

Learning to Lie | Po Bronson

Kids lie early, often, and for all sorts of reasons—to avoid punishment, to bond with friends, to gain a sense of control. But now there’s a singular theory for one way this habit develops: They are just copying their parents.

In the last few years, a handful of intrepid scholars have decided it’s time to try to understand why kids lie. For a study to assess the extent of teenage dissembling, Dr. Nancy Darling, then at Penn State University, recruited a special research team of a dozen undergraduate students, all under the age of 21. Using gift certificates for free CDs as bait, Darling’s Mod Squad persuaded high-school students to spend a few hours with them in the local pizzeria.

Each student was handed a deck of 36 cards, and each card in this deck listed a topic teens sometimes lie about to their parents. Over a slice and a Coke, the teen and two researchers worked through the deck, learning what things the kid was lying to his parents about, and why.

“They began the interviews saying that parents give you everything and yes, you should tell them everything,” Darling observes. By the end of the interview, the kids saw for the first time how much they were lying and how many of the family’s rules they had broken. Darling says 98 percent of the teens reported lying to their parents.

Out of the 36 topics, the average teen was lying to his parents about twelve of them. The teens lied about what they spent their allowances on, and whether they’d started dating, and what clothes they put on away from the house. They lied about what movie they went to, and whom they went with. They lied about alcohol and drug use, and they lied about whether they were hanging out with friends their parents disapproved of. They lied about how they spent their afternoons while their parents were at work. They lied about whether chaperones were in attendance at a party or whether they rode in cars driven by drunken teens.

Being an honors student didn’t change these numbers by much; nor did being an overscheduled kid. No kid, apparently, was too busy to break a few rules. And lest you wonder if these numbers apply only to teens in State College, Pennsylvania, the teens in Darling’s sample were compared to national averages on a bevy of statistics, from academics to extracurriculars. “We had a very normal, representative sample,” Darling says.

For two decades, parents have rated “honesty” as the trait they most wanted in their children. Other traits, such as confidence or good judgment, don’t even come close. On paper, the kids are getting this message. In surveys, 98 percent said that trust and honesty were essential in a personal relationship. Depending on their ages, 96 to 98 percent said lying is morally wrong.

So when do the 98 percent who think lying is wrong become the 98 percent who lie?

It starts very young. Indeed, bright kids—those who do better on other academic indicators—are able to start lying at 2 or 3. “Lying is related to intelligence,” explains Dr. Victoria Talwar, an assistant professor at Montreal’s McGill University and a leading expert on children’s lying behavior.

Although we think of truthfulness as a young child’s paramount virtue, it turns out that lying is the more advanced skill. A child who is going to lie must recognize the truth, intellectually conceive of an alternate reality, and be able to convincingly sell that new reality to someone else. Therefore, lying demands both advanced cognitive development and social skills that honesty simply doesn’t require. “It’s a developmental milestone,” Talwar has concluded.

This puts parents in the position of being either damned or blessed, depending on how they choose to look at it. If your 4-year-old is a good liar, it's a strong sign she's got brains. And it's the smart, savvy kid who's most at risk of becoming a habitual liar.

By their 4th birthday, almost all kids will start experimenting with lying in order to avoid punishment. Because of that, they lie indiscriminately—whenever punishment seems to be a possibility. A 3-year-old will say, "I didn't hit my sister," even if a parent witnessed the child's hitting her sibling.

Most parents hear their child lie and assume he's too young to understand what lies are or that lying's wrong. They presume their child will stop when he gets older and learns those distinctions. Talwar has found the opposite to be true—kids who grasp early the nuances between lies and truth use this knowledge to their advantage, making them more prone to lie when given the chance.

Many parenting Websites and books advise parents to just let lies go—they'll grow out of it. The truth, according to Talwar, is that kids grow into it. In studies where children are observed in their natural environment, a 4-year-old will lie once every two hours, while a 6-year-old will lie about once every hour and a half. Few kids are exceptions.

By the time a child reaches school age, the reasons for lying become more complex. Avoiding punishment is still a primary catalyst for lying, but lying also becomes a way to increase a child's power and sense of control—by manipulating friends with teasing, by bragging to assert status, and by learning he can fool his parents.

