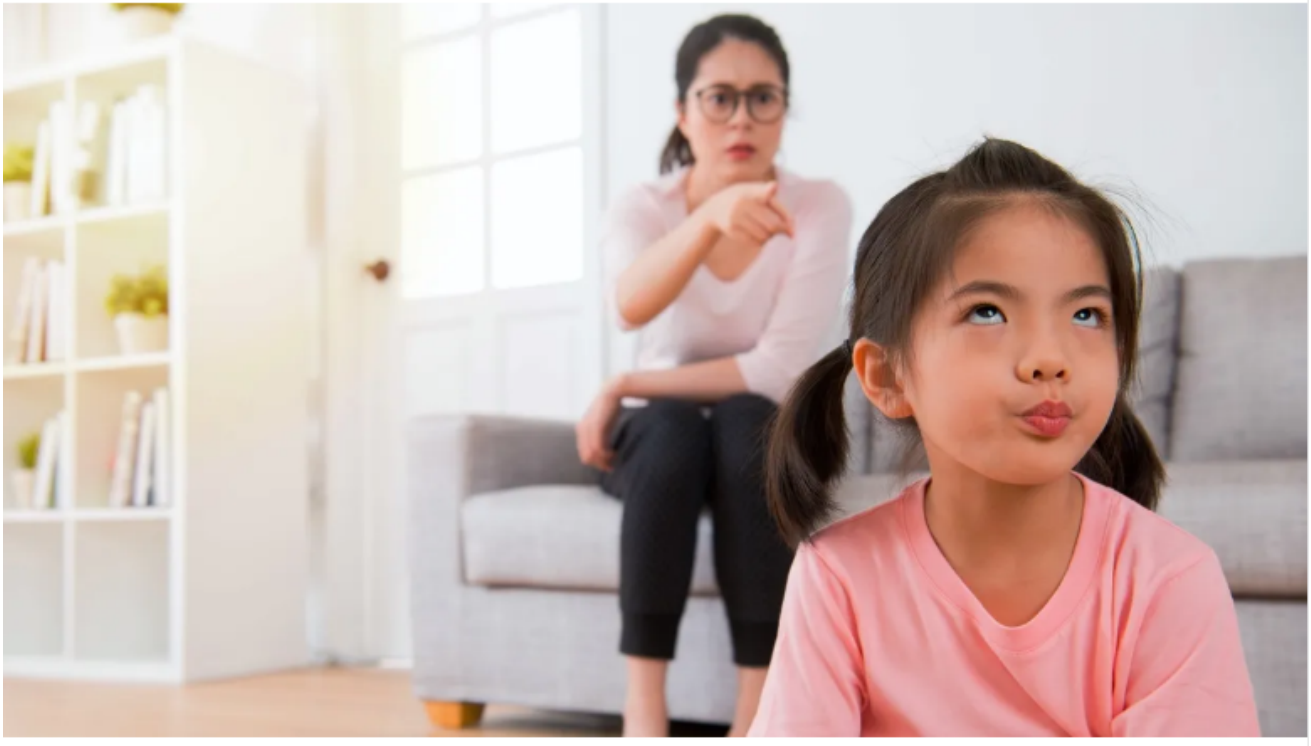
https://bigthink.com/personal-growth/parents-who-lie

Parents who lie to their kids raise adult liars

A new study finds that casually fibbing to children results in lifelong issues.

