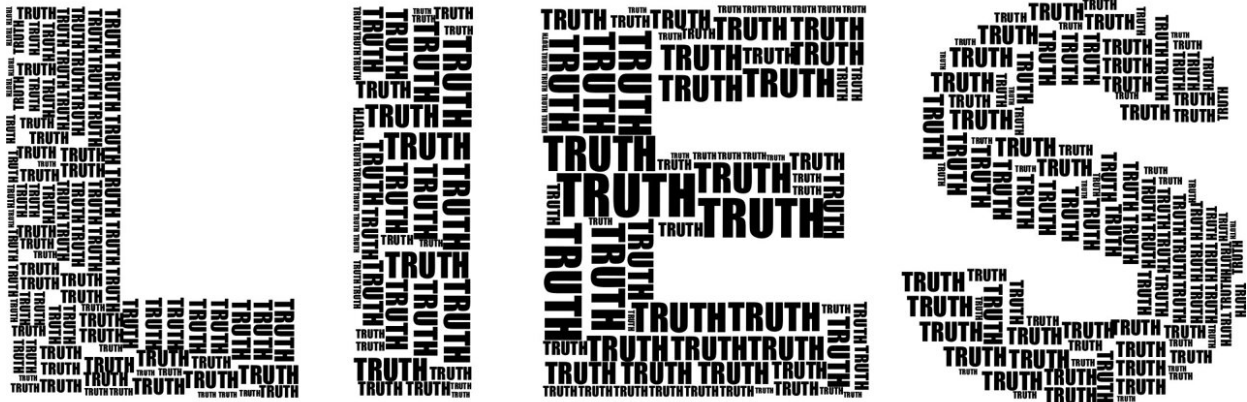


# Parenting by lying linked to more lie-telling in children

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While instrumental lies—a type of parental lie told to encourage behavioral changes—may lead to behavioral compliance, a new study by Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore) suggests that children told such lies are more likely to lie to their parents.

Through a study of 564 parent-child pairs in Singapore, the NTU Singapore researchers found that exposure to [white lies](#)—another type of

parental lie such as saying "Good job!" even though it is not true to instill positive emotions in children—could also make children more likely to lie to their parents. However, in contrast to an instrumental lie, this effect arises only when children know they have been lied to.

These findings, [published](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* in January, shed light on how children process different types of parental lies in childhood, highlighting a deeper need to understand lying as a parenting practice and its relation to children's outcomes, said the researchers led by Associate Professor Setoh Peipei from the Psychology division at NTU's School of Social Sciences.

Associate Professor Setoh, who is also the Director of NTU's Early Cognition Lab, said, "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. 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, "Given that parents are role models and educators to their children, parents' lying behaviors 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."

Other members of the research team include NTU Ph.D. student and lead researcher Petrina Low and Dr. Yena Kyeong, a visiting scholar at NTU's Early Cognition Lab.

## **Lies parents tell to socialize their children**

The NTU researchers focused on instrumental and white lies for their

study. Earlier research has shown that these two types of parenting lies appear commonly across different cultures.

Instrumental lies may take the form of false threats ("If you continue to misbehave, I will call the police") or false promises ("If you finish your homework, I will take you to Disneyland").

Parents tell white lies to induce [positive emotions](#) in children, such as complimenting a child for a job well done, even though that is not the case.

## **How the study was done**

To examine how parental lying affects dishonesty in children, the NTU researchers surveyed 1,128 participants drawn from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) study, a large birth cohort study that aims to empower the Singapore population to work towards a healthier next generation.

The participants are made up of 564 children aged 11 to 12 and one of their parents. The researchers picked this age group of children because it is when children's concepts of lying become more sophisticated.

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

In the first questionnaire on parental lying, the participants were given a list of instrumental and white lies. Parent participants were asked, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), if they have said something similar to their children.

Child participants were 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.

The second questionnaire assessed children's lying behavior. On a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always), child participants were asked how often they lied to their parents. Parents were asked how often their children lied to them.

The scores for each participant were then tabulated and used in statistical analyses to determine how parental lying relates to children's lying behaviors and how this relationship is affected by children's belief in these lies.

## **How parental lying affects children**

Based on data from child and parent-reported parental lying behaviors, the NTU study suggests that the more children were told instrumental lies, the more likely they were to lie to their parents, regardless of whether the children knew they were being lied to.

Considering how instrumental lies could have an effect on child compliance, the researchers said that children exposed to these lies may have learnt that such lies are effective in achieving a certain purpose, therefore socializing them to use more lies.

Another possible explanation is that the use of instrumental lies, which are often coercive in nature, may have given rise to negative feelings in children, potentially straining parent-child relationships and thus contributing to a higher likelihood of children lying to their parents.

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.

Said the research team: "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."

This study is one of the first to understand whether children believe or are aware of parental lies, lending a unique perspective on the implications of parenting by lying for lie-telling in children. It builds on Assoc Prof Setoh's work to build a body of knowledge about parenting by lying and its implications for children.

One way to take this area of research further is to use [longitudinal studies](#) to map out the developmental trajectory of how children are socialized about lying, said Assoc Prof Setoh.

While the current study focused on children's belief in parental lies, she added that future studies could build on this to examine other aspects of children's interpretation of parental lies and how different parental lies shape children's social-emotional outcomes.

**More information:** Petrina Hui Xian Low et al, Parenting by lying and children's lying to parents: The moderating role of children's beliefs, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2023.105837](#)

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