Thrown into elementary school, many kids begin lying to their peers as a coping mechanism, as a way to vent frustration or get attention. Any sudden spate of lying, or dramatic increase in lying, is a danger sign: Something has changed in that child's life, in a way that troubles him. "Lying is a symptom—often of a bigger problem behavior," explains Talwar. "It's a strategy to keep themselves afloat."

In longitudinal studies, a majority of 6-year-olds who frequently lie have it socialized out of them by age 7. But if lying has become a successful strategy for handling difficult social situations, a child will stick with it. About half of all kids do—and if they're still lying a lot at 7, then it seems likely to continue for the rest of childhood. They're hooked.

"My son doesn't lie," insisted Steve, a slightly frazzled father in his mid-thirties, as he watched Nick, his eager 6-year-old, enthralled in a game of marbles with a student researcher in Talwar's Montreal lab. Steve was quite proud of his son, describing him as easygoing and very social. He had Nick bark out an impressive series of addition problems the boy had memorized, as if that was somehow proof of Nick's sincerity.

Steve then took his assertion down a notch. "Well, I've never heard him lie." Perhaps that, too, was a little strong. "I'm sure he must lie some, but when I hear it, I'll still be surprised." He had brought his son to the lab after seeing an advertisement in a Montreal parenting magazine that asked, "Can Your Child Tell the Difference Between the Truth and a Lie?"

Steve was curious to find out if Nick would lie, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. The idea of his son's being dishonest with him was profoundly troubling.

But I knew for a fact his son did lie. Nick cheated, then he lied, and then he lied again. He did so unhesitatingly, without a single glimmer of remorse.

Nick thought he'd spent the hour playing a series of games with a couple of nice women. He had won two prizes, a cool toy car and a bag of plastic dinosaurs, and everyone said he did very well. What the first-grader didn't know was that those games were really a battery of psychological tests, and the women were Talwar's trained researchers working toward doctorates in child psychology.

One of Talwar's experiments, a variation on a classic experiment called the temptation-resistance paradigm, is known in the lab as "the Peeking Game." Through a hidden camera, I'd watched Nick play it with another one of Talwar's students, Cindy Arruda. She told Nick they were going to play a guessing game. Nick was to sit facing the wall and try to guess the identity of a toy Arruda brought out, based on the sound it made. If he was right three times, he'd win a prize.

The first two were easy: a police car and a crying baby doll. Nick bounced in his chair with excitement when he got the answers right. Then Arruda brought out a soft, stuffed soccer ball and placed it on top of a greeting card that played music. She cracked the card, triggering it to play a music-box jingle of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. Nick, of course, was stumped.

Arruda suddenly said she had to leave the room for a bit, promising to be right back. She admonished Nick not to peek at the toy while she was gone. Nick struggled not to, but at thirteen seconds, he gave in and looked.

When Arruda returned, she could barely come through the door before Nick—facing the wall again—triumphantly announced, "A soccer ball!" Arruda told Nick to wait for her to get seated. Suddenly realizing he should sound unsure of his answer, he hesitantly asked, "A soccer ball?"

Arruda said Nick was right, and when he turned to face her, he acted very pleased. Arruda asked Nick if he had peeked. "No," he said quickly. Then a big smile spread across his face.

Without challenging him, or even a note of suspicion in her voice, Arruda asked Nick how he'd figured out the sound came from a soccer ball.

Nick cupped his chin in his hands, then said, "The music had sounded like a ball." Then: "The ball sounded black and white." Nick added that the music sounded like the soccer balls he played with at school: They squeaked. And the music sounded like the squeak he heard when he kicked a ball. To emphasize this, his winning point, he brushed his hand against the side of the toy ball.

This experiment was not just a test to see if children cheat and lie under temptation. It was also designed to test a child's ability to extend a lie, offering plausible explanations and avoiding what the scientists call "leakage"—inconsistencies that reveal the lie for what it is. Nick's whiffs at covering up his lie would be scored later by coders who watched the videotape. So Arruda accepted without question the fact that soccer balls play Beethoven when they're kicked and gave Nick his prize. He was thrilled.