ROBBY BERMAN 06 October, 2019



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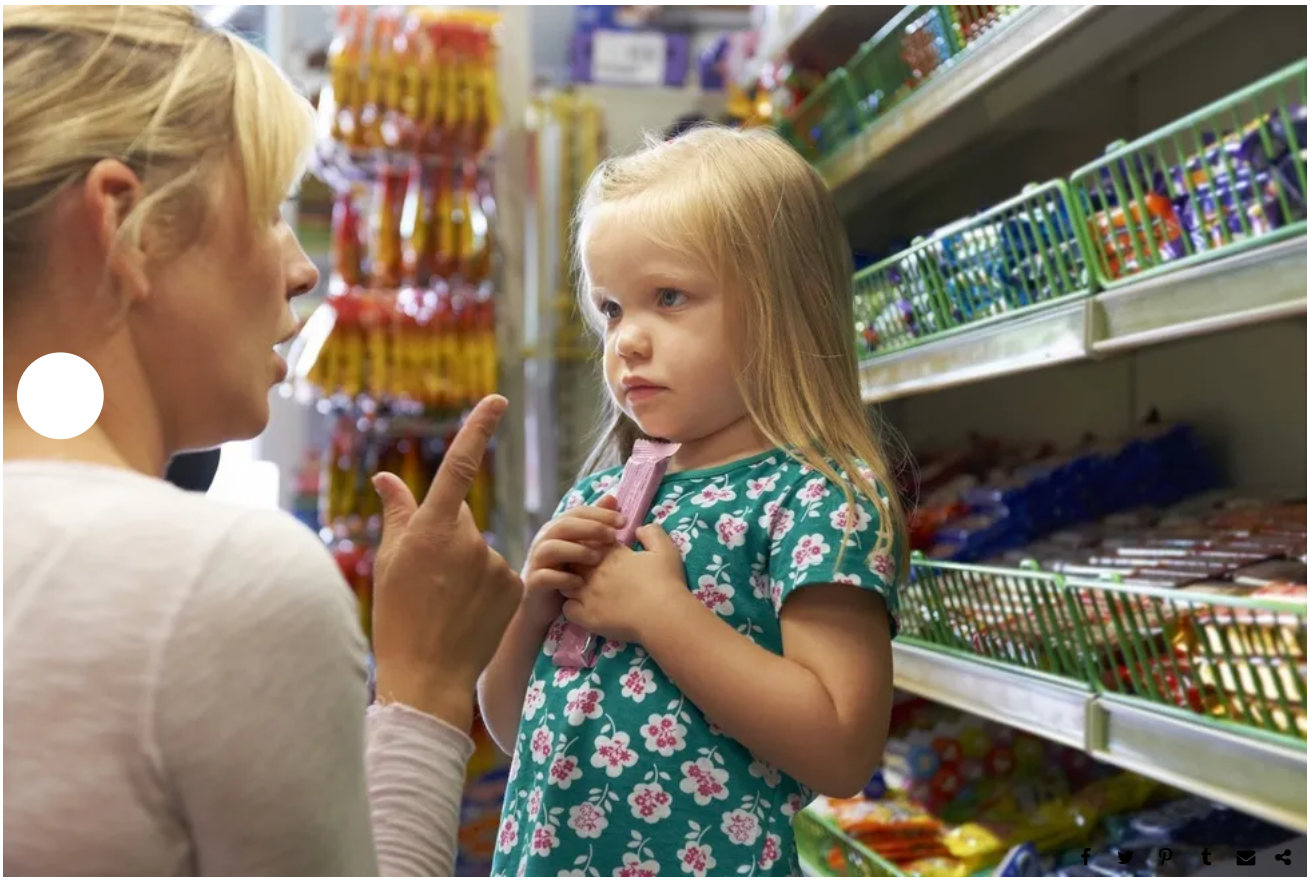
- For simplicity and speed, parents may employ untruths as conversation-enders and to coerce desirable behavior using empty threats.
- Telling kids not to lie while modeling contrary behavior is, not surprisingly, a problem.
- Lying as an adult is just one of the issues lied-to children exhibit as grownups.

Let's set aside the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny for a few moments. There are countless other — typically well-intentioned — daily lies that a parent may tell a child, including empty threats to get them to behave, over-simplification of tricky questions, and so on. A new psychology study led by Setoh Peipei of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, however, finds a correlation between being lied to in childhood and lying more as an adult, something that other research has shown becomes easier and easier over time. It's also associated with other problematic behaviors such as rule-breaking, aggression, and intrusiveness.

