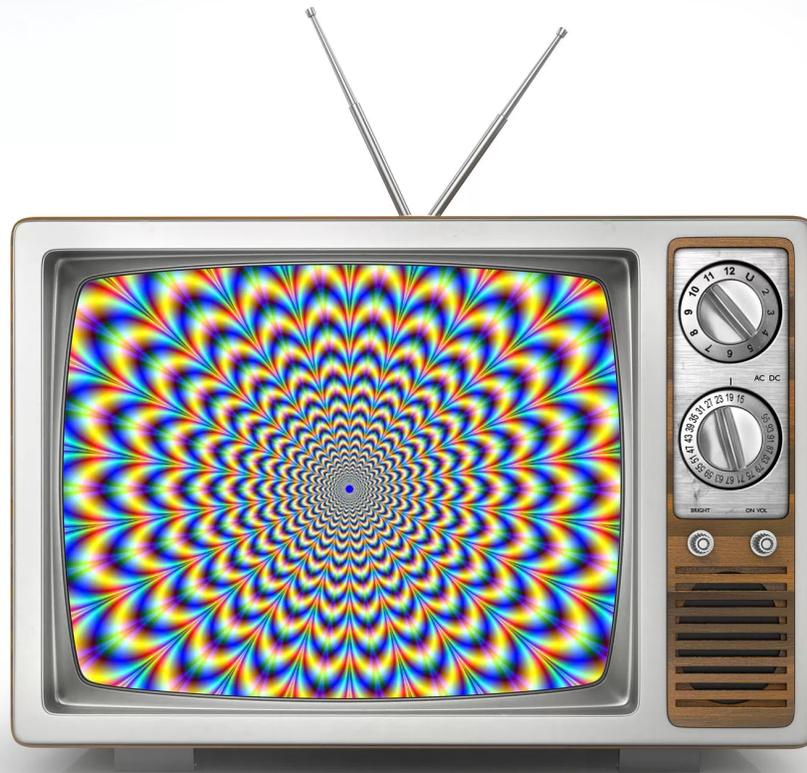


The Science of Childhood Lying in an Age of Post-Truth

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In a world where “post-truth” was just recognized by Oxford Dictionaries as the 2016 international word of the year, it seems necessary to explore the prevalence and impact of lying on our children.

The dictionary defines “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Although the prefix “post” typically means “after”, in this case it implies an environment in which facts are disregarded. Sadly, this means that lying has become quite acceptable in our current culture.

How will this affect how we raise our children?

Why children lie

All children lie at some point. According to [The Telegraph](#), 20 percent of two-year-olds lie, nearly 50 percent of three-year-olds lie, and close to 90 percent of kids lie at age four. The most deceitful age of all is 12, when almost every child lies. By the driving age, lying starts to decrease; 70 percent of 16-year-olds lie.

Kids under five who make up untrue stories are simply engaging in normal activity, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. They learn to tell lies from an early age, usually by around three years old. This is when they start to realize that they can say things that are not necessarily true without you realizing it. Since toddlers are just learning language skills, they do not have a clear understanding of the difference between truth and lies.

At this young age, children also do not fully grasp the difference between reality, daydreams, wishes, fantasies, and fears. They use lies to express their emotions and show their independence.

Once they reach four to six years old, children may start to lie more often and get better at telling lies. By the time children are in elementary school, they might lie more often and get even better at it as they can use more creative words and stories to back up their lies. Children continue to experiment with the truth through all developmental stages.

Children have many reasons for telling lies – to look for your reaction, cover something up so they avoid getting into trouble, make their story more exciting, have themselves sound better, garner attention, protect someone else’s negative behavior, get something they really want, or simply to be polite.

What to do when your children lie

A recent study found that parents are not recognizing when their children lie as much as we would like. It can be frustrating and even scary when we catch our children in a lie. Try to remember that this is a great teachable moment and doesn’t mean they will end up committing a crime in the future. Lying is part of growing up, as much as learning to tell the truth is.

The best way to address lying is to encourage and praise honesty and truth. According to [Victoria Talwar, Ph.D.](#), associate professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at McGill University in Montreal, “Teaching children about the importance of honesty early and teaching them how to resolve situations so they don’t need to rely on lying will ensure they will be honest—most of the time.”

As your kids get older, explain to them the difference between what is true and what is false. Make statements like ‘When you don’t tell me the truth, I feel sad and disappointed’ to communicate that lying is inappropriate and potentially hurtful. Explain that when they lie, people will no longer trust them, and they will have less freedom in the future.

