



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

HONESTY COMMITMENT FOR STUDENTS

"Honesty is often very hard. The truth is often painful. But the freedom it can bring is worth the trying."

—Fred Rogers

OVERVIEW

Students make a detailed, verbalized commitment that describes how they will be honest in a particular situation or in life.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build a culture of honesty and trust in the classroom
- When you suspect students are being dishonest
- Just before an activity that requires honesty

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand that honesty and integrity is important in developing trust and relationships
- Practice making verbal, detailed commitments to being honest in a particular situation or in life

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Reflect and think about the times you were dishonest when you were a child—what were you dishonest about? Can you remember why you were dishonest? This might help you situate yourself in students' shoes.
- Think about the values and norms you've already established in your classroom—how have you discussed honesty and trust, and how might you build on that?

INSTRUCTIONS

This practice can be done with an individual student or as a group activity.

FOR AN INDIVIDUAL STUDENT WHO HAS NOT BEEN HONEST

- Ask the student why they were dishonest. For example, were they scared of getting in trouble or scared that the teacher would be angry at them?
- Ask the student how they felt about being dishonest and how they think it might make others feel.
- Invite the student to make verbal commitments to practicing honesty. The statements should be context specific and they should explain how they are being truthful. For example, a student might say, "I will ask before using something that is not mine because I don't want to make my friend sad."

AS A CLASSROOM ACTIVITY TO SET A NORM OR JUST BEFORE A CLASSROOM OR RECESS ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES HONESTY

- Ask students to discuss why being honest is important in the classroom and what honesty means to them. For example, honesty might mean telling the truth, playing fairly, or respecting the rules.

- Share a time when telling the truth was difficult for you, but was the right thing to do.
- Invite students to create detailed, verbal commitments about how they will practice honesty in the classroom or in their lives, or during a particular classroom or recess activity.
 - Rather than asking them to simply acquiesce to your request to be honest, invite them to say specifically what they are making a commitment to do, in the form of “I will [description of action].”
 - For example, “I will leave the game board pieces where they are when my friend is not looking,” or “I will keep my eyes on my own paper.”

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Are the students practicing more truthful and respectful behavior in the classroom and/or on the playground?
How do you know?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a study with 3 to 5-year olds, the children played a guessing game and were assigned to one of three groups: The first group was told not to peek, the second group was told not to peek and also asked to say “OK” in agreement, and the third group was told not to peek and also asked to say “I will not turn around and peek at the toy.” Children who repeated the full verbal commitment were less likely to peek compared to children in the other two groups. If they did peek, they took longer to do so, suggesting that they were more aware of the tension between wanting to peek and wanting to make good on their word.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Lying is common in childhood and a natural part of development: Students begin to lie as preschoolers because they’ve developed more complex thinking abilities—to take other people’s perspectives and to hold contradictory information in their minds. As they grow older, children can be tempted to cheat at board games to win, cheat during tests at school to get higher grades, or covertly taste dessert before dinner because they want to test the limits of house rules.

But older children who frequently tell lies for self-serving reasons are [more likely](#) to also engage in conflict, aggression, and delinquency, and others may see them as insincere and untrustworthy. A key part of children’s development is teaching them what it means to be trustworthy, which helps them have stronger relationships. Young children who are more honest tend to [avoid delinquency](#) in adolescence and young adulthood.

Our [words can guide our actions](#), and [research](#) suggests that saying they will do something can help students do it. Discussing expectations of trustworthiness with your child and asking them to verbalize a commitment to be honest can increase their sense of responsibility and their obligation to themselves to fulfill that commitment. In comparison, rather than reinforcing their own intention to be honest, simply saying “OK” involves the student agreeing with a teacher’s requests or rules, which shifts their sense of obligation outside themselves.

SOURCE

Angela Evans, Ph.D., Brock University