Why parents lie



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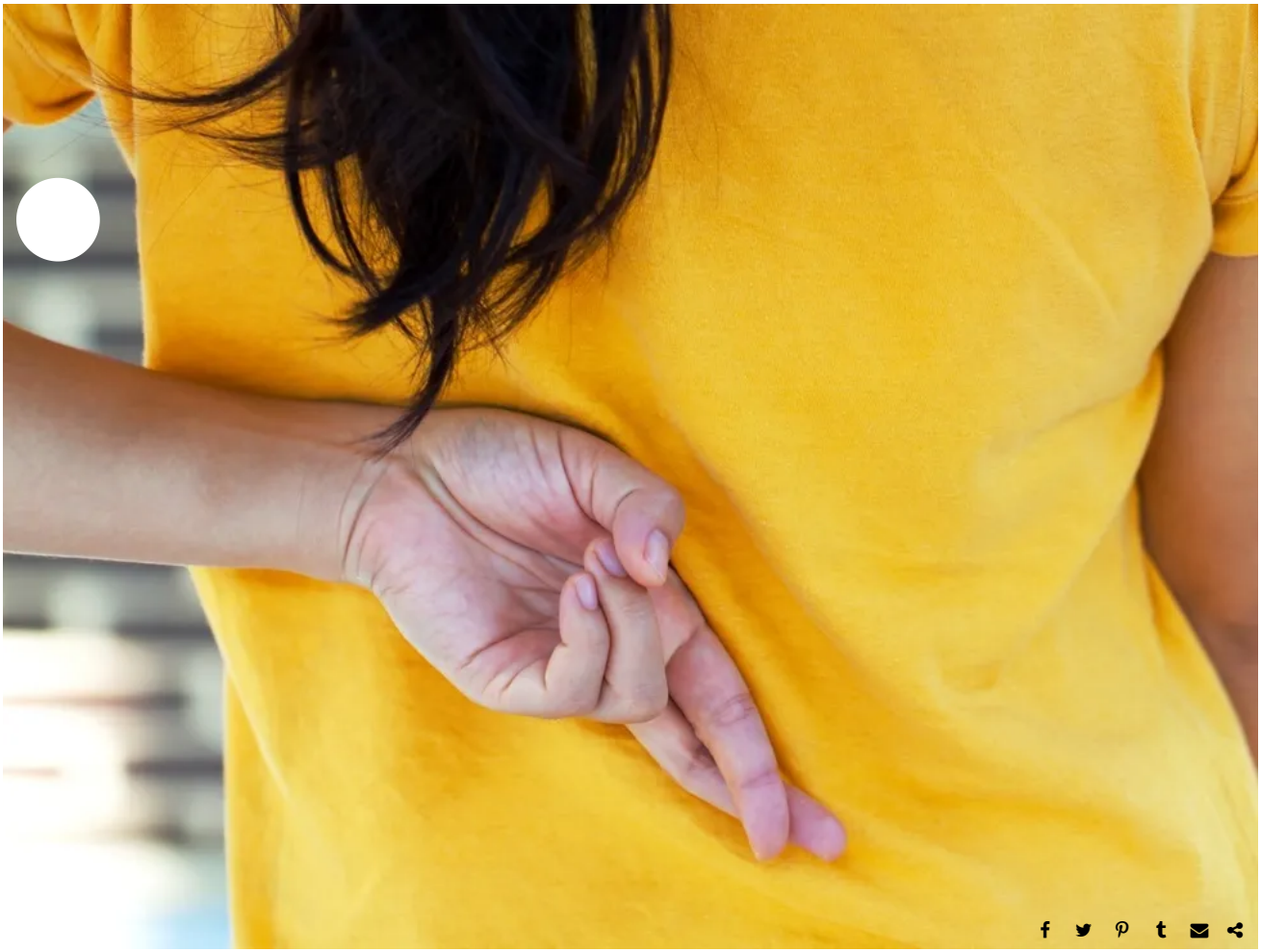
The 24/7 demands of parenting can be relentless, and it's easy to understand why an exhausted Mom or Dad may be attracted to shortcuts that seem to save time and obviate the need for complicated explanations that would require maturity to grasp. There are lots of these:

- "If you don't come right now, I'm going to leave you in this store."
- "No TV for the rest of the week if you don't do your homework now."
- "Mommy/Daddy will always be here."
- Even the classic, no-one-knows-why-it-works-so-well, "I'm counting: 1...2..." It's inherently a bluff. Most kids never find out what would happen at 3. Few parents know, either.

Nonetheless, trust shifts once a child sees that actually you'll wait for them to come and not abandon them in the store, and the implicit message is ultimately, "I tell you never to lie, but I do it to you all the time."

"Authority assertion over children is a form of psychological intrusiveness," points out Setoh, "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."

The study



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The study published in the September issue of the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S002209651830540X)* was a collaboration between Setoh and researchers from University of Toronto in Canada, University of California, San Diego in the U.S., and Zhejiang Normal University in China.

