

# our developing children

The Talwar Child Development Research Lab

FALL 2013

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## Research to Real Life: Those Little White Lies

Annual holidays bring joy, excitement, and social situations in which the blunt truth may not always be the best policy.

Celebrations are often associated with the sharing of food and the giving of gifts. As adults, we know to express appreciation for efforts and thoughtfulness of others, even when it does not necessarily live up to our expectations. For instance, a female lab member recalls her "excitement" upon receiving an extra large men's polo shirt from her 90 year old grandfather as a birthday present. Parents often hope their children to do the same during these social exchanges.

Although children are generally instructed to be truthful, in some situations telling a little "white lie" to be polite may be condoned. For instance, upon receiving a gift, the failure to mask one's actual disappointment could result in feelings of discomfort and hurt for the gift-giver. Lies told to be polite in such situations are rated less negatively than other more self-oriented lies and are considered to be a prosocial form of deception.

To better understand the use of white lie-telling among children, Talwar and various research colleagues have executed several creative studies that place children in certain "politeness scenarios" and examine their natural responses. These studies are quite special in that they mimic naturalistic situations where white lies are often socially desirable.

In the "reverse rouge task," children are asked to take a picture of an experimenter,

who has an obvious mark of red lipstick on their nose. Prior to taking the photo, children are asked by the experimenter if they look okay for the picture. Findings suggest that the majority of children will claim the experimenter appears fine, however will later confess to another adult that they in fact had not looked picture perfect. Even 3 year olds were found to be capable of telling such a lie in these studies.

Other experiments have involved children receiving an undesirable toy. In these scenarios, children must decide to tell the truth in hopes of getting a better gift, or lie to please the gift giver. After playing a game, children are presented with a wrapped prize for their participation. The experimenter quickly leaves the room to "take a phone call," enabling the child to unwrap the toy (e.g., a bar of soap) and react to it privately. Children's responses are recorded. After a few minutes, the experimenter returns and asks the child if they liked the gift.

In this predicament, findings suggest older children are more likely to tell a white lie compared to younger children. Furthermore, older children are more apt at telling convincing falsehoods; they behave in ways that are consistent with their initial lie and elaborate with plausible rationales. For instance, some children have said that "they ran out of soap at home" or they "collect soap." Altogether, research on white lie-telling reveals that children can express them relatively early in life, however the ability to support and maintain them develops with age.



THANK YOU!  
MERCII!



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# What's Happening at the Lab

Interested in participating?  
Check out these studies:

## **SPIRIT II (7-11 years) \*NEW\***

Children are asked to fill out a paper based questionnaire regarding their views of spirituality and their own social-emotional wellbeing. Children's responses will then be compared to similar aged peers with cancer to explore the prevalence of spiritual beliefs when coping with significant adversity. The study takes approximately 1 hour and a gift certificate is given for time.

## **RECALL (6-12 years)**

Children will complete a series of activities. They may then witness a researcher take money from a wallet and may be asked to lie about the incident. They will then be interviewed about the prior event using an interview technique known to increase adult's lie-detection rates. The study takes 1 hour and monetary compensation is given for time.

## **MORAL (4-7 years)**

Children will witness a research assistant accidentally break a ball. They will be asked to keep a secret about the event. Children will be read a neutral or morally related fable by another researcher before being interviewed about the incident. The study takes 30 minutes.

## **PARENT FOCUS GROUPS \*NEW\***

We are looking for parents to participate in small focus groups led by Dr Victoria Talwar and a graduate student. Parents will have the opportunity to share their experiences and ask questions regarding their children's lie-telling practices.

## **In preparation**

We kindly ask that you refrain from telling your children about the purpose of our research to ensure a natural response. We recommend preparing children for the visit by discussing the activities they will be asked to do (e.g., playing games, answering questions, listening to stories).

## **Our debriefing procedure**

Given the nature of our research, we believe it is important to properly debrief children after our studies on deception. This includes an explicit acknowledgment and praise of children's decisions to be truthful, role modeling of honest behavior, and a demonstration of the positive consequences that can arise from telling the truth. Lying is a common place practice among children and adults alike, however studies suggest we may be more likely to foster honesty in children by reinforcing instances of honest behavior, rather than focusing on and punishing dishonest behavior.

## **MEET OUR NEW ADDITIONS TO THE LAB**

### **Ati Shohoudimojdehi, PhD. Student**

Ati is a first year PhD student in Human Development. She is interested in children's altruistic lie-telling and cultural differences in deceptive behavior.

### **Josh Wyman, M.A. Student**

Josh is currently completing his Master's in School and Applied Child Psychology. His dissertation examines children's abilities to lie about another's transgression.

### **Ida Foster, M.A. Student**

Ida is a first year Master's student in the School and Applied Child Psychology program. She is interested in exploring how the gender of an interviewer may influence children's tendencies to lie during questioning.

### **Lauryn Conway, M.A. Student**

Lauryn is in the first year of her Master's in Human Development. Her thesis project will explore how youth conceptualize and experience cyberbullying.

## Contact us

For more  
information or to  
participate in one  
of our studies ...

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WE TEST ON EVENINGS  
AND WEEKENDS AT  
YOUR CONVENIENCE!

CHILDREN RECEIVE A  
SMALL PRIZE FOR THEIR  
EFFORT AND TIME.  
MONETARY  
COMPENSATION IS  
OFFERED FOR SOME  
STUDIES.

WE WELCOME SIBLINGS  
OF PARTICIPANTS TO  
COME AND ENJOY OUR  
WONDERFUL PLAYROOM  
THAT IS PACKED FULL OF  
GAMES & TOYS.

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