Seventy-six percent of kids Nick's age take the chance to peek during the game, and when asked if they peeked, 95 percent lie about it.

But sometimes the researcher will read the child a short storybook before she asks about the peeking. One story read aloud is *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*—the version in which both the boy and the sheep get eaten because of his repeated lies. Alternatively, they read *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*, in which young George confesses to his father that he chopped down the prized tree with his new hatchet. The story ends with his father's reply:

“George, I’m glad that you cut down the tree after all. Hearing you tell the truth instead of a lie is better than if I had a thousand cherry trees.”

Now, which story do you think reduced lying more? When we surveyed 1,300 people, 75 percent thought *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* would work better. However, this famous fable actually did not cut down lying at all in Talwar’s experiments. In fact, after hearing the story, kids lied even a little more than normal. Meanwhile, hearing *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*—even when Washington was replaced with a nondescript character, eliminating the potential that his iconic celebrity might influence older kids—reduced lying a sizable 43 percent in kids. Although most kids lied in the control situation, the majority hearing George Washington told the truth.

The shepherd boy ends up suffering the ultimate punishment, but the fact that lies get punished is not news to children. Increasing the threat of punishment for lying only makes children hyperaware of the potential personal cost. It distracts children from learning how their lies affect others. In studies, scholars find that kids who live in threat of consistent punishment don’t lie less. Instead, they become better liars, at an earlier age—learning to get caught less often.

Ultimately, it’s not fairy tales that stop kids from lying—it’s the process of socialization. But the wisdom in *The Cherry Tree* applies: According to Talwar, parents need to teach kids the worth of honesty, just like George Washington’s father did, as much as they need to say that lying is wrong.

The most disturbing reason children lie is that parents teach them to. According to Talwar, they learn it from us. “We don’t explicitly tell them to lie, but they see us do it. They see us tell the telemarketer, ‘I’m just a guest here.’ They see us boast and lie to smooth social relationships.”

Consider how we expect a child to act when he opens a gift he doesn’t like. We instruct him to swallow all his honest reactions and put on a polite smile. Talwar runs an experiment where children play games to win a present, but when they finally receive the present, it’s a lousy bar of soap. After giving the kids a moment to overcome the shock, a researcher asks them how they like it. About a quarter of preschoolers can lie that they like the gift—by elementary school, about half. Telling this lie makes them extremely uncomfortable, especially when pressed to offer a few reasons *why* they like the bar of soap. Kids who shouted with glee when they won the Peeking Game suddenly mumble quietly and fidget.

Meanwhile, the child’s parent usually cheers when the child comes up with the white lie. “Often, the parents are proud that their kids are ‘polite’—they don’t see it as lying,” Talwar remarks. She’s regularly amazed at parents’ seeming inability to recognize that white lies are still lies.

When adults are asked to keep diaries of their own lies, they admit to about one lie per every five social interactions, which works out to one per day, on average. The vast majority of these lies are white lies, lies to protect yourself or others, like telling the guy at work who brought in his wife’s muffins that they taste great or saying, “Of course this is my natural hair color.”

Encouraged to tell so many white lies and hearing so many others, children gradually get comfortable with being disingenuous. Insincerity becomes, literally, a daily occurrence. They learn that honesty only creates conflict, and dishonesty is an easy way to avoid conflict. And while they don’t confuse white-lie situations with lying to cover their misdeeds, they bring this emotional groundwork from one circumstance to the other. It becomes easier, psychologically, to lie to a parent. So if the parent says, “Where did you get these Pokémon cards?! I told you,

you're not allowed to waste your allowance on Pokémon cards!" this may feel to the child very much like a white-lie scenario—he can make his father *feel better* by telling him the cards were extras from a friend.

Now, compare this with the way children are taught not to tattle. What grown-ups really mean by "Don't tell" is that we want children to learn to work it out with one another first. But tattling has received some scientific interest, and researchers have spent hours observing kids at play. They've learned that nine out of ten times, when a kid runs up to a parent to tell, that kid is being completely honest. And while it might seem to a parent that tattling is incessant, to a child that's not the case—because for every time a child seeks a parent for help, there are fourteen instances when he was wronged but did not run to the parent for aid. So when the frustrated child finally comes to tell the parent the truth, he hears, in effect, "Stop bringing me your problems!"