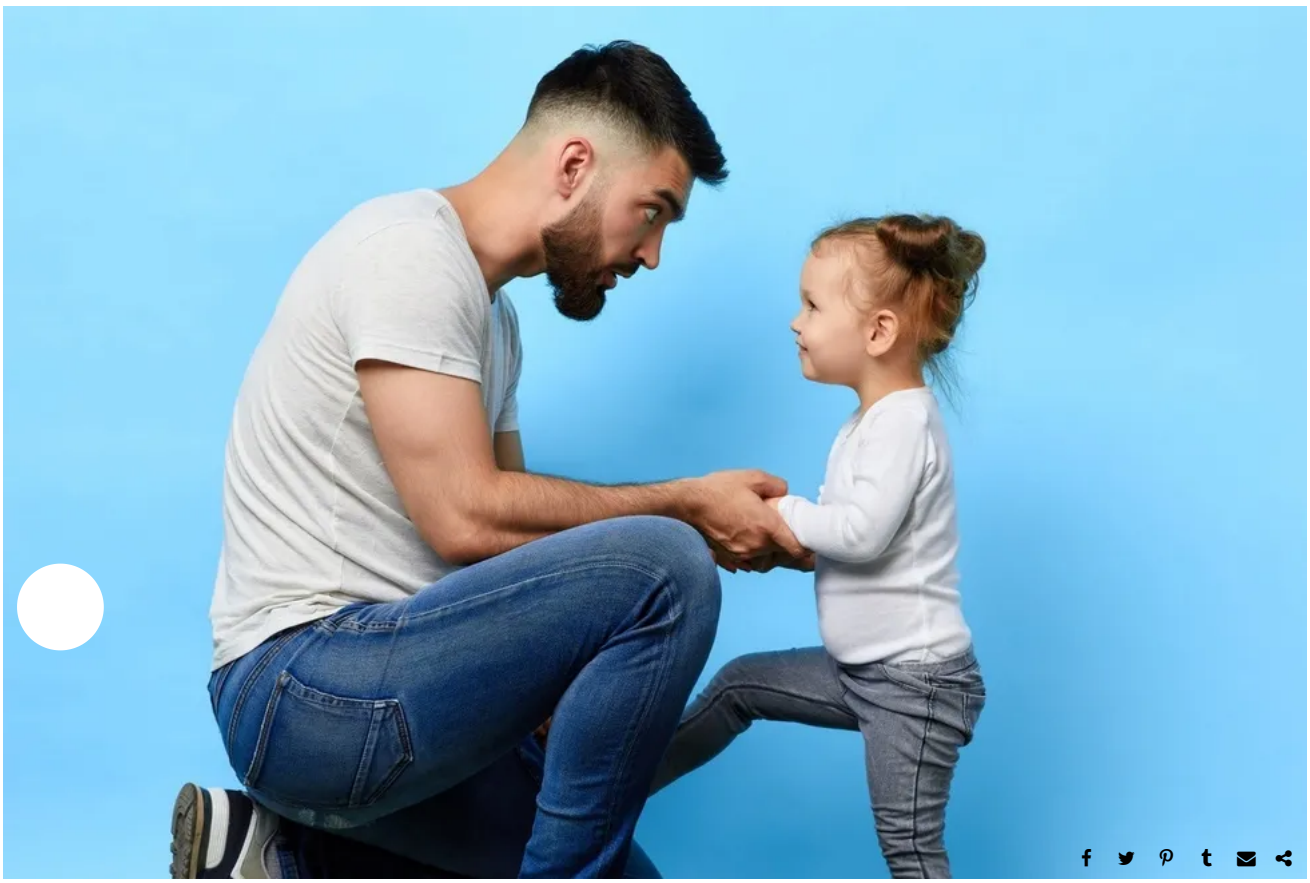
The subjects were 379 young adults from Singapore who responded to questions posed in online surveys:

- The subjects were asked if their parents ever lied to them about four particular subjects: eating, leaving or staying, misbehavior, or money.

- Finally, the subjects filled out two questionnaires self-reporting their own psychosocial maladjustments and tendency to act selfishly or impulsively.

The results may be taken with a few caveats. First, self-reporting can be unreliable. Second, while the subjects' answers show a correlation between parental lying and individuals' behaviors, it's just that, a correlation that may or may not indicate the true cause of their problems. Finally, Setoh suggests a more complete picture of the mechanisms at play could be gained from a study that involves both young adults *and* their parents.

How to change



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Setoh tells NTU, "Parents should be aware of these potential downstream implications and consider alternatives to lying, such as acknowledging children's feelings, giving information so children know what to expect, offering choices and problem-solving together to elicit good behavior from children."

To respond effectively, honestly, and relatively easily to difficult inquiries, answer the question being asked and stop. A child questioning you about such topics will never ask, "Tell me all about sex," for example, but more likely, "Did I live in your tummy?" or "How did I get in there?" By honestly answering the question being asked, you don't have to lie, and you're unlikely to be met with any difficult follow-up questions since the child needs time to absorb and process the new information. They may get back to you later with a follow-up, of course, at which point you do the same thing. Few people asking what time it is want to know how to build a clock.