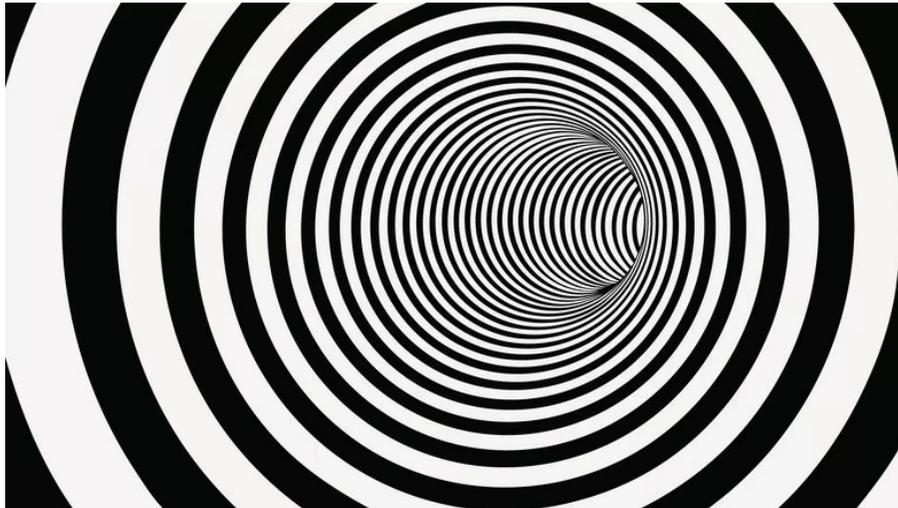
It’s important to address lying with appropriate consequences, and to deal separately with the lying and the behavior that led to it. Try to get to the heart of why they lied. If they lied to get your attention, consider more positive ways you can give them attention. If they lied to get something they wanted, consider using a rewards system that lets them earn what they crave. You may also need to make changes to their environment, like friends or activities, to avoid situations where they feel the need to lie.

Try to avoid calling your children liars. This label could damage their self-esteem and might even lead to more lying. If they are labeled a liar, they start to believe they are one and will keep doing it. Instead, try discussing your child's behavior and the reason that triggered it.

Always have an open line of communication with your children. Let them know that they can tell you anything, and that you will still love them. This is better than them lying and hiding what's really going on when they really need your support.

It is also helpful to read stories about lying at every stage of development, or watch shows or movies with an important message about lying. Discuss the lessons with your children. Talk about how the character's life could have been different or what better choices the character could have made.

Finally, be a good role model to your children. Do your best to always be honest. Even telling little white lies in front of your children can make them second guess your ability to tell the truth. If you must tell a lie to be polite, explain to your children why you did it as soon as possible.



Are there any benefits to lying?

Believe it or not, lying can actually be positive for our children. We know that lying is a normal part of childhood development, but research also tells us that children who lie are more intelligent and typically more successful in the future.

Researchers determined that lying shows children have excellent memories and thinking skills. Psychologists at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom tested a group of children aged six and seven years old. The children were given the opportunity to peek at the answers on the back of a card during a trivia game. They were left alone and were filmed by a hidden camera.

The children who looked at the answers but lied about it did better on a memory test. The researchers believe this correlation between lying and intelligence happens because it takes a lot of thought and memory skills to keep track of the details involved in lying.

In another study at Toronto University’s Institute of Child Study, scientists invited children to sit in a room with hidden cameras. A toy was placed behind them, and when the researcher left the room, the kids were told not to look back. Nine out of 10 times, they were caught on camera peeking, but when asked, they denied it.

The assessment showed that the children who lie have a cognitive advantage because lying requires a highly functioning brain and skills to develop the lie, manipulate information, and then convince others of their story. Lying, therefore, is associated with brain regions that are responsible for higher-order thinking and reasoning.

According to the head researcher [Dr. Kang Lee](#), lying involves two key components. First, children need to understand what someone else knows, which is called the theory of mind. Second, they need to have executive function, which is the ability to plan ahead and maneuver around unwanted actions or events. These skills are very sophisticated, and the younger a child demonstrates these skills, the better developed their brains are.

Fortunately, researchers believe that childhood lying is a more an indicator of intelligence than morality. It isn’t necessarily a sign that a child will continue to lie as they get older. Instead, the children will be better able to meet life’s challenges in the future because of the skills they’ve developed from being able to effectively lie. They may be more successful in school and in their interaction with peers, and possibly more able to think on their feet later in life.

What it all means

As lying becomes more accepted in our society – even indicating intelligence – parents need to be more on guard and pay close attention to what our children are saying. We should never accept that lying is okay. But we can recognize how it helps our children develop into more successful adults provided we help them transfer that creative energy into more positive actions.

As the primary role models in our children’s lives, we play a vital part in showcasing honesty every day. No matter what is going on in the world around us, including television, sports, and politics, we are the most important influence on our children.

By building a home filled with love and honesty, our children will be able to go off into the world better equipped to decipher between the truths and falsehoods around them. It’s our job to give them the tools to make the most effective decisions to be successful, kind citizens.



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