By the middle years of elementary school, a *tattler* is about the worst thing a kid can be called on the playground. So a child considering reporting a problem to an adult not only faces peer condemnation as a traitor but also recalls the reprimand "Work it out on your own." Each year, the problems they deal with grow exponentially. They watch other kids cut class, vandalize walls, and shoplift. To tattle is to act like a little kid. Keeping their mouth shut is easy; they've been encouraged to do so since they were little.

The era of holding back information from parents has begun.

By withholding details about their lives, adolescents carve out a social domain and identity that are theirs alone, independent from their parents or other adult authority figures. To seek out a parent for help is, from a teen's perspective, a tacit admission that he's not mature enough to handle it alone. Having to tell parents about it can be psychologically emasculating, whether the confession is forced out of him or he volunteers it on his own. It's essential for some things to be "none of your business."

The big surprise in the research is when this need for autonomy is strongest. It's not mild at 12, moderate at 15, and most powerful at 18. Darling's scholarship shows that the objection to parental authority peaks around ages 14 to 15. In fact, this resistance is slightly stronger at age 11 than at 18. In popular culture, we think of high school as the risk years, but the psychological forces driving deception surge earlier than that.

In her study of teenage students, Darling also mailed survey questionnaires to the parents of the teenagers interviewed, and it was interesting how the two sets of data reflected on each other. First, she was struck by parents' vivid fear of pushing their teens into outright hostile rebellion. "Many parents today believe the best way to get teens to disclose is to be more permissive and not set rules," Darling says. Parents imagine a trade-off between being informed and being strict. Better to hear the truth and be able to help than be kept in the dark.

Darling found that permissive parents don't actually learn more about their children's lives. "Kids who go wild and get in trouble mostly have parents who don't set rules or standards. Their parents are loving and accepting no matter what the kids do. But the kids take the lack of rules as a sign their parents don't care—that their parent doesn't really want this job of being the parent."

Pushing a teen into rebellion by having too many rules was a sort of statistical myth. "That actually doesn't happen," remarks Darling. She found that most rules-heavy parents don't actually enforce them. "It's too much work," says Darling. "It's a lot harder to enforce three rules than to set twenty rules."

A few parents managed to live up to the stereotype of the oppressive parent, with lots of psychological intrusion, but those teens weren't rebelling. They were obedient. And depressed.

“Ironically, the type of parents who are actually most consistent in enforcing rules are the same parents who are most warm and have the most conversations with their kids,” Darling observes. They’ve set a few rules over certain key spheres of influence, and they’ve explained why the rules are there. They expect the child to obey them. Over life’s other spheres, they supported the child’s autonomy, allowing them freedom to make their own decisions.

The kids of these parents lied the least. Rather than hiding twelve areas from their parents, they might be hiding as few as five.

In the thesaurus, the antonym of *honesty* is *lying*, and the opposite of *arguing* is *agreeing*. But in the minds of teenagers, that’s not how it works. Really, to an adolescent, arguing is the opposite of lying.

When Nancy Darling’s researchers interviewed the teenagers from Pennsylvania, they also asked the teens when and why they told the truth to their parents about things they knew their parents disapproved of. Occasionally they told the truth because they knew a lie wouldn’t fly—they’d be caught. Sometimes they told the truth because they just felt obligated, saying, “They’re my parents, I’m supposed to tell them.” But one important motivation that emerged was that many teens told their parents the truth when they were planning on doing something that was against the rules—in hopes their parents might give in and say it was okay. Usually, this meant an argument ensued, but it was worth it if a parent might budge.

The average Pennsylvania teen was 244 percent more likely to lie than to protest a rule. In the families where there was less deception, however, there was a much higher ratio of arguing and complaining. The argument enabled the child to speak honestly. Certain types of fighting, despite the acrimony, were ultimately signs of respect—not of disrespect.

But most parents don’t make this distinction in how they perceive arguments with their children. Dr. Tabitha Holmes of SUNY–New Paltz conducted extensive interviews asking mothers and adolescents, separately, to describe their arguments and how they felt about them. And there was a big difference.

