

Children told lies by parents subsequently lie more as adults and face adjustment difficulties



"If you don't behave, I'll call the police," is a lie that parents might use to get their young children to behave. Parents' lies elicit compliance in the short term, but a new psychology study led by Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore) suggests that they are associated with detrimental effects when the child becomes an adult.

The research team asked 379 Singaporean young adults whether their parents lied to them when they were children, how much they lie to their parents now, and how well they adjust to adulthood challenges. Adults who reported being lied to more as children, were more likely to report lying to their parents in their adulthood. They also said they faced greater difficulty in meeting psychological and social challenges. Adjustment difficulties include disruptiveness, conduct problems, experience of guilt and shame, as well as selfish and manipulative character.

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* in September.

Lead author Assistant Professor Setoh Peipei from NTU Singapore's School of Social Sciences 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."

“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.”

How the study was done

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; children’s misbehaviour; and spending money. Some examples of such lies are “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 actions; prosocial lies (or lies intended to benefit others); and exaggerations about events.

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

The analysis found that parenting by lying could place children at a greater risk of developing problems that the society frowns upon, such as aggression, rule-breaking and intrusive behaviours.

Some limitations of the study include relying on what young adults report about their retrospective experience of parents’ lying. “Future research can explore using multiple informants, such as parents, to report on the same variables,” suggested Asst Prof Setoh.

The authors also pointed out that as the study is correlational in design, which aims to find out the naturally occurring relationships between variables, they are unable to draw causal inferences.

Another area yet to be investigated would be the nature of the lies or goals of the parent. Asst Prof Setoh 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, e.g. ‘there is no more candy in the house’.

“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.”