimes confusing and intense experiences of the social and emotional world of school.

If your child comes home and reports that another child hit him, it might mean that's exactly what happened. But it might mean another child was hit, that your child hit someone, or that someone had a tantrum. Your child may be trying to communicate that something happened at school that day that was upsetting. Your child is not lying but simply struggling to put strong feelings into words. Maybe your child is intimidated or troubled by the exuberant behavior of classmates. Maybe he is uncomfortable with his own feelings of

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anger or frustration. Or, of course, maybe someone really did hit him! The task of the adult is to react in a way that leaves open the possibility that any of these things may be true.

Maybe your child says, "No one will play with me." This could be a way to describe a lonely feeling at school that has more to do with natural anxiety about a new classroom than about exclusion. Or, it could be your child's way of saying, "Other people don't want to play what I want to play." Or perhaps your child wants to play with a certain classmate who turned him down; this rejection felt like the most significant part of your child's school day. Again, your reaction should be one that helps your child understand his own emotions better, regardless of what the "real" story is.

How can you react to your child's tales from the classroom in a way that makes you a good resource for your child as she navigates the complicated social and emotional world of school?

First, listen carefully to your child with an open mind. Don't rush to dismiss your child's feelings but don't think you have to offer an immediate solution to the problem either. Remember that what your child describes to you may be more about feelings than about facts. Ask questions that encourage your child to give you more information. For example, "What happened next?" Reflect your child's feelings if it is clear what they are, "It seems you were really angry about that!" But still be careful not to assume you know exactly what's going on or how your child felt about it. Just being a good listener and making comments like, "Oh!" can help your child feel that you are taking the situation and his feelings seriously.

If your child says, "No one is my friend," and you rush in to reassure, "Of course you have friends!" your child may feel that you are dismissing a real emotion. If your child says, "Someone pushed me," and you express shock, horror and dismay, you may be making too big a deal out of something that was just a small (but memorable) part of his day.

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Finally, it is important to have a trusting relationship with the teacher and the school. Get to know the children and teachers so that you have some frame of reference for the stories your child brings home. Your child will also feel more at home at school if he sees you as part of it. You can tell the teachers about the stories your child is bringing home, and chances are the teachers can help you put the stories in context and interpret them in a way that will help you help your child.

Kate & Meredith