

Children whose parents tell white lies to get them to behave are 'more likely to grow into dishonest, selfish or manipulative adults'

- Fibbing to children is a quick-fix parenting tactic to elicit short-term compliance
- It could prove detrimental over the years as it cultivates a dishonest personality
- Psychologists who surveyed 379 Singapore adults said honesty is the best policy

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Children are more likely to develop into dishonest adults if their parents tell them white lies in a bid to get them to behave, a study has found.

Harmless fibbing to your son or daughter such as 'if you don't behave, I'll call the police' often prompts short-term compliance.

But this quick-fix parenting tactic could be damaging over the years as it cultivates scheming, selfish and disruptive personality traits.

Scientists at the Nanyang Technological University, [Singapore](#), surveyed 379 adults, asking them if their parents lied to them as children, how much they lie to their parents now, and how well they adjust to adulthood challenges.



Children are more likely to develop into dishonest adults if their parents lie to them, according to psychologists advocating 'honesty as the best policy' (file photo)

The research, published in the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, found that those whose parents were dishonest find it tough to have social interactions, in which they often exaggerate and deceive.

Lead author, Assistant Professor Setoh Peipei said: 'Parenting by lying can seem to save time especially when the real reasons behind why parents want children to do something is complicated to explain.'

'When parents tell children that "honesty is the best policy", but display dishonesty by lying, such behaviour can send conflicting messages to their children.'

'Parents' dishonesty may eventually erode trust and promote dishonesty in children.'

In urging mothers and fathers to scrap lying as a quick-fix solution, Professor Peipei offered alternatives which were not damaging in the long term.



Harmless fibbing to your son or daughter such as 'if you don't behave, I'll call the police' often prompts short-term compliance (file photo)

She said: 'Our research suggests that parenting by lying is a practice that has negative consequences for children when they grow up.'

'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 behaviour from children.'

The experiment was conducted in collaboration with the University of Toronto, the University of California, San Diego, and China's Zhejiang Normal University.

Professor Setoh ceded that a limitation of the test was getting young adults to self-report on their childhood memories, which could have faded.

WHAT WERE PEOPLE ASKED IN THE SURVEY?

A total 379 Singaporean young adults completed four online questionnaires.

The first questionnaire asked participants to recall if their parents told them lies that related to eating, leaving and/or staying, misbehaviour, and spending money.

Some examples of such lies were: 'If you don't come with me now, I will leave you here by yourself' and 'I did not bring money with me today, we can come back another day'.

The second questionnaire asked participants to indicate how frequently as adults they lied to their parents.

It asked about lies in relation to their activities and prosocial lies (or lies

And she said that future investigations should try to ascertain the reasoning behind parents' decision to lie.

She said: 'It is possible that a lie to assert the parents' power, such as saying "if you don't behave, we will throw you into the ocean to feed the fish", may be more related to children's adjustment difficulties as adults, compared to lies that target children's compliance, such as "there is no more candy in the house".

intended to benefit others), and exaggerations about events.

Last, participants filled in two questionnaires that measured their self-reported psychosocial maladjustment and tendency to behave selfishly and impulsively.

