

# I Didn't Do It

All parents hear this phrase for an uncountable number from their children. It doesn't matter whether they are an only child or one of many siblings. Children use this to stay away from feared punishment. This article will discuss the reasons why and give parents strategies to deal with it.

No one wants to be punished. As adults many of us have dreaded words we dislike hearing. How many of us automatically go on the defensive when we hear the phrase: I need to talk to you? We often think oh my what did I do? We think something is wrong before we think the person just wants to have a conversation with us. It may be true that many conversations beginning with the phrase might be negative but not all necessarily. Our children are the same way. They become conditioned to hearing a certain phrase and they react or even lie to avoid the after effects of their behavior.

Children will say I didn't do it because they don't know the correct words to express themselves. This is very common with young children. They are still learning vocabulary and how to use them. It is easier to say they didn't do something instead of thinking about what they really want to say.

Children will say it to see how you will respond. All children are looking for security and if they feel their sense of security is in jeopardy, they will say whatever they feel will keep that sense of security.

Children will say it when it has worked for them in the past. If a parent doesn't have consistent rules or boundaries, then children learn that and will use it to their advantage in the future. Why not do what works to avoid trouble or accountability? Children learn this early on.

Children don't have developed problem-solving skills. This takes time. A three-year-old doesn't have the same skill level as an 11-year-old. Time and brain development are a process. (see CARES workshop on brain development and realistic expectations)

Trauma will cause a child to use defense mechanisms to protect themselves. A child will shut down, rebel, or lash out when they feel threatened. Fear caused by trauma can alter the brain's ability to reason rationally and a default mode of fight, flight or freeze will set in. Saying I didn't do it is a way to fight off the perceived threat.

Parents you can help your child/ren learn to fight saying I didn't do it.

Talk to them at the age level they are at. Don't use big words that might confuse a younger child. Ask them in specific and direct words. Example: "Mike the top of the cookie jar is off. Did you get a cookie and left the top off?" Talk in a tone that is not accusatory (you already know the answer) and give them a way out. Humor often helps. In the above example you could say, "When I was around your age, I loved chocolate chip cookies and would sneak them when my parents weren't around. (smile) It seems you are like me. I saw the top off the cookie jar. We want to keep them fresh so please ask me before you take one again. okay?" This lets the child know you know what they did but doesn't put them on the defense and it gives them

permission to ask for what they want without fear. Your answer might still be no to their request for a cookie but at least it does open the lines of communication between you and your child.

Practice praising your child when they do something good. This reinforces positive behaviors. The more a child feels secure they more likely they will confide in you even when they make a poor choice. Communication is key. Children will also look for their place of significance in the family. In a family of multiple children, each child must have a sense of belonging and feeling that they are valued. Often with sibling rivalry many children blame others or lie to avoid punishment. The goal is not usually to get their sibling in trouble, but to stay out of trouble themselves. If a child does perceive a parent favors one child over another then they might develop resentment and they may lie to get their sibling in trouble. Parents must take a proactive position on this. Assure all your children that you love them equally. I know children have different temperaments and some are easier to deal with than others. but love should be equal to all children.

Teach your children problem solving skills. It is a process. Time is required. A child's brain doesn't fully develop until the age of 25. Parents can't expect a child to problem solve the way they do. Parents can model correct behaviors to their children. They are watching. If they see you lie or trying to avoid consequences, then they will follow that example. I suggest an exercise of role play with your child. Have them practice situations real or possible and give them options to practice how they can or should respond. Allow them to tell you how they would respond and ask lots of questions as to why? This helps you learn to know your child and how to coach them. Listen to them first and allow their point of view to be considered. We all don't think alike. Some situations there are a clear right or wrong way and many times there are shades of gray or alternatives. Consider the goal which is to teach accountability, responsibility and respect.

When a child still uses the I didn't do it phrase, go over the incident with them. Show them the damages or effects of the choice the child made. Make sure there are established house rules written and put in a visible place the children can see. You can't have a rule for everything, but core values should be established and discussed. Being responsible and showing respect are also some possible values to teach your children. You decide. Have family meetings to discuss any issues you or your children may have. Allow honesty and transparency. Let the children talk and share their opinions. Provide guidance. Directions should be achievable, specific, realistic and measurable. Make sure consequences are given in advance and follow through with them. Consistency is key.

Always reassure your children that you are their advocate and support them throughout their lives. Show them you are teaching them how to be a good person and problem solver. No one is perfect, but we all can strive to be better.