

The New York Times

Parenting

December 10, 2019

Big Little Liars



By Jessica Grose



Yann Bastard

A lot of parenting questions boil down to: Is this a thing, or is something wrong? We're doing an occasional series explaining why certain things seem to happen to your kid (or to your body or to your relationships) as your child grows. This week, we're talking about why children lie. [Read previous "Is this a thing?" newsletters here](#). If you have a question for a future "Is this a thing?" [email us](#).

Q: My 6-year-old told his acting teacher his parents were dead and he's home-schooled. All lies. Is this a thing?

— Megan Kilb, Charleston, S.C.

A: First, let me congratulate you on your magnificently creative lil' liar. But to answer your question, yes: This is regular kid behavior, according to the four psychologists I spoke to for this column. Almost all children in all cultures lie by the age of 7.

Neurotypical children develop the cognitive ability to tell lies in preschool. That's when they establish something called "theory of mind," which has come [up in previous columns](#) — it's the concept that other people have thoughts that are separate from your own thoughts. To lie, children also need to develop executive function, said Kang Lee, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, which means they have the ability to hold back the truth, and then tell a lie instead.

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However, a child is not lying because he is "morally corrupt and will grow up to be a criminal," Dr. Lee said. He is probably lying for a concrete reason, and the most common motivations are to get out of trouble, to make himself look better or to make someone else feel good (known as a "pro-social lie"), Dr. Lee said. The only time you should be concerned about a child under 7 lying is if it is clustered with other issues, like oppositional, defiant or aggressive behavior, said Victoria Talwar, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at McGill University in Montreal; if you see lying along with those other behaviors, you should seek professional advice.

So, what should you do if your child tells the occasional whopper?

Don't overreact. "Responding angrily, or even with shock, isn't the answer," said Dunya Poltorak, Ph.D., a pediatric medical psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Mich. Jumping straight to condemnation or punishment may make your little one lie even more, because he feels guilty — and is afraid of you.

Label the truth. If your child is still in preschool, it's best to respond to him plainly with the inconsistencies in his story, said Sally Beville Hunter,

Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. So for example, if your child is telling you he did not eat that cookie and you see the chocolate ringed his mouth, you can say something like, “Oh, that’s strange, you have chocolate around your mouth. How did that get there? Let’s go to the mirror and look at your face.” You can keep it lighthearted, Dr. Hunter said.

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Dr. Hunter cautioned that if your child is particularly anxious in temperament and would melt down at this kind of questioning, you might want to say something like: “I want to know the truth about the cookie, let’s figure this out together.”

Get to the bottom of the lie. As children reach kindergarten age, their verbal abilities increase, Dr. Poltorak said, so you want to explore why they told the lie in the first place. In the case of your child’s gothic story about his dead parents, you should ask him why he said it, and in listening to his explanation, try to pinpoint the motivation behind the lie — he could simply be craving extra attention from his teacher, but you won’t know until you have the conversation.

Once you figure out the reason, work with your child to come up with different responses to his issue that don’t involve lying. Instead of punishing the child, teaching him skills to deal with uncomfortable feelings will do more to prevent lying down the road, Dr. Poltorak said.

Praise honesty. A body of research has shown that praising children for their honesty is far more effective than punishing them for their lies. In the Times’s Sunday Review in 2018, [the writer Alex Stone summarized research that Dr. Lee did with Dr. Talwar](#), where [they told classic morality tales about honesty to a group of 268 children between the ages of 3 and 7](#) to see if any of them actually inspired children to be more truthful.

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Researchers left children alone in a room and told them not to peek at a

toy. After the researchers returned, they read the children one of three stories: “Pinocchio,” “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” or “George Washington and the Cherry Tree.” (The control group was read “The Tortoise and the Hare.”) The only story that got children to be honest about peeking at the toy was “George Washington and the Cherry Tree,” [wherein George admits to cutting down a cherry tree](#), and his father forgives him because he tells the truth when confronted. Stories showing that lying makes your nose grow (“Pinocchio”) or leads to being eaten by wolves (“The Boy Who Cried Wolf”) did not motivate truth-telling in the same way.

The moral of *this* story is that your kid is in the right place — acting class. His natural storytelling ability will serve him well onstage.

Want More on Kid Behavior?

- Positive reinforcement doesn’t just help mitigate lying — [it also helps with your kid’s other annoying habits](#). Dr. Jacob Towery, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, wrote an excellent piece for us about how nagging and scolding bad manners aren’t as effective as praising good ones.
 - Whining is truly the most annoying sound — it’s been proven by researchers, and we ran a piece about [how children evolved their whining to get your attention](#).
 - Why are kids so obsessed with poop jokes? [Jenny Marder gets into it](#).
 - My kids spend a lot of time performing elaborate bedtime rituals for their dolls, and this article from the Atlantic explains [why kids love “parenting” their toys so darn much](#).
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Tiny Victories

Parenting can be a grind. Let’s celebrate the tiny victories.

Our 10-month-old HATES eating and trying new foods but loves to suck on his thumb. I finally decided to just strategically dip his thumb in new purées for him to suck.

— *Serena Wu, San Francisco*

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