

Do the 'harmless' lies parents tell children have an impact on their emotional well-being?



PHOTO: Pixabay

A study carried out by researchers at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University suggests that parents' lies may have repercussions for their children's mental health, including into adulthood.

Parents tend to lie at least a little bit to their children. Sometimes they lie by omission, sometimes out of spite, sometimes "for their own good." It's important however to limit lying and try to provide honest reasons to children when refusing their requests, according to researchers at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

The research, done in collaboration with Canada's University of Toronto, the United States' University of California, San Diego, and China's Zhejiang Normal University, was published in *The Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. For the study, 379 young adults (whose average was 21) were invited to fill out four questionnaires.

The first gauged the frequency with which they thought their parents lied to them as children. For example, "if you don't leave with me right now, I will leave you here all alone." Or, "I didn't bring my wallet with me, we will come back another day."

The second questionnaire was related to the participants' own lies to their parents. The two others concerned their prosocial behaviours and their tendencies to behave in selfish and impulsive ways.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIALLY HARMFUL LIES TOLD TO CHILDREN

In analysing the responses, the study's authors noted that the adults whose parents seemed to have lied to them frequently were more likely to adopt intrusive, even manipulative, behaviour.

"Authority assertion over children is a form of psychological intrusiveness, which may undermine children's sense of autonomy and convey rejection, ultimately undermining children's emotional well-being. Future research should examine the nature of the lies and goals of the parents so that researchers can suggest what kind of lies to avoid, and what kind of truth-telling parents should engage in," suggested Assistant Professor Peipei Setoh of Nanyang Technological University Singapore's School of Social Sciences, the study's lead author.

While the theory is interesting, it is limited by the fact that the data came from participants' self-reporting and, what's more, was based on childhood memories.

The authors of the study also specified that it would be advisable to involve parents in future research on the subject, in order to distinguish the "inoffensive" lies from those which could detract from their children's psychological well-being.