Forty-six percent of the mothers rated their arguments as being destructive to their relationships with their teens. Being challenged was stressful, chaotic, and (in their perception) disrespectful. The more frequently they fought, and the more intense the fights were, the more the mother rated the fighting as harmful. But only 23 percent of the adolescents felt that their arguments were destructive. Far more believed that fighting *strengthened* their relationship with their mothers. “Their perception of the fighting was really sophisticated, far more than we anticipated for teenagers,” notes Holmes. “They saw fighting as a way to see their parents in a new way, as a result of hearing their mother’s point of view be articulated.”

What most surprised Holmes was learning that for the teens, fighting often, or having big fights, did not cause them to rate the fighting as harmful and destructive. Statistically, it made no difference at all. Certainly, there is a point in families where there is too much conflict, Holmes notes. “But we didn’t have anybody in our study with an extreme amount of conflict.” Instead, the variable that seemed to really matter was how the arguments were resolved.

It will be many years before my own children become teenagers, but having lying on my radar screen has changed the way things work around the Bronson household. No matter how small, lies no longer go unnoticed. The moments slow down, and I have a better sense of how to handle them.

Just the other day, my 6-year-old son, Luke, came home from school having learned a new phrase and a new attitude—quipping “I don’t care” snidely, and shrugging his shoulders to everything. He repeated “I don’t care” so many times I finally got frustrated and demanded to know if someone at school had taught him this dismissive phrase.

He froze. And I could suddenly intuit the debate running through his head—should he lie to his dad, or rat out his friend? Recognizing the conflict, I told him that if he learned the phrase at school, he did not have to tell me who taught him the phrase. Telling me the truth was not going to get his friends in trouble.

“Okay,” he said, relieved. “I learned it at school.” Then he told me he did care, and he gave me a hug. I haven’t heard it again.

Does how we deal with a child’s lies really matter down the road in life? The irony of lying is that it’s both normal and abnormal behavior at the same time. It’s to be expected, and yet it can’t be disregarded.

Dr. Bella DePaulo of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has devoted much of her career to adult lying. In one study, she had both college students and community members enter a private room equipped with an audiotape recorder. Promising them complete confidentiality, DePaulo’s team instructed the subjects to recall the worst lie they ever told—with all the scintillating details.

“I was fully expecting serious lies,” DePaulo remarks. “Stories of affairs kept from spouses, stories of squandering money, or being a salesperson and screwing money out of car buyers.” And she did hear those kinds of whoppers, including theft and even one murder. But to her surprise, a lot of the stories told were about when the subject was a mere child—and they were not, at first glance, lies of any great consequence. “One told of eating the icing off a cake, then telling her parents the cake came that way. Another told of stealing some coins from a sibling.” As these stories first started trickling in, DePaulo scoffed, thinking, “C’mon, that’s the worst lie you’ve ever told?” But the stories of childhood kept coming, and DePaulo had to create a category in her analysis just for them. “I had to reframe my understanding to consider what it must have been like as a child to have told this lie,” she recalls. “For young kids, their lie challenged their self-concept that they were a good child, and that they did the right thing.”

Many subjects commented on how that momentous lie early in life established a pattern that affected them thereafter. “We had some who said, ‘I told this lie, I got caught, and I felt so badly, I vowed to never do it again.’ Others said, ‘Wow, I never realized I’d be so good at deceiving my father, I can do this all the time.’ The lies they tell early on are meaningful. The way parents react can really affect lying.”

Talwar says parents often entrap their kids, putting them in positions to lie and testing their honesty unnecessarily. Last week, I put my 3½-year-old daughter in that exact situation. I noticed she had scribbled on the dining table with a washable marker. Disapprovingly, I asked, “Did you draw on the table, Thia?” In the past, she would have just answered honestly, but my tone gave away that she’d done something wrong. Immediately, I wished I could retract the question. I should have just reminded her not to write on the table, slipped newspaper under her coloring book, and washed the ink away. Instead, I had done just as Talwar had warned against.

“No, I didn’t,” my daughter said, lying to me for the first time.

For that stain, I had only myself to blame.

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