

Survival of the Fibbest: Why We Lie So Well

By SHIRLEY S. WANG

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Your child tells you he didn't eat a cookie despite the tell-tale crumbs all over his mouth. You call your boss to say you're taking "a sick day," feigning a cough while on the phone. You're both lying, but is it the same?

Whether we're 2 years old or 62, our reasons for lying are mostly the same: to get out of trouble, for personal gain and to make ourselves look better in the eyes of others. But a growing body of research is raising questions about how a child's lie is different from an adult's lie, and how the way we deceive changes as we grow.

The Lying Life

Research suggests we begin lying as toddlers and keep on as adults, but how we deceive changes as we age. View chart
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Developmental psychologists are trying to understand lying through behavior. Neuroscientists are tracking which regions of the brain are activated when we spin lies. Their results could shed light on issues from why a tween lies to your face about breaking a vase to whether young children can be trusted to give eye-witness testimony in court. One intriguing new study suggests that lying may spring from a completely different part of the brain in children compared with adults.

What has become clear from studies including the work of Kang Lee, a professor at the University of Toronto and director of the Institute of Child Study, is that lying is a sign of normal maturation.

Parents and teachers who catch their children lying "should not be alarmed—and their children are not going to turn out to be pathological liars," says Dr. Lee, who has spent the last 15 years studying how lying changes as kids get older, why some people lie more than others as well as which factors can reduce lying. "The fact that their children tell lies is a sign that they have reached a new developmental milestone."

Dr. Lee and Victoria Talwar, a colleague he often collaborates with at McGill University, conducted a series of studies in which they bring children into a lab with hidden cameras. Children and young adults age

2 to 17 are enticed to lie by being told not to peek at a toy—often a plush purple Barney dinosaur—that is put behind the child's back. The test giver then leaves the room for one minute, ostensibly to answer a phone call, giving the child ample time to peek at the toy. Whether or not the child sneaks a look is caught on tape.

For young kids, the temptation to cheat is "tremendous" and 90% peek in these experiments. Even adolescents and adults are tempted in similar situations, says Dr. Lee.

When the test giver returns to the room, the child is asked if he or she peeked. At age 2, about a quarter of children will lie and say they didn't. By 3, half of kids will lie, and by 4, that figure is 90%, studies show.

This trend continues until kids are about 15. By that age, nearly everyone who cheated in the experiment will lie about it. The good news: The number of liars begins to decline beyond this age. By 17, the percentage that lies drops to about 70%.

Researchers have also examined why some kids lie more than others, and have found that it isn't related to better moral values or religious upbringing. Rather, it's kids with better cognitive abilities who lie more. That's because to lie you also have to keep the truth in mind, which involves multiple brain processes, such as integrating several sources of information and manipulating that information, according to Shawn Christ, a neuropsychologist at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The ability to lie—and lie successfully—is thought to be related to development of brain regions that allow so-called "executive functioning," or higher order thinking and reasoning abilities. Kids who perform better on tests that involve executive functioning also lie more.

To get a clearer picture of potential differences between adult and child lying, recently Markus Kruesi and colleagues at the Medical University of South Carolina scanned the brains of a couple dozen children ages 10 to 16 and adults ages 19 to 40 while they were telling the lies and telling the truth.

As the children and adults lied, the researchers expected to see increased blood flow due to neural activity in the frontal regions of the brain, where executive functioning is thought to be carried out. That happened in adult scans, but none of the frontal regions in the children's brains showed the activity.

While it is too early to know why these differences exist, Dr. Kruesi is looking into whether other areas of the brain, such as those tied to emotion, might be more active when children lie.

When it comes to covering up their lies up, studies show that kids learn quite young that they need to disguise their lying, and very quickly adopt truthful-looking behaviors—like not looking away when questioned. Dr. Talwar's work has shown that it's hard even for a young child's own parent to detect when the child is lying just by looking at the child's behaviors.

But young kids often give themselves away verbally, according to recent research by Drs. Lee and Talwar. Kids may say they didn't peek at the Barney doll, but when the experimenter asks, "What do you think the toy is?" the children blurt out, "Barney." When asked how they knew, many children then confess.

Starting around five, children begin to understand that such an answer gives their deception away, so they pretend to guess or come up with better reasons for why they knew the answer. Even so, the logic may be flawed. Dr. Lee recounted how one little girl asked to place her hand underneath a blanket that was over the toy before she answered the question. After feeling the toy but not seeing it, she said, "It feels purple, so it's Barney!"

By seven, the majority of kids can conceal their lying and cheating very well. "The time to catch a liar is before eight years of age," says Dr. Lee.

So what's a parent to do after that? Some studies suggest there is no long-term effect of parenting on lying behavior, but the work of Dr. Talwar and her colleague Angela Crossman at the John Jay College at the City College of New York shows that a certain type of parenting style seems to discourage lying. They suggest parents discuss why there are rules against lying. Also, parents who point out when kids lie—and also acknowledge when children come clean—can foster more truth-telling, says Dr. Talwar.

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(article insert)

For Parents: the Truth About Lying

* Lying is normal and isn't a problem unless kids lie frequently

and consistently.

- * Ask a child to promise to tell the truth. Children who promise are much more likely to tell the truth than kids who aren't asked to promise.

- * Lying shouldn't be ignored. When a lie comes to light, be explicit with children that it is wrong to lie.

- * Don't set up children to lie. If you know they committed a transgression, don't ask if they did it. Instead, ask why they did it.

- * If a child confesses, thank them for telling you the truth. If kids are only punished for lying, they will be more likely to lie in the future, according to studies.

- * Stories with an ending that show truth-telling as a good thing appear more effective at damping lying than fear- or punishmentbased stories

(e.g., Pinocchio's nose grows longer when he lies).

Source: American Pain Foundation