

Even 'White Lies' From Parents Encourage Lying by Kids



Medically reviewed by Carmen Pope, BPharm. Last updated on Feb 12, 2024.

By Dennis Thompson HealthDay Reporter

MONDAY, Feb. 12, 2024 -- Kids are more likely to lie to their parents if their parents have been lying to them -- even with positive "white" lies, a new study shows.

But researchers found a difference between encouraging white lies and "instrumental" lies that involve false threats or promises.

Any sort of instrumental lie -- "Behave or I'll call the police" or "Finish your homework and we'll go to Disneyland" -- increased the likelihood that a kid would lie to their parents.

But white lies only affected kids if they knew that their parents weren't telling the truth, researchers found.

"Our study shows that while both instrumental and white lies told by parents could result in children lying to their parents, the effect of white lies was seen only in children who know they have been lied to," said lead researcher Pei Pei Setoh, an associate professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

"This suggests that the way children develop lying behaviors could depend on the way they understand and process different types of lies told to them," she added in a university news release.

The new study involved 564 parent-child pairs in Singapore, with kids that were ages 11 and 12. Researchers picked this age because this is the time when children's concepts of lying become more sophisticated.

Parents responded to a questionnaire regarding instrumental and white lies, noting when they'd said something similar to their children. An example of a white lie is telling a child "Good job!" even when it's not true, to promote positive emotions.

Separately, children were asked whether they'd been told similar lies.

Both parent and child were then handed a second questionnaire regarding the kid's behavior. Children were asked how often they lied to their parents, and parents were asked how often their kids lied to them.

The data suggest that the more children were told instrumental lies, the more likely they were to lie to their parents -- even if they didn't know what they were told was a lie.

Since these instrumental lies can get a child to behave, kids might be gaining an unintended lesson from them, researchers speculated. They could be learning that such lies are effective in achieving a goal, making them more likely to lie.

But these instrumental lies also might cause negative feelings because they are coercive in nature, straining the parent-child relationship and making the kid more likely to lie out of resentment, researchers added.

However, white lies only promoted more lying if children knew their parent was being disingenuous.

"Our results suggest that when exposure to white lies was coupled with an awareness of being lied to, children may learn the appropriateness of lying behaviors, thereby using more lies toward their parent," the researchers said.

Future studies could build on this finding to look more deeply at how children interpret parental lies, and how different lies affect children's social and emotional development, she said.

The new study appears in the April issue of the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

Sources

- Nanyang Technological University, news release, Feb. 7, 2024

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