

SINGAPORE

‘Behave, or I’ll call the police!’: Singapore university study finds kids told ‘instrumental lies’ more likely to lie to parents



A new study conducted by Nanyang Technological University researchers found that ‘parenting by lying’ may indirectly encourage children to lie. — TODAY pic

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SINGAPORE, Feb 7 — Parents who lie to their children to make them better behaved may indirectly encourage their kids to lie too, a new study has found.

Results from the study — conducted by psychology researchers at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) — suggest that the more children are told such “instrumental lies”, the more likely they are to lie to their parents.

This happens regardless of whether the children knew they were being lied to, the university said in a news release today.

An instrumental lie is a type of “parental lie” told to encourage behavioural changes.

This may take the form of a false threat or promise, for example lying about calling the police when a child misbehaves, or dangling a Disneyland trip in return for finished homework.

Even white lies, another type of lie told to instil positive emotions in children, were also found to make children more likely to lie to their parents.

In contrast to an instrumental lie, however, this outcome arises only when children know they have been told a white lie — for example, if they are complimented for a job well done even though that is not the case.

The study was led by Associate Professor Setoh Peipei from the psychology division at NTU’s School of Social Sciences.

Other members of the research team included NTU PhD student Petrina Low and Dr Yena Kyeong, a visiting scholar at NTU’s Early Cognition Lab.

How the study was conducted

To examine how parental lying affects dishonesty in children, the researchers chose to focus on instrumental and white lies as earlier research had shown that they appear commonly across different cultures, said NTU.

They surveyed 564 parent-child pairs in Singapore. The participants were drawn from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (Gusto) study — a large birth cohort study launched in 2008.

The researchers picked children aged 11 to 12, along with one of their parents.

That age group was chosen “because it is when children’s concepts of lying become more sophisticated”, the university said.

The participants were then surveyed independently through questionnaires to gather data on lying behaviours from both child and parent perspectives.

In the first questionnaire on parental lying, the participants were given a list of instrumental and white lies.

Parents were asked, on a scale of 1 to 5 if they have said something similar to their children, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree.

The children were also asked to score on the same five-point scale whether they have been told similar lies, and if so, how much they believed in these lies.

A second questionnaire was conducted to assess children's lying behaviour.

On a scale of 1 to 5, the children were asked how often they lied to their parents, while parents were asked how often their children lied to them, with 1 indicating never and 5 indicating always.

The scores for each participant were then calculated and statistically analysed to find out how parental lying relates to children's lying, and how this relationship is affected by children's belief in these lies.

How parental lying affects children

The study found that children exposed to instrumental lies may have learnt that such lies are effective in achieving a certain purpose, "therefore socialising them to use more lies", said NTU.

Another possible explanation is that the use of instrumental lies, which are often coercive in nature, may have resulted in the development of negative feelings in children.

This can "potentially (strain) parent-child relationships and thus (contribute) to a higher likelihood of children lying to their parents", the study found.

When it came to white lies, however, children were more likely to lie to their parents, but only if they knew they were lied to.

"This suggests that the way children develop lying behaviours could depend on the way they understand and process different types of lies told to them," Assoc Prof Setoh, who is also director of NTU's Early Cognition Lab, said of the study.

She added: "Given that parents are role models and educators to their children, parents' lying behaviours could indirectly encourage children how to lie.

"These findings should give parents pause when it comes to parenting by lying, even if the lies they tell their children may be interpreted as benign." — TODAY