

Harsh discipline fosters dishonesty in young children

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Young children exposed to a harshly punitive school environment are more inclined to lie to conceal their misbehaviour than are children from non-punitive schools, a study of three- and four-year-old West African children suggests.

The study, published in the journal *Child Development*, also indicates that [children](#) in a punitive environment are able to tell more convincing lies than those in a non-punitive environment.

The research, by Professor Victoria Talwar of McGill University and Professor Kang Lee of the University of Toronto, examined deceptive [behaviours](#) in two groups of children living in the same [neighbourhood](#). One group was enrolled in a [private school](#) that used a traditional authoritarian [discipline](#) model, in which beating with a stick, slapping of the head, and pinching were administered publicly and routinely for offenses ranging from forgetting a pencil to being disruptive in class. In the other school, also private, children were disciplined with time-outs or scolding and, for more serious offenses, were taken to the principal's office for further reprimand.

The study involved an experiment comparing the behaviour of children in the two schools. Children were seen individually and asked to play a guessing game by an experimenter who was born and raised locally. The children were told not to peek at a toy when left alone in a room. Most children in both schools couldn't resist the [temptation](#), and peeked at the toy. When the experimenter asked if they had peeked, nearly all the

peekers from the punitive school lied – compared with just over half of those from the non-punitive school. What's more, after the initial lie, lie-tellers from the punitive school were better able to maintain their deception when answering follow-up questions about the identity of the toy – by deliberately giving an incorrect answer, for example, or by feigning ignorance, rather than blurting out the name of the toy.

The findings suggest that "a punitive environment not only fosters increased dishonesty but also children's abilities to lie to conceal their transgressions," Talwar and Lee conclude.

In fact, the three- and four-year-old lie-tellers in the punitive school were as advanced in their ability to tell convincing lies as six- to seven-year-old lie-tellers in existing studies. "This finding is surprising," the authors note, as "existing studies have consistently found that children from punitive environments tend to suffer general delays in cognitive development."

"One possibility is that the harsh punitive environment heightens children's motivation to come up with any strategies that will help them survive in that environment," Prof. Lee says. "Lying seems particularly adaptive for the situation."

"Our study, I think, may serve as a cautionary tale for parents who sometimes would use the harshest means of punishment when they catch their children lying. It is clear that corporal punishment not only does not reduce children's tendency to lie, but actually improves their lying skills."

Provided by